BLACK MOMS MATTER: COMPETING DISCOURSES OF BLACK MOTHERHOOD IN THE AGE OF BLACK LIVES MATTER

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I examine discourses of Black motherhood using three case studies to understand how media reinforce and challenge discourses of deviant Black motherhood. Chapter 2 of this dissertation begins with a case study of *The Help* (Taylor, 2011) which explores how the Black domestic functions as a maternal figure in service to middle-class white women to the detriment of their own Black children. In this chapter, I argue the representation of Black domestic workers function to redefine Black motherhood as a tool to stabilize the racial superiority of whiteness within the context of the so-called post-racial/post-feminist era of the Barack Obama presidential administration. In Chapter 3, I engage Michelle Obama's public relations campaign to re/define herself as the first Black First Lady of the United States. Specifically, I analyze Michelle Obama's mom-in-chief discourse as an example of the use of strategic ambiguity used to universalize and individualize Black motherhood on the national political stage. Rebranding herself as "mom-in-chief" allowed Obama to make herself relatable to her white constituents by reproducing the norms of motherhood present in white heteronormative, middle-class, families. Conversely, Obama's reinforcement of a conceptualization of Blackness that exists in contrast to the prevailing stereotypes of Black women and mothers as uninvolved in their children's lives and dependent on government assistance implicitly reinforced mediated discourses of poor and working-class Black people as socially deviant—unlike Michelle Obama. Finally, in Chapter 4 I explore Black motherhood in relationship to the Black Lives Matter movement. By studying online news reports featuring Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin, and Lesley McSpadden, the mother of Michael Brown Jr., I study media constructions of Black motherhood as a representative of Black death. I argue Fulton and McSpadden efforts to use their grief to speak through their sons' stories to

challenge the mediated representations of their sons as thugs bump up against a discursive narrative that demands white audiences fully understand and universalize an experience rooted in white supremacy. Together the case studies illustrate the mechanisms by which media representations of Black mothers reproduce a discourse that positions Black mothers as sexually deviant and disposable.

For 18-year-old Kerry:

You were always a somebody

and

For Chawn:

Who opened my world, just by locking his car doors,

and

For Paris:

Whose favorite number has always been 3

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"Just keep livin'"— Grandma

In 2000, I worked as a representative for a company that provided phone customer service for the burgeoning online shopping industry. In 2002, the company believed it would be best served by shutting down their facility in Saint Louis, MO and moving the entire call volume to a call center in Manilla, Philippines. I needed to use the slight severance package I received to sustain me and my family until I could find a new job or receive my first unemployment check—whichever would come first. My partner, Chawn, believed my search for a minimum wage job in a tight economy was making me depressed so he suggested I return to the community college I dropped out of to take care of my daughter. I was scared to go back because I only had 17 credits. One day Chawn drove me to St. Louis Community College-Forest Park in the early 90s Lincoln Continental gifted to him by his late stepfather. When we pulled into the parking lot, he told me to get out the car. I didn't want to get out car. I finally got out of the car since Chawn told me we weren't leaving until I went into the registrar's office and signed up for classes. When my fear told me to get back in the car, Chawn locked the car doors. I decided to inside and register for classes, since at this point, I wasn't getting back into the car. Chawn, when you locked me out of the car you sent me on this path to a Ph.D.—and for that I will be eternally grateful. Even though you've crossed over to the other side, this is still for you. You believed I could do anything and here I am doing the thing. I'll always love you. See you space cowboy.

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Paris Anastacia: You are proof that the truth is stranger than fiction. There is no way in the world I could have dreamed you up—and I believe a have a pretty good imagination. This has always been for you. So, when this thing becomes a book, you're doing the cover half-price because you owe me one.

Thanks Candy, for the gossip and the laughter, and calming me down on those days that I couldn't take the educational or the family drama. You're cooler than the other side of the pillow.

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Rick, you found me during a very strange period in my life and you didn't shy away from it. You're an awesome nerd boy. I'm a lucky girl because I get to call you my bestie. I have no idea where we're going, but I know is I wanna go with you.

My furry babies: Zoe, the Alphacat and OG Black Panther, I hope you didn't spend too much time at the Rainbow Bridge. Scratch Chawn for me. My little old lady, Pebbles, I'm not a dog person, but I will always be Team Pebbles. Thank you for saving me from overly sensitive smoke detectors. Halo, my Princess Fluffybutt, I will forever be your loyal and humble servant.

And Alle, my favorite little sister and my number one hater: Keep hating…

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

At 18-years-old I became a stereotype: Black[1], teenage, and pregnant. During my pregnancy, I considered having an abortion four times because I did not believe I had the capacity to care for another human being. I ultimately decided to give birth to my daughter and take on the responsibility of being her parent even though I had no idea what it meant to be a mother. I also had no idea what it meant to use my positionality as a mother to further my education or to begin a research trajectory that focused specifically on Black motherhood. Because I had not married my daughter's father, I created what Black social work scholar James Bembry (2011) termed a "fragile family" or a family made of "disadvantaged, unmarried parents with a heightened risk for economic and social problems and family dissolution" (p. 55). According to Bembry's (2011) research, I was a failure because I got pregnant and gave birth to a child outside of a two-parent heterosexual relationship. As a Black woman, my failure to create an intact heterosexual two-parent family reflected on me personally and appeared to foreclose any hope or opportunity of obtaining a higher education. To the culture at large, unwed Black mothers such as myself made Black people look bad by adding to the culture of poverty discourse (Chase, 2019; Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965; Rousseau, 2013). I write this dissertation because the above line of research does not consider the systematic oppressions that make it difficult for young Black women regardless of maternal status, to obtain higher education and rarely considers the lived experiences of Black teenage mothers such as myself (Chase, 2017).

[1] I identify as a Black woman; therefore, I will use the term Black (with the "B" capitalized) throughout this dissertation except in cases where the original author uses something different.

When my daughter started kindergarten, I decided I did not want any more children. I enjoyed the freedom granted by my daughter's budding independence and I felt secure in my identity as a mother to a school-age child. I could nap when I pleased, and I could leave home with my child without all the accoutrements required for newborns. And as she moved from kindergarten to middle school and then to high school, I moved from an associate's degree to a bachelor's degree and then to a master's degree. Ten years later, my daughter began her second year of high school, and I began work on my dissertation proposal. At this time, I knew I did not want another child. I did not want to consider the thought of writing a dissertation while caring for a newborn. The pre-cancerous cells on my cervix agreed and I was scheduled for a hysterectomy. I signed a single double-sided form that would allow the state to pay for the surgery. Two weeks later, I woke up in a hospital room without the womb that held my one-and-only biological child. I was shocked at how relatively easy it was for me to obtain a hysterectomy as a single Black woman with limited health insurance.

As I complete this dissertation, my only biological daughter will celebrate her 23rd birthday. The mother she needs now as an independent Black woman is not the same mother she needed when she graduated from high school at 18-years-old. The mother she needed in high school was also not the same mother she needed when she started kindergarten at age 5, and it was not the mother she needed as a newborn. I was taught by Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2008) that biological motherhood is not the sole definer of maternal identity; yet I mourned the loss of my ability to physically produce additional children. I questioned my credibility as a scholar of Black motherhood by knowingly engaging with a medical system that historically used forced sterilization and criminalization of poverty to prevent Black women from

having children (Roberts, 1997). As such, I began to realize how much my identity was wrapped up within the institution of motherhood.

Throughout the 23 years of my daughter's life, I maintained an interest in how Black mothers are discussed in media and popular culture. As an academic, I sought to interrogate the discourses that made Black mothers like believe we were the downfalls of Black communities. As a Black woman and a mother, I have a unique perspective for understanding the discourses of Black motherhood and how they have shaped our[2] lived experiences in both theoretical and material ways. The collision of my maternal identity and my educational career required me to do what Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Godden (2003) define as shifting: "a sort of subterfuge that African Americans have long practiced to ensure their survival in our society...From one moment to the next they change their outward behavior, attitude or tone, shifting 'White' then shifting 'Black' again" (p. 6-7). Put simply, I am required to move seamlessly between motherhood and the ivory tower in a manner that neglects neither institution while using my positionality in both spaces to challenge the stereotypes of Black women and mothers. My research is informed by my shifts between the institutions of motherhood and the academy.

Black Motherhood as Social & Political Construct

The institution of motherhood is socially construction in ways that highlight the racialized, gendered, and class marginalization of Black women and our families. Representations of Black mothers as social deviants reproduce the discourses used to control the public conversations about the racialized and political marginalization of Black people. The

[2] I am referring to Black women in the first person in order to position myself within the group that I am studying.

social and political construction of Black motherhood combined with what Collins (2008) calls the controlling images of Black womanhood creates a code or shorthand used in the production of mediated discourses of Black motherhood which positions Blackness at odds with the constructed norms of whiteness (Hall, 1992) and attributes characteristics to Black women that are coded as 'naturally given' (Hall, 1992, p. 121). When combined with the mediated representations of Black mothers, controlling images of Black womanhood provides a framework for understanding the ways in which U.S. society constructs and deploys race, gender, and class.

The Eurocentric perspective of motherhood, which constructs motherhood as the sole responsibility of the biological female parent and only acceptable within the confines of a heterosexual relationship, has historically been incompatible with the lived experiences of Black mothers. The separation of women's work into the private sphere and men's work into the public sphere forces women to "gain social influence through their roles as mothers, transmitters of culture, and parents of the next generation" (Collins, 1987, p. 3). Unfortunately, the regulation of motherhood to the private sphere in the dominant paradigm of motherhood reproduces gender inequality and normalizes the belief that motherhood is satisfying for all women. The realities of Black motherhood during and after slavery are not represented by the Eurocentric perspective of motherhood.

Slavery and reproductive control contribute to the construction of a maternal ideology that has consequences for both Black and white mothers (Hill, 2005). Under the dominant ideology of motherhood, white women were assumed to have both the natural capacity to perform the tasks of motherhood and the self-sacrificing nature to put their children's needs before their own. Affluent white women were allowed to accept "the ideology that motherhood

made them inherently virtuous and morally superior to men," and this ideology justified white women's advocacy "for policies that were advantageous to women, such as voluntary motherhood, birth control, better prenatal care, education and the entry of women into the caring professions" (Hill, 2005, p. 127). Conversely, race and class prevented Black women from being full participants in the dominant paradigm of motherhood. Black mothers were associated with the inability to sexually restrain themselves and the inability to raise their children. Enslaved Black women resisted the mandate to breed workers for the institution of slavery by using their status as mothers to gain privileges for themselves and their families as a means of survival (Hill, 2005). The controlling image of the docile mammy figure who was more loyal to their white enslavers than her own family functions as a way to maintain control over Black women's sexual reproduction (Collins, 2008).

The discourse of Black mothers' inferiority and deviance did not disappear with the end of slavery. In the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson, as a part of his War on Poverty, commissioned Senator Patrick Moynihan to research the issue of Black people and poverty. The thesis of the resulting report entitled *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action* (commonly referred to as the Moynihan Report) is "the fundamental problem in which this is most clearly the case, is that Black family structure" (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965). Moynihan attributes the high number of welfare recipients and low educational achievement in Black communities is the fact that Black women are more likely to assume the position of head of the family.

> In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965).

In his report, Moynihan predicts that Black people will never achieve or "go beyond civil rights" or obtain "future equal opportunities for them as a group that will produce roughly equal results, as compared with other groups" unless the Black family structure is realigned to match that of the dominant culture—meaning with men as heads of the household (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965).

Claims of Black "cultural poverty," "criminality," and "dysfunctional family structures" posited in The Moynihan Report (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965) have been critiqued and dissected by scholars in fields of study within and outside of feminist media studies. Yet, the discourses of Black maternal deviance have endured well into the 21st century. And the discourses of Black maternal deviance mentioned above have social and political implications for the health and social welfare of Black families. In *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty, s*ociologist Dorothy Roberts (1997) argues historical and contemporary attempts to control and regulate racialized reproduction, behavior, and family structures are grounded in discourses that construct Black women's sexuality as deviant. Black women's maternal reproduction is a significant site of examination for Roberts because, she claims, it is a central characteristic of the racialization of the abortion and fertility rights debates.

The controlling image of the welfare queen is a key component to the debates about Black women's maternal production and the contemporary mediated discourses of Black motherhood (Collins, 2005; Hancock, 2003, 2004). During the Ronald Reagan presidential administration, the welfare queen controlling image was used to justify welfare reform policies that limited Black mothers' access to the governmental services they need to sustain their

families. Hancock's construction of the public identity the welfare queen is useful to understanding how the mediated discourses of Black motherhood influence the material conditions of Black women and their families because it acts as a mediator between the public sphere and the individual citizen. Hancock (2003) argues, the welfare queen public "identity, while shaped by political elites, academics, and the media, draws on citizen's pre-existing beliefs about who exist at the intersection of marginalized, race, class and gender identities" (p. 32). In other words, the public identity of the welfare queen acts a signifier for the racialized and gendered ideologies that equate Black motherhood with deviance.

Black Feminist Theoretical Framework

In this dissertation, I centralize an intersectional Black feminist analysis of mediated discourses of Black motherhood informed by my lived experience as a Black woman and a mother. To interrogate the mediated discourses of Black motherhood, I situate this work within an epistemological framework that privileges Black women's standpoint. My approach is significant for three reasons. Firstly, mainstream media simply do not privilege the experiences of Black people. Instead, mainstream media centralize the white experience by presenting their stories as the default and the stories of people of color as peripheral (Orbe et al., 2013). Secondly, the consolidation of media outlets makes it difficult to produce and popularize representations of Black women outside of the stereotypical representations of us as sexually and morally deviant. In *Black Feminist Thought,* sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2008) argues,

> Despite differences of age, sexual orientation, social class, region, and religion, U.S. Black women encounter societal practices that restrict us to hide this differential consideration behind an array of common beliefs about Black women intelligence, work habits, and sexuality. These common challenges in turn result in recurring patterns of experiences for individual group members (p. 29).

Therefore, the third reason it is important to consider how Black motherhood is positioned with media and popular culture is because these discourses influence the material and social positions of Black women and our children (Collins, 2008).

My examination of the discourses of Black motherhood are situated within the field of feminist media analysis. By using the lens of feminist media analysis, I am able to position Black mothers as a signifier used to make meaning of Black women and their families within a post-racial and post-feminist political and mediated landscape. I use feminist media analysis to contextualize Black women's position as media signifier by using the controlling images of Black womanhood as a framework for understanding how the misgynoiristic (Bailey, 2021) discourses of Black motherhood are deployed in popular culture.

Feminist media analysis affords me the ability to position Black motherhood within the frameworks of the body and neoliberal post-identity politics. My goal is to move beyond the identification of stereotypes in media to engage with the overarching controlling discourses that influences how the public makes sense of Black women and the children in their care. It is important to analyze the mediated representation of Black mothers because they reproduce discourses of Black motherhood that position Black women and their children as morally and socially deviant. The mediated representation of the discourses of Black motherhood has social, political, and material consequences for Black mothers and their families. My positionality as a Black mother prevents me from separating myself from these consequences.

So where do women like me fit within the discourses of Black motherhood in media? Black mothers are typically symbolically annihilated or omitted, unrepresented, or trivialized in many aspects of media productions (Gutsche et al., 2020, p. 5). Using a Black feminist framework in conjunction with a feminist media analysis allows me to use my position as a

Black woman and a mother to focus on the implications of Black mothers' lived experiences in a racialized/gendered U.S. context that privileges the heterosexual-white-male identity within three case studies. Historically we have been depicted as mammies, or stand-ins for mothers of white children such as in the film *The Help*[3]. Discourses of Black motherhood are complicated by Michelle Obama's mom-in-chief discourse[4] and her focus on the care of her two daughters. Obama's deployment of her mom-in-chief discourse challenges the representation of Black mothers as mammies only suitable to care for white children. Yet, Obama's challenge to the representation of Black mothers as docile mammies works to reproduce the racialized and gendered stereotypes of Black people who look towards governmental handouts without a willingness to do the work of changing their circumstances without outside intervention. The mothers Obama charges with changing their material circumstances for themselves and their children are also represented as responsible for the criminality of their children.[5] My life as a Black mother is intertwined in these three case studies. Both my access to services I needed as a Black teenage mother to care for my daughter and my perception as an academic who places Black women at the center of her analysis are all dependent on how the representations of Black mothers influence the larger discursive narrative of Black women.

Feminist Media Analysis

Mainstream media platforms such as film, television, and the internet set the boundaries of and shapes the acceptable performances within the institution of motherhood (Collins, 2008). As such mainstream media are key to the circulation of the discourses of Black motherhood. The underrepresentation and trivialization of white women's roles in news stories also works to

[3] See Chapter 2.
[4] See Chapter 3.
[5] See Chapter 4.

marginalize Black women's position in the public sphere and justify Black women's absence from news programs as newsmakers by positioning our concerns as outside of the default concerns of a white male audience. In their study of women in television news, Lana F. Rakow and Kimberlie Kranich (Rakow & Kranich, 1991) examine how the sign of "woman" speaks to the cultural position of women as a group within a white male-dominated society. They argue the symbolic annihilation of women in the white male-dominated news paradigm works to centralize the white male-dominant interests of mainstream media. Specifically, the sign of "woman" functions in mainstream media as a means to construct women as a racially monolithic group that positions white womanhood as the default sign for all women. Therefore, the "woman" as a sign requires racial homogeneity in a manner that only allows white woman to "signify as 'woman'" (Rakow & Kranich, 1991, p. 19)—further erasing the concerns of Black women and mothers in a contemporary media landscape. A theoretical approach of feminist media analysis allows me to speak to how media consumes the signs of "Black woman" and "Black mother" and challenge these patterns of consumption within a cultural paradigm that de-centers and erases the political and social experiences of Black women and mothers (Gledhill, 1988).

I am examining the discourses of Black motherhood because I want to understand how media producers and consumers make meaning of representations of Black mothers within a contemporary political moment characterized by the neoliberal ideologies of post-racism and post feminism. I situate my examination of the discourses of Black motherhood with the cultural context of a post-Barack Obama presidency in order to reassign value and meaning of the Black motherhood in three case studies. The first case study focuses on the representation of the controlling image of the mammy in *The Help*—a movie released in 2011 during Obama's first term as president and looks at Black-white racial relationships in a pre-Civil Rights movement

Jackson, Mississippi. Next, I examine the mom-in-chief discourse deployed by Michelle Obama during her tenure in the White House reinforces and challenges discourses of Black maternal deviance. Finally, I look at Black motherhood within the Black Lives Matter movement—a movement that focused on the extrajudicial racialized violence enacted on Black people during the tenure of the first Black president.

In *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture,* media and communication scholars Martia Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2004) highlight the importance of cultural context to understanding how we make meaning out of mediated representations. Cultural context, according to Sturken and Cartwright, are "shared practices of group community, through which meaning is made out of the visual, aural, and textual world of representations" (p. 3). We cannot consider the discourses of Black motherhood without contextualizing the ways in which those discourses are deployed to marginalize Black people because the cultural context of media production and consumption influence the meanings and values assigned to media texts. The process of "looking" or meaning making illustrated by Sturken and Cartwright (2004) constructs a system of representation that influences communication practices by relying on semiotics to add in the interpretation of media messages by examining the present and invisible contextual codes used to make meaning (Hall, 1997). There are two steps to this meaning making process. Step one requires the enactment of mental processes that provide conceptual maps for understanding the signs appearing in culture. The second step gives meaning to the signs by applying linguistic signifiers to the signs available on the conceptual map. According to Stuart Hall (1997), the system of representations "consists, not of individual concepts but of different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging, and classifying concepts and establishing complex relationships between them" (p. 17). Put simply, this process of representation works to transmit

the discourses of Black motherhood culturally through the reproduction and consumption of Black mothers within media.

Feminist media analysis allows for the possibility of disrupting cultural ideologies based on the discourses of Black motherhood as culturally, morally, and sexually deviant by challenging their position within what bell hooks (2012) calls the "imperialist white supremacy capitalist patriarchy" (p. 4). Ideologies are the shared set of beliefs people hold in relationship to their social and cultural environments. To be clear, the significant part of an ideology is that it is shared. According to discourse scholar to Teun A. van Dijk (2006),

> ideologies are not personal beliefs of individual people; they are not necessarily 'negative' (there are racist as well as antiracist ideologies, communist and anticommunist ones); they are not some kind of 'false consciousness' (whatever that is exactly); they are not necessarily dominant, but may also define resistance and opposition; they are not the same as discourses or other social practices that express, reproduce or enact them; and they are not the same as any other socially shared beliefs or belief systems (p. 117).

Political and social institutions reaffirm ideologies by highlighting the relationship between race, gender, class, and power. Ideologies are dependent on the active and passive reproduction of attitudes, prejudices, and beliefs "formulated in talk and interaction" (van Dijk, 1987, p. 22) and facilitated by popular culture and mediated representations. Likewise, ideologies shape social and political structures inconsistently so they may not be experienced similarly by all of the members of any one social group (van Dijk, 2006). Therefore, the audience becomes both a site of negotiation and an incubator for ideological formations because of the conscious and unconscious processes that influence how media is interpreted by the group. Mediated representations of the discourses of Black motherhood reproduce racialized and gendered ideologies; and an examination of those ideologies requires a semiotic negotiation between

media producers and audiences (Hall, 1992) in a manner that considers media ethics, cultural value, and economic challenges (Gledhill, 1988).

Mediating Race and Gender through Black Women's Bodies

In *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial*, Ralina L. Joseph (2012) argues "representations are vehicles that drive controlling and alternative images of race, gender, class, and sexuality, the social forces that govern our society" (p. 3). the vehicle of representation in this analogy is powered by the physical body. According to sociologist Joanne Nagel, (2003), the physical body is significant to understanding how gender and sexuality are both constructed and understood. In the book *Race, Ethnicity and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers,* Nagel (2003) argues,

> The gendered and sexualized body is a major location for the social construction of men and women, masculinity and femininity, and male and female sexuality. The body is an instrument of *performance* and a site of *performativity.* Gender and sexuality are both performed and performative—conscious and unconscious, intended and unintended, explicitly and implicit (p. 51).

Likewise, Nagel (2003) argues ethnicity works in conjunction with the gendered and sexualized physical body to construct what she calls ethnosexual borders or sites where "ethnicity is sexualized, and sexuality is racialized, ethnicized, and nationalized" (p. 14). These boundaries are numerous, used as barriers for in-grouping and out-grouping, and constructed as natural.

> Ethnic boundaries are also sexual boundaries. Ethnicity and sexuality join together to form a barrier to hold some people in and keep others out, to define who is pure and who is impure, to shape our view of ourselves and others, to fashion feelings of sexual desire and notions of sexual desirability, to provide us with seemingly "natural" sexual preferences for some partners and "intuitive" aversions to others, to leave us with a taste for some ethnic sexual encounters and a distaste for others (Nagel, 2003, p. 1).

Nagel's framework is useful for understanding how power imbalances influence how discourses of sexual and moral deviance are placed on the bodies of Black women and mothers even though

she does not fully engage with how racial and gendered power work to reinforce these ethnosexual borders after they are created.

Popular ideas about race, gender, and sexuality are built on and mediated through the foundation of the physical body. The popular representations and dominant ideologies of the physical and social body are used to control the larger conversation about Black mothers in media and in our everyday lives. Michel Foucault addresses how the physical body mediates popular discourses of race and sexuality in a manner that resembles how the Black female body becomes a mediator for the discourses of moral and sexual deviance. In *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at The Collège De France, 1975-1976,* Foucault (2003) uses the physical body to equate racial discourse to the political discourses of power and war. According to Foucault, (2003) racism is an act of war used to separate the social body from the physical body by exercising the power to the take the lives of the members of social body. "[W]ar is about two things: it is not simply a matter of destroying a political adversary, but of destroying the enemy race, and destroying that [sort] of biological thereat of those people over there represent to our race" (Foucault, 2003, p. 257). When paired with sexuality, discourses of race work to problematize the social and material conditions Black mothers must face in their physical bodies. In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction,* Foucault (1990) writes,

> [I]t was then that a whole politics of settlement, family, marriage, education, social hierarchization, and property, accompanied by a long series of permanent interventions at the levee lot the body, conduct, health, and everyday life, received their color and justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of blood and ensuring the triumph of the race (p. 149).

Again, power is crucial to understanding the intersection of the racialized and gendered discourses mediated through the Black maternal body. Racialized and gendered discourses not

only control the larger conversation about Black mothers; but they also control the conversations we have about Black children.

Foucault's discussion of human capital further illustrates how the racialized and gendered discourses of Black motherhood influence Black children. In *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* Foucault posits the relationship a child has with her mother is directly related to the human capital the child will be able to acquire out in the society guided by the neoliberal economic principles.

> Putting it in clear terms, this will mean that given my own genetic make-up, if I wish to have a child whose genetic make-up will be at least as good as mine, or as far as possible better than mine, then I will have to find someone who also has a good genetic make-up. And if you want a child whose human capital, understood simply in terms of innate and hereditary elements, is high, you can see that you will have to make an investment, that is to say, you will have to have worked enough, to have sufficient income, and to have a social status such that it will enable you to take for a spouse or co-producer of this future human capital, someone who has significant human capital themselves (p. 228).

In short, it is difficult for Black mothers to pass on their human capital to their children because we have had to fight to even be seen as human. Discourses of Black motherhood that represent Black mothers and morally, sexually, and culturally deviant contribute to the inability of Black mothers to conform to the tenets of neoliberalism.

Constructing a Mediated Discourse of Black Motherhood

In this dissertation, I define discourse as the language used to construct an overarching narrative which controls the conversation about Black motherhood in popular culture. The ways in which language is constructed and deployed within the mediated landscape is crucial to understanding how discourse operates within political and popular cultural environments because language contributes to the social, systematic, and ideological latency of discourse in general and the discourses of Black motherhood in specific. According to linguist James P. Gee (2011),

discourses integrate with "words, deeds, interactions, thoughts, feelings, objects, tools, times, and places [in ways] that allow us to enact and recognize different socially situated identities" (p. 44). In other words, the lived experiences of media producers and consumers and the political contexts in which those groups are culturally situated influence the deployment and reception of discourses. Significantly, discourses influence how multicultural consumers interpret and generally understand issues of race, gender, and class; and more importantly, discourse controls how Black mothers are discussed, interpreted, and understood within the institution of motherhood.

An examination of the discourses controlling the conversation about Black women within the institution of motherhood is significant because motherhood is a core racialized and gendered institution in the United States. Motherhood discourses are crucial to the discursive construction of the white heteronormative, two-parent "nuclear" family structure and the gendered division of labor associated with it. After 9/11, motherhood discourses were crucial to shaping the dominant ideologies of U.S. cultural nationalism by providing support for the "war on terror" and the occupation of the Middle East (Tapia, 2011). Likewise, Black women have been historically and contemporarily marginalized within the institution of motherhood through our representation as scapegoats of manufactured epidemics such as the "war on drugs" (Roberts, 1997) and the "culture of poverty" (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965). Still, Black women used our position as mothers to advocate for the well-being of their children and families (Triece, 2013; White, 1999) and demand justice for our children when they were victimized by extrajudicial racialized violence (Al'Uqdah & Adomako, 2018; Killen, 2018). As well, the discourses of Black motherhood are significant to understanding how dominant society makes sense of Black women as mothers; but more importantly, the discourses

of Black motherhood are significant to understanding how we as Black mothers make sense of ourselves. By using discourse analysis as a framework for understanding the discursive construction of Black mothers in media, I can focus on three representational themes of Black motherhood: Black women's sexuality, Black mothers' relationship to body politics, and the political and social implications of the mediated discourses of Black motherhood.

Controlling images of Black womanhood are grounded in the assumption of Black women's sexual deviance (Collins, 2008; Nagel, 2003; Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016) and "are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday lives" (p. 77). Mediated representations of the controlling images of Black womanhood add to the historical discourses of Black mothers as morally, culturally, and sexually deviant (Collins, 2005) by influencing the overarching conversation about Black mothers in this contemporary moment. In short, racialized discourses of Black mothers' social deviancy perpetuate the belief that Black women produce children who are unable to fit into a white heteronormative family structure by imparting habits and behaviors that run counter to the expectations of dominant society (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965; Roberts, 1997). Controlling images of Black women such as the jezebel, mammy, matriarch, and welfare queen (Collins, 2005, 2008) function within the context of economic exploitation of Black women's reproductive capacity to construct a discourse of Black mothers as unable to care for our own children, but perfectly capable of caring for white children (McElya, 2007; Wooten & Branch, 2012).

Black women occupy a unique position within the institution of motherhood as we are historically and contemporarily situated within the tension between valued and devalued maternal labor. The fertility of Black women has been consistently juxtaposed against the more-

valued white maternal reproduction in ways that have challenged the womanhood of Black mothers specifically and the humanity of Black people generally. When Black women were formally enslaved their maternal reproduction was only valued for its ability to create a workforce for their captors. After the enslavement of Black people was formally eradicated, the continued oppression of Black women who were no longer breeding a wage-free workforce was justified with the usage of racialized and gendered discourses that devalued the humanity of Black mothers and their families. Discourses of Black women as morally, sexually, and culturally deviant have (and still) work to position Black women outside of the acceptable boundaries of the racialized and gendered institution of motherhood in the United States.

In the book *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America,* historian Micki McElya (2007) argues Black families needed to be economically devalued for enslavers to profit off Black servitude. The devaluation of Black families is situated within racialized construction of the family that positions the maternal labor of Black women as an economic commodity designed to produce labor for the institution of slavery. Enslavers rendered Black families illegitimate by ignoring any maternal labor performed by Black women that did not occur in the white home (McElya, 2007).

> When black women's work was appropriated by the white household, their care-giving labor was reframed as motherly instinct and love in the figure of the mammy, thus not as work at all. The emotional traits that defined maternal affection fell outside the realm of black women's relationships with black children in this framework. The black mammy figure became a powerful icon of motherly affection and care, but this was not held to be an inherent attribute, innate to black women. Rather, promoters of the mammy narrative believed these traits to be the product of the supposedly civilizing environs of white domestic space (p. 82).

The mammy figure, according to McElya (2007), functioned as a sentimental narrative designed to position Black women's maternal labor as a product of the civilizing nature of whiteness-and not a trait inherent to Black people.

In conjunction with the mammy figure, the jezebel justified the institution of slavery by positioning Black women as both sexually and morally deviant animals who were happy with their position as slaves. According to historian Deborah Gray White (1999), the jezebel figure positioned Black women's sexuality as the antithesis of the archetype of the virtuous Victorian-era white woman. The controlling images of the mammy and the jezebel justified the institution of slavery by positioning Black women as both sexually and morally deviant animals who were happy being slaves (White, 1999). After slavery, controlling images of the welfare queen and the matriarch functioned to shape Black mothers as bad influences on their children by spending too much time away from their children, so they do not have adequate supervision. Or if they do not work, they are considered as lazy and unable to care for their children and therefore they become drains on society.

The popular media representations of Black mothers as sexuality deviant influences how their identity is constructed and discussed within the public sphere. Philosopher Michel Foucault (2012) argues the body is important to representation because representation comes from the body. As racialized and gendered subjects, Black mothers' experiences are influenced by and situated within representations of our bodies.

> The body now serves as an instrument or intermediary: if one intervenes upon it to imprison it, or to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property. The body, according to this penalty, is caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions. Physical pain, the pain of the body itself, is no longer the constituent element of the penalty (Foucault, 2008, p. 11).

Foucault's focus on the body is important to understanding the historical contexts of bodily and cultural representation of Black women and mothers, even though he does not take into consideration race and gender in his understanding of the body. Nevertheless, race and gender are important constructs for understanding the acts of power associated with the ability to discipline and punish Black mothers and their children.

There are real implications for the circulation of discourses of Black motherhood. In *Killing the Black Body,* Dorothy Roberts (1997) argues the construction and representation of Black women's sexual reproduction has social and political implications for the health and social welfare of Black families. Furthermore, Roberts (1997) positions the sexuality of Black women within the historical and contemporary attempts to control and regulate racialized reproduction, behavior, and family structures. Governmental legislation of social programs creates rules (and exceptions to those rules) to deny Black women access to family planning services and welfare benefits based on the belief that Black women produce socially unfit and criminal children. In short, Black women's sexual reproduction is regulated and surveilled by the state in order to protect the state's interests (Lawson, 2000).

A mediated landscape that refuses to discuss Black women and mothers as causalities of racialized and gendered systems unwilling to provide the resources needed to sustain our families and communities has material consequences. Therefore, in the three case studies presented in this dissertation, I show how Black maternal labor is positioned as valid only when it serves the interests of white supremacy. Firstly, in *The Help* (Taylor, 2011) Black mothers are represented as mammy figures who use their maternal labor to mother white women and girls into an elevated social position. Next, Michelle Obama deploys her mom-in-chief discourse as a mechanism for pushing a neoliberal family values mandate which privileges individual grit over

substantial governmental intervention into the economic and political issues within Black communities. Finally, mediated representations of Black mothers who have lost their children to extrajudicial racialized violence construct a discourse that blames the mothers for the deaths of their children by conflating reports of their children's behavioral issues and/or trouble with authority figures with culpability with their deaths. The discourses of bad Black mothers are reproduced by representing Black mothers as paying the ultimate price for failing to socialize their children into a culture that demands Black deference to whiteness.

The stakes are high for me and women like me. In Missouri, where my daughter was born, Black mothers are four times as likely to die during childbirth than white mothers (Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services, 2017). I am also more likely to lose my child to police violence than a mother of any other race in the United States (Edwards et al., 2019). Therefore, it is difficult for me to separate the intellectual work of writing about the representations of Black mothers of media from the life-or-death consequences of life as a Black mother. The tradition of Black feminist epistemology says I don't have to (Collins, 2008; Cooper, 2018; Crenshaw, 1989). My positionality as a Black mother adds to my analysis of discourses of Black motherhood because it means that I am invested in the outcome—and I am affected by the outcome. Furthermore, grounding this work within a tradition of Black feminist knowledge production allows me to use my positionality as a mother to contextualize the racialized and gendered stereotypes of Black women and mothers to making meaning of the larger discourses of Black motherhood beyond the snap judgement of deeming those stereotypes either "positive" or "negative."

Representational Context for the Discourses of Black Motherhood

Whiteness is a key component to understanding how the mediated representations of the controlling images of Black womanhood shape the contemporary discourses of Black motherhood. The ideology of whiteness expands the act of stereotyping beyond the act of human classification to a system designed to control the political, material, and social outcomes of Black women and mothers. Stereotypical representations of whiteness are often representing group members as individual and complex and avoids using race as an explanation for group behavior (Shohat & Stam, 1994). Conversely, mediated representations of the controlling images of Black womanhood are often static, immobile, and dependent on stereotypes that work to signify an entire race of people as monolithic. To be clear, mediated stereotypes affect all groups regardless of race, gender, class, or sexuality. Yet, members of dominant groups, including but not limited to white heterosexual cis-gender men are more able to resist the controlling nature of those stereotypes. Marginalized groups such as Black mothers are often forced to face the social, political, material, and physical consequences of stereotypical representations (Shohat & Stam, 1994).

The ideology of whiteness needs the discourses of Black motherhood which are grounded in the controlling images of Black womanhood to sustain the structural privilege of the white male position in the racial and gendered hierarchy (Collins, 2008; Vera & Gordon, 2003). In the book *The Racial Order of Things: Cultural Imaginaries of the Post-Soul Era* race and media scholar Roopali Mukherjee (2006) argues, the hypervisibility of whiteness was an outcome of the Civil Rights Movement because the increased political gains made by Black people during this time allowed white people to position themselves as the true ideological victims of racial inequality. The post-Civil Rights politics of race demand a focus on the colorblind and

genderblind attitudes that seek to re-categorize the importance of race and gender representation in a manner that centers the social position of the cis-gender, heterosexual, white male figure.

In *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice,* cultural critic bell hooks seeks to reposition the discussion of race, gender, and class in a manner that points to the invisible nature of the white supremacist thinking that constructs a dominant racial discourse that influences the lives of people of all races. According to hooks (2012), the dominant narrative of Blackness is a fluid one that causes a division among Black Americans because there is no shared reference point for critical understanding of experiences. On the other hand, the invisibility of whiteness prevents whites from understanding how the everyday nature of racist language complicates contemporary discussions of race. Furthermore, hooks claims media constructs and normalizes a hegemonic discourse of race that perpetuates dominator culture. Racial discourses work together with mediated representations to marginalize Blackness by creating a culture of blame and victimhood that promotes dominator culture by dehistoricizing racial inequalities. hooks (2012) argues,

> Patriarchy is a political and social system that insists males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak as well as the right to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological abuse and violence (p. 34).

Furthermore, hooks believes the solution to this psychological abuse lies in the politics of accountability. The focus on accountability allows one to position herself as both the victim and the perpetrator of white supremacist thinking and cultural production and considers how internalized racism and sexism allow Black people to reproduce a hegemonic racial order.

Mainstream media reproduces discourses of Black motherhood in a manner that renders the bodies of Black women and mothers socially and sexually deviant (Molina-Guzmán, 2010).

In the book *Dangerous Curves: Latina Bodies in the Media,* media studies scholar Isabel Molina-Guzmán (2010) uses the terms symbolic colonization and symbolic rupture as frameworks for understanding how mainstream media producers centralize whiteness by privileging stereotypical mediated representations of women of color and how as women of color scholars we can disrupt those stereotypical representation by reconstructing and reinterpreting the meaning of those stereotypical representations. By using the Latina body as a focus, Molina-Guzmán (2010) provides a model for understanding how Black women and mothers are represented as "homogenous," stereotypical" and "consumable" (p. 9). Likewise, Molina-Guzmán uses the term "symbolic rupture" to highlight how cultural readers and consumers make meaning of the stereotypical cultural representations by disrupting media producers' intended meanings. The concepts of symbolic colonization and symbolic rupture are significant to my dissertation because they highlight both the prominence of the discourses of Black motherhood and the intervention, I make in disrupting those discourses. Consequently, media representations of Black mothers in media become sites of struggle for understanding how discourses of Black motherhood are constructed, deployed, and received.

An examination of a system of representation (Hall, 1997) present in the mediated discourses of Black motherhood assists with the understanding of the position of Black mothers and their families within the larger social body. According to Hall (1997), a system of representation "consists, not of individual concepts, but of different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts and establishing complex relations between [them]" (p. 17). The meaning making process Hall refers has two distinct steps. Step one requires the enactment of mental processes that provide conceptual maps for understanding the signs appearing in culture. Step two assigns meaning to signs by applying linguistic signifiers to the

signs available on the cultural map. By focusing my examination of the discourses of Black motherhood on mediated representations of Black mothers, I can understand how signifiers (i.e., stereotypes and/or controlling images of Black women) are enacted on the sign (Black mothers) to make meaning of Black women and mothers in popular culture and everyday society. Understanding how representation functions to create discourses of Black motherhood has implications for the development of social and political policies that influence the conversations we as a social body have about Black mothers.

In my desire to disrupt the discourses of Black motherhood that represent Black mothers and their families as sexually, culturally, and morally deviant, I run the risk of replicating the controlling images of Black womanhood that essentialize the experiences of Black mothers. A simplistic categorization of representations as "positive" or "negative" can function to reinforce the stereotype that all Black people have the same lived experiences. In *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness*, anthropologist Deborah A. Thomas and socio-legal scholar Kamari Maxine Clarke (2006) challenge the hegemonic discourse of Black authenticity that simplifies the representation of Black culture on a global scale. Thomas and Clarke (2006) argue, "blackness does not just index race; it also indexes gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, labor, nationality, transnationality, and politics. These dynamic relationships create social means specific to the local, national, and regional contexts" (p. 9). In other words, the physical body of a Black mother is constructed and indexed by the cultural and social meanings associated with Blackness. To suggest, however, the social meanings associated with Blackness are solely due to white supremacy denies the agency available to Black people to create the meanings out of the lived experience of Blackness—in the United States and globally. It is important to acknowledge how the identities of Black Americans are constructed to

deconstruct the hegemonic discourse of a U.S.-based Black experience that works to constrain expressions of Black identity.

Unfortunately, the conflation of Black identity does not only occur in stereotypes that represent Black mothers and their families as sexually, morally, and culturally deviant. In this dissertation, I argue the discourses of Black motherhood are influenced by the controlling images of Black womanhood such as the mammy, jezebel, and the welfare queen (Collins, 2005, 2008). As I stated above, historical controlling images of Black womanhood work to justify the economic and political exploitation of Black people by delegitimating Black mothers and their families (Collins, 2008; McElya, 2007). When we counter those so-called negative representations with controlling images that romanticize characteristics that are considered positive traits in Black people, we run the risk of further simplifying the construction of Blackness by not allowing a space for a complex of understanding of Black culture.

The politics of respectability constructed by the Black cultural elite functioned to counteract the prevalent controlling images of Black womanhood by allowing Black women to define themselves outside of white supremacy (Higginbotham, 1994, p. 192). Respectability politics operated as a "survival mechanism" designed to ensure "safety from racial discrimination" (Obasogie & Newman, 2016, p. 546). In the quest to survive, however, the politics of respectability disregards the historical and systemic oppression of Black people and contributes to the discourses of Black motherhood as sexually, morally, and culturally deviant by demanding Black women and mothers assimilate to the standards of whiteness. Law scholars Osagie K. Obasogie and Zachary Newman (2016) argue,

> The focus of the individual means changing and molding that individual to fit into the mainstream, with whiteness and class as the guiding centerpieces. Ultimately, the strategy

> of countering harmful stereotypes and racist discourses has potentially led to "an acceptance and internalization of these representations (p. 547).

Furthermore, the focus respectability politics has on conforming and reacting to whiteness works to reinforce an ingroup/outgroup division that privileges the protection of white bodies over the Black bodies that are viewed as threats (Obasogie & Newman, 2016).

Demanding respectability from mediated representations of Black women and mothers contributes to the discourses of Black motherhood by confining representational opportunities to a narrow field of vision. The influence of systemic racism and white supremacy have on the discourses of Black motherhood are rendered invisible while Black mothers and their families are caught within the double bind of the historical controlling images of Black womanhood and the assimilationist approach of respectability politics. Journalist Tamara Winfrey Harris (2016) argues,

> [Black women] are required to be noble examples of Black excellence. To be better. To be respectable. And the bounds of respectability are narrowly defined by professional and personal choices reflecting the social mores of the majority culture—patriarchal, Judeo-Christian, heteronormative, and middle class (p. 67).

The combination of respectability politics and controlling images place the burden of proper representation of the entire Black race on Black mothers. The tension between challenging the controlling images of Black womanhood present in the discourses of Black motherhood and acting as a representative of a "respectable" Black culture palatable to dominant white culture is grounded in a neoliberal logic that centers personal responsibility and individualism over an examination of the systemic misogynoir (Bailey, 2021) that influences the life chances of Black mothers and their families. In this dissertation, I examine three cases of Black mothers in popular cultural contexts faced with the burden of challenged the controlling images of Black womanhood that represent Black mothers as sexually, morally, and culturally deviant while

simultaneously personifying a version of Blackness deemed respectable and acceptable to both Black and white people.

Black Motherhood and Post-Identity Politics

Contemporary discourses of Black motherhood are situated within the neoliberal post-racial and post-feminist ideological frameworks that deny the significance of race and gender, while at the same time using race and gender to influence mediated representations and material conditions of Black women and their families. Post-racial ideologies assume race is no longer a factor influencing the life chances of Black people because the U.S. government outlawed race-based discrimination after the Civil Rights Movement (Da Costa, 2016). Similarly, post-feminist ideologies imagine a society that has moved beyond the need for feminist interventions because the second-wave feminist movement achieved its goals of gender equality by fully empowered women (Tasker & Negra, 2007). Specifically, the ideologies of post-racism and post-feminism work together to reinscribe the salience of whiteness as an organizing principle of society by centering and emphasizing the experiences of whiteness in a manner that blames Black people for the existence of racial differences (Joseph, 2012; Kennedy, 2017; Projansky, 2001). By situating mediated representations of Black mothers within the intersecting frameworks of post-racism and post-feminism, I can examine how race and gender intersectionally inform the discourses of Black motherhood within this contemporary moment.

Using Colorblindness to Mediate a Post-racial Framework

The usage of the term post-racial was popularized by the election of Barack Obama in 2008 (Mukherjee et al., 2019). Yet, post-racial ideologies are grounded in a discourse of colorblindness that predates the election of the first Black president. The ideology of colorblindness became prominent in political and popular discourses after Dr. Martin Luther

King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington (Seale, 2020). Scholars have interrogated colorblind ideologies using a number of different names which include but are not limited to the "new racism" (Collins, 2005), enlightened racism (Jhally & Lewis, 1992), and colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Collins, (2005), Jhally and Lewis (1992), and Bonilla-Silva (2010), use their respective terminology to challenge colorblind ideologies that posit a society in which racism is no longer a factor in the life chances of Black people.

In *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism,* Patricia Hill Collins (2005) theorizes a "new" racism that combines explicit forms of race-based social control present in a pre-Civil Rights historical period with media representations based in contemporary multiculturalism. Similarly, communication scholars Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis (1992), enlightened racism uses television to reinforce the belief in the availability of equal opportunities under the ideology of U.S. meritocracy. In their book *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences & the Myth of the American Dream,* (1992) Jhally and Lewis use *The Cosby Show* to argue television representations of Black people, like the upper-middle class Huxtable family, who have fully integrated into a white heteronormative culture reinforce the perceived cultural pathologies of Black communities by providing audiences with a limited context of the material and political conditions that influence the real lives of Black people. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010) argues in *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* posits a colorblind racist framework that provides whites with a way of making sense of racial equality in a manner that allows them to agree with racial equality in theory while blocking policies that will implement racial equality in practice. Central to this dissertation is how the "new racism," enlightened racism, and colorblind

racism focus on the role media play in the circulation of racialized discourses in the United States after the Civil Rights Movement.

The racial framework of colorblindness is currently dominant, but it is not static—it can adapt to new situations with contradictions, exceptions, and new information (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Strategies of a colorblind racial framework attempt to mark the end of racism through the reappropriation of civil rights rhetoric and is used as a means to attack race-based political policies and actions. Media and popular culture scholars Sarah Nielson and Sarah E. Turner (2014) define this colorblind racial framework as "a contemporary set of beliefs that posit that racism is a thing of the past and that race and racism do not play an important role in the current and economic realities" (p. 4). Furthermore, sociologist Ashley "Woody" Doane (2014) extends this definition by arguing that colorblindness is the primary framework used to understand how racism functions in contemporary U.S. culture.

Furthermore, whiteness remains both a central and a constant factor in understanding how colorblind discourses function in media. As a major ideological framework for media (Doane, 2006), colorblindness centralizes whiteness by highlighting individual acts of racism and obscuring systemic ideologies and policies that influence the life chances of Black mothers and their families. One way whiteness is reinforced to the detriment of Black mothers within a colorblind ideological framework is through the idea of minority racism. Again, Doane (2014) argues,

> Because societal racism is viewed as a thing of the past, and because racism is defined as a deed (prejudice and/or discrimination) committed by a dwindling number of isolated individuals, it then "logically follows that anyone—white, black, Latino, Asian, or Native American—can be racist. In other words, black racism, white racism, and Latino and other racisms are all on par with each other in an analytical framework that is torn from history and separated from social institutions…The idea of "minority racism" has become

> a basic tenant of colorblind racial ideology, which in turn means that people of color can also be subjected to the "racial morality play" (p. 23).

Colorblind ideologies use the concept of "minority racism" to demonize Black women and their families in the public sphere while whiteness remains sacrosanct (Doane, 2014). In *The Colorblind Screen: Television in Post-racial America,* Sarah E. Turner and Sarah Nilsen (2014) argue televisual representations are a discursive medium for narratives of colorblind racism by playing "a central role in the articulation, construction, and congestion of racialized identities" (p. 4). Even though explicit racial stereotypes are still prevalent in media, the dominant mode of televisional racialization has shifted to reinforcing a colorblind ideology that foregrounds racial differences in order to celebrate multicultural assimilation while simultaneously denying the significant, social, economic, and political relations and inequalities that continue to define race relations contemporarily (Nilsen & Turner, 2014). Specifically, media functions as a distribution point of racial representations and an entry point for the construction of the prevalent discourses of Black motherhood.

Racializing Post-feminist Frameworks

Similar to post-racism, post-feminism is contingent upon the assumption that the second-wave feminist movement eradicated sexism making the issues of patriarchy and gender inequality irrelevant (Joseph, 2012, p. 27). Media scholars Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (2007) argue in their book *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* that post-feminism "broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the 'pastness' of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated" (p. 1). Similar to the ways in which post-racism highlights race by obscuring its existence, post-feminism perpetuates gender inequality by

pretending gender equality has been achieved—thus rendering the feminist movement a thing of the past. Under post-feminism, women are universalized and essentialized in order to cover up racial, class, and sexuality differences (Projansky, 2001). When Black women are represented in post-feminist discourses, they are not allowed to discuss their specific racialized and classed experiences to maintain the dominant racial subject position of middle-class whites (Projansky, 2001).

The ideologies of post-feminism and post-racism are tied together with the logic of neoliberalism. Post-feminism uses the ideology of post-racism to "legitimate [the] historical order of gender and race" (Kennedy, 2017, p. 11). In other words, post-feminism ignores gender in similar to the way that post-racism ignores race to reinscribe Black women's marginalized position within the social hierarchy. Both post-feminism and post-racism are grounded in the neoliberal ethics of individualism and self-regulation of marginalized subjects—by marginalized subjects (Gill & Scharff, 2013). Discourses of Black motherhood situated within the ideologies of post-racism and post-feminism reify neoliberal logics by disregarding the systemic racism and sexism influencing the material conditions of Black mothers and their families. Thus, Black mothers in/ability to adhere to the ethic of personal responsibility becomes a key feature of the conversations that are had about Black mothers and their families within the popular discourse.

Overview of Chapters

In this dissertation, I examine the discourses of Black motherhood using three case studies to argue a trajectory of discourses that both reinforce and challenge the maternal deviance of Black motherhood. In Chapter 2, I begin with an examination of the discourses of Black motherhood in the 2011 film adaptation of *The Help.* In this chapter, I examine how the Black domestic functions as a maternal figure to white women in a manner that reinforces the stability

of whiteness during the so-called post-racial and post-feminist ear of the Obama administration. Next, in Chapter 3 I turn my focus to Michelle Obama's deployment of mom-in-chief discourse to analyze how she uses techniques of strategic ambiguity (Joseph, 2018) to rebrand herself as a mother figure capable of challenging controlling images of Black womanhood by providing a respectable representation of Black mothers. Still, I argue, Obama's usage of the mom-in-chief discourse to challenge stereotypes of Black motherhood also functions to reinforce the prevailing discourses of Black mothers and their families as morally, sexually, and culturally deviant by positioning herself as unlike the Black people that need government assistance and intervention to maintain their material conditions. Finally, in Chapter 4, I examine the discourses of Black motherhood and their relationship to the representations of Black mothers in the forefront of the Black Lives Matter movement. In this chapter, I examine the representation of Sybrina Fulton and Lesley McSpadden, the respective mothers of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, Jr., in online mainstream news reports thirty days after their sons' deaths. I argue, the representations of Fulton and McSpadden in mainstream online news stories positions Black mothers in between the historical controlling images of Black womanhood that blame Black women for producing culturally deviant children and the demand that they act as respectable symbols for the movement against extrajudicial racialized violence.

Chapter 2

The stereotypical representation of Black mothers as docile mammies contributes to the devaluation of Black families and is important to the examination of the discourses of Black motherhood in the film adaptation of *The Help.* My examination of the representation of the mammy figure in *The Help* moves beyond the simple identification of stereotypes because that approach does not consider how the complex intersection of racial and gendered ideologies in

The Help contribute to a discourse of Black motherhood that privileges the maintenance of white supremacy. An exclusive focus on stereotypes also ignores the contradictions within the mediated representations of those stereotypes and hides the misrepresentation of cultural practices in characters that are not considered stereotypical (Shohat & Stam, 1994). Therefore, in this chapter, I build on Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's (1994) ethnicities-in-relation framework that is rooted in ethnic image studies but challenges the paradigm of ignoring the contradictions present in stereotypes and refusing to consider the complexities of all identities by placing people of color against a hegemonic whiteness. Shohat and Stam (1994) argue,

> A cross-cultural "mutually illuminating" dialogical approach stress not the analogies within specific national film traditions – for instance, the analogies between the representations of African Americans and Native Americans within Hollywood cinema – but also the analogies and disanalogies between the representations of both groups in Hollywood cinema, and their representations of other multiethnic film cultures of the Americas (p. 242).

By using a relational approach, I can deconstruct the representations of *The Help* beyond a Black-white racial binary. Furthermore, I extend my analysis beyond the identification of stereotypes to examine the complexity of representations present in the film. I focus on the cultural practices represented in the film, even if the character representations do no align cleaning with documented stereotypes and historical controlling images (Shohat & Stam, 1994; Collins, 2008). Shohat and Stam's (1994) ethnicities-in-relation framework allows me to focus on how *The Help* contributes to the discourses of Black motherhood by representing Black mothers to audiences as valid only if their maternal labor serves the dominant white power structure while avoiding essentialized readings of racialized and gendered stereotypes.

Using an ethnicities-in-relation framework allows me to focus my examination of discourses of Black motherhood present in *The Help.* Discourses are significant because they are

grounded in ideological formations of power and are used as overarching narratives which control the conversations about Black mothers in popular culture and everyday society. In the book *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials,* Gillian Rose (2007) argues discourse "refers to groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thing" (p.142). The constructs of race and gender (and the intersection thereof) perform significant discursive work by asserting their significance within the political landscape even as the neoliberal logics of post-racism and post-feminism work to deny the importance of race and gender to the life chances of Black mothers and their families (Mukherjee, 2006).

Discourse analysis is the appropriate method for understanding how *The Help* influences the popular cultural conversations had about Black mothers because this method addresses the relationship between power and knowledge. Rose (2007) contends, "discourse disciplines subjects into certain ways of thinking and acting, but this is not simply repressive; it does not impose rules for thought and behavior on a pre-existing human agent. Instead, human subjects are produced by discourses" (p. 143). By paying attention to the social construction and production of knowledge by human agents (Rose, 2007), discourse analysis highlights the ideology in visual media by calling attention the way humans construct and reproduce meaning.

Chapter 3

The release of *The* Help in 2011 occurred toward the end of the first term of the Barack Obama presidential administration. The election of the first Black president of the United States ushered in the popular belief that the United States has transcending Blackness and entered a post-racial society (Joseph, 2011). Nevertheless, the veneer of post-racism was consistently targeted by racist images of both Barack and Michelle Obama (Brown, 2012; Joseph, 2011). *The*

Help, with its focus on a racial stability that centralizes white supremacy serves as yet another counterpoint to the perceived political gains made by Black people (Collins, 2008). In Chapter 3, I move from the nostalgic representation of the Black domestic as a mammy figure for white women produced during the Obama administration to the examination of how Michelle Obama contributes to the discourses of Black motherhood during her role as the wife of a Black presidential candidate for president in 2008 and in her role as the first Black First Lady of the United States (FLOTUS) from 2008 to 2016.

As FLOTUS, Michelle Obama deployed her mom-in-chief discourse as a mechanism for challenging the controlling images of Black womanhood by presenting herself as a mother who is both willing and able to care for her children—instead of a docile mammy whose maternal labor is only valid in the white home. Conversely, Obama's deployment of her mom-in-chief discourse reinforced the discourses of Black motherhood that constructed mothers as morally, culturally, and sexually deviant by positioning herself as different from typical Black families who may need governmental intervention to maintain their material circumstances because her role as FLOTUS required her to appeal to mainstream white audiences. Obama intervenes in the discursive construction of First Ladies as representatives of an institution designed solely for upper-class, cisgender, heterosexual white women (Handau & Simian, 2019) by using her mom-in-chief discourse to control her public persona and assert her privilege to choose motherhood.

Yet, how do we reconcile the historical accomplishment the first Black president and First Lady with the Black mothers forced to defend the value of their children's lives and by extension their position as mothers if the Obama administration was supposed to mark the end of the marginalization and devaluation of Black people? I examine Obama's deployment of her mom-in-chief discourse because Obama's identification with motherhood both challenges and

reinforces the discourse of Black motherhood that represents Black women as sexually, morally, and culturally deviant mothers from broken homes who create criminal children who will leech off the government by presenting herself as similar to "hard-working everyday white families" and unlike those Black families who need handouts from the federal government to fix their communities.

In this chapter, I examine how Obama's uses the mom-in-chief discourse as a tool to challenge the racialized and gendered discourse of unfit Black mothers and as a weapon to reinforce the narrative of culturally, morally, and sexually deviant in video performances of three distinct FLOTUS duties: political/campaign support, promoter of social causes through her FLOTUS initiatives, and a celebrity figure speaking to popular audiences. Situating my examination of Obama's mom-in-chief discourse within the institutions of motherhood and FLOTUS allows me to extend my analysis beyond an examination of Obama as a representation of an exceptional Black person (Kendi, 2016) divorced from the racialized and gendered context of taking up space into two institutions that do not welcome the presence of Black women. Instead, I am able to extend my focus to how Obama's mom-in-chief discourse positions her as a figure using the rope of motherhood to speak to the competing audiences of mainstream white political constituents who need to be comfortable with a Black family in the White House and Black audiences who how have been historically constructed as sexually, morally, and culturally deviant.

Chapter 4

Michelle Obama's usage of the mom-in-chief discourse to resist the racialized and gendered confines of the FLOTUS position provides a backdrop for the then-burgeoning Black Lives Matter movement-a movement born out of Black mothers losing their children to

extrajudicial racialized violence. It is important to note that the Black Lives Matter movement began as a viral Twitter hashtag and morphed into a global movement challenging (Garza, 2016) the extrajudicial racialized violence enacted on Black people during the second term of the Obama presidential administration. To be clear, a movement born out of Black mothers losing their children to extrajudicial racialized violence at the same time a Black woman was using her position as FLOTUS to assert herself as the de facto mother of the nation (Tapia, 2011).

Sybrina Fulton and Lesley McSpadden[6] were thrust into the spotlight when their respective sons, Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, Jr. were killed by acts of extrajudicial racialized violence. Chapter 4 examines how Fulton and McSpadden were represented in online mainstream news stories for 30 days after their sons' respective deaths. The 30-day period I selected for the Google search is significant because that is when there was the greatest demand for information about the incidents from audiences, media outlets, and law enforcement agencies. I conducted an advanced Google search for the key words "Sybrina Fulton" between the dates of Trayvon's death on February 26, 2012, and March 26, 2012. The search returned a total of 236 of the most relevant search results. I also conducted an advanced Google search using the keyword "Lesley McSpadden" between the dates of Michael's death on August 9, 2014, and September 9, 2014. The search returned a total of 226 if the most relevant results. I have eliminated all the broken links and results that do not reference Fulton or McSpadden and I perform a textual analysis of the remaining results. I chose to use Google instead of the academic search engine Lexis Nexis because I wanted to collect a sample of news available within the popular mediated landscape. Still, the data available in a Google search is governed by the

[6] According to her book, *Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil*, McSpadden's (2016) preferred spelling of her name is Lezley McSpadden. However, most Google searches refer to her as "Lesley." It's important for this research to acknowledge her agency by acknowledging the correct spelling her name.

algorithmic data made available by the company and should not be considered "benign, neutral, or objective" (Noble, 2018, p. 1).

The examination of the representation of Fulton and McSpadden in mainstream news after the deaths of their sons is significant to understanding the competing discourses association with Black motherhood while engaging with the mediated spectacle of Black death. To advocate for justice for their deceased children, Fulton and McSpadden must present themselves as sympathetic maternal figures within the public sphere. Fulton and McSpadden are required to perform a version of motherhood that is relatable to mainstream white audiences to mainstream news organizations that use the tragedy of their sons' deaths to further the discourse of culturally, morally, and sexually deviant Black families. Conversely, Fulton's and McSpadden's value as mothers is both affirmed and delegitimated by representations of them as symbols for a larger movement against the extrajudicial racialized violence enacted upon Black people. The tension between having to challenge the historical controlling images of Black womanhood that deem them unfit and unworthy mothers and the narrative that Black women are supposed to do the hard work of carrying a movement—despite experiencing a parent's worst nightmare is a significant influence on the discourses of b motherhood in media and in popular culture.

Chapter 5

In Chapter 5, I will conclude by highlighting the real-world implications of the mediated discourses of Black motherhood. I will show how the language that we use to discuss Black mothers influences how we are seen in popular and how it influences how we view ourselves as mothers and as children of Black mothers. I will provide areas for further research, and I will examine the limitations of this work. All in all, my purpose is to move a discussion of the discourses of Black motherhood beyond the theoretical exercise of a dissertation to examining

how the material conditions of Black people are greatly influenced by how we discuss Black mothers. As a Black mother, I have a vested interested in understanding the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood because they guide how I move through the world, and they influence how my child moves through world now and how she will move through the world she decide to have children of her own.

CHAPTER 2: "YOU IS KIND. YOU IS SMART. YOU IS IMPORTANT.": BLACK MAMMY'S NOSTALGIC DISCOURSES IN *THE HELP*

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the discourses of Black motherhood by examining the representation of the Black domestic as a maternal figure whose job it is to serve and care for white women in the film adaptation of *The Help. The Help* uses the controlling image of the mammy figure as a framework for positioning the Black domestic within a nostalgic narrative of white racial stability before the Civil Rights and feminist movements. By focusing on the Black domestic's relationship with the white women they care for, *The* Help becomes a significant site for understanding how the historical controlling image of the mammy influences the current prevailing discourses of Black motherhood. As a contemporary popular cultural text, *The Help* functions both as a callback to the era of Jim Crow segregation and as a counterpoint to the perceived political gains made by Black Americans during the Obama administration. Furthermore, *The Help* is located at the intersection of the neoliberal post-racial and post-feminist discourses that reify and commodify racialized, gendered, and classed identities in U.S. popular culture while working to obscure the influence those identities have on the life chances of marginalized people. My focus on the representation of Black domestics in *The Help* allows me to highlight how the performance of the controlling image of the mammy figure by the Black domestics in the movie contribute to the discourse of Black mothers as morally, sexually, and culturally deviant. More importantly, my focus on the Black domestic as a mammy figure to white women allows me to interrogate how mediated representations of Black motherhood present in *The Help* minimize the discursive space needed to interrogate the underlying political,

material, and cultural implications of imagining and discussing Black motherhood in limited ways.

The Help[7] (Taylor, 2011), released by DreamWorks in 2011, is an adaptation of Kathryn Stockett's 2009 eponymous debut novel. Both the novel and the subsequent film draw on Stockett's experience growing up with a Black domestic in her hometown of Jackson, Mississippi. The film's main plot focuses on the protagonist Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan returning home to Jackson after her college graduation to begin work as a journalist for the local newspaper. After Hilly Holbrook, the movie's antagonist, announces the introduction of her "Home Health Sanitation Initiative" which will require white families to build a separate bathroom for the Black domestics they employ, Skeeter approaches a publisher with the idea of writing a book from the perspective of Black domestics in Jackson. To complete the project, Skeeter asks Black domestics Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson to contribute their stories to the book and to recruit other Black domestics who are willing to share their experiences of working for white families. The book fuels the movie's secondary plot by providing Skeeter with an opportunity to investigate the whereabouts of Constantine, her family's previous Black domestic and her surrogate mother figure.

As a book[8] club mainstay, *The Help* succeeded with critical and popular audiences; and as a film, *The Help* was both a commercial and industry success. During its theatrical release, the

[7] The novel topped *The New York Times* bestseller list six times during is 103-week tenure (DreamWorks Studios, 2011). *Publishers Weekly* ranked *The Help* number three on its list of best-selling hardcover books in 2009 and it was the first single Amazon Kindle title to sell one million eBook copies (Owen, 2011). Additionally, in Stockett won numerous awards for her novel including the American Bookseller's Association Indies Choice Award and the Southern Independent Booksellers Association Book of the Year for fiction in 2010 (Stockett, 2011).

[8] To write *The Help*, Stockett drew from her experience of growing up with a Black maid in her hometown of Jackson, Mississippi. In the novel, the central character Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan returns to her hometown (also Jackson, Mississippi) after graduation to begin work as a journalist for the local newspaper. After becoming

film version of *The Help* grossed approximately $170 million domestically and over $210 million globally. The success of *The Help* was aided by aggressive marketing and promotional tie-ins such as southern cooking, fashion, and style guides (Christianson, 2011; MyRecipes.com, 2011), and cross-branding efforts with The Home Shopping Network (Blogmother, 2011; Williams, 2011) and Goodreads.com, the social network for readers that invoked a nostalgia for the fashion, food, and culture of 1960s-era southern United States without any discussion of the racism or inequality experienced by the Black domestics represented in the movie.

Still, the theatrical release of *The Help* was not without controversy. *The Help* was accused of misrepresenting Black domestics specifically and Black culture more generally with a white-washed feel-good story of racial harmony during the racially turbulent 1960s (Seitz, 2011). After the film's 2011 release*,* Aibileen Cooper, a domestic worker for Kathryn Stockett's brother, sued Stockett for co-opting and misappropriating her identity for financial gain (Mohr, 2011). In 2018, Viola Davis, the actress who played the fictionalized Aibileen Clark in *The Help* critiqued the film for marginalizing the stories and experiences of the Black domestics it claimed to highlight. In *The New York Times,* Davis expressed regret for appearing in *The Help.*

> I just felt that at the end of the day that it wasn't the voices of the maids that were heard. I know Aibileen. I know Minny. They're my grandma. They're my mom. And I know that if you do a movie where the whole premise is, I want to know what it feels like to work for white people and to bring up children in 1963, I want to hear how you really feel about it. I never heard that in the course of the movie (Murphy, 2018, paragraph 12).

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disconnect with the lightweight assignments the newspaper editor gives her, Skeeter approaches a book editor with the idea of writing a book from the perspective of the Black maids in her hometown (Stockett, 2009).
The film, however, focuses on the "unlikely friendship" (DreamWorks Studios, 2011) Skeeter has with Black maids Aibileen and Minny ("the help") as they work together to tell the stories of Black maids working for white families in 1960s-era Jackson, Mississippi. Skeeter's hopes the book will serve the dual purpose of impressing a book publisher in New York City and changing the way Black maids are treated by their employers.

More generally, *The Help* uses the figure of the Black domestic to perpetuate and reinforce the discursive construction of Black communities as culturally, morally, and sexually deviant. In an "Open Statement to Fans of *The Help,*" The Association of Black Women Historians (ABWH) condemned the film for misrepresenting southern and Black culture. They argue (2011),

> Both versions of *The Help* also misrepresent African American speech and culture. Set in the South, the appropriate regional accent gives way to a child-like, over-exaggerated "black" dialect. In the film, for example, the primary character, Aibileen, reassures a young white child that, "you is smat [sic], you is kind, you is important." In the book black women refer to the Lord as the "Law," an irreverent depiction of black vernacular. For centuries, black women and men have drawn strength from the community institutions. The black family, in particular provided support and the validation of personhood necessary to stand against adversity. We do not recognize the black community described in *The Help* where most of the black male characters are depicted as drunkards, abusive, or absent. Such distorted images are misleading and do not represent the historical realities of black masculinity and manhood (paragraph 3).

Before *The Help* was released, blogs questioned the lack of roles for Black actresses by suggesting that it may be a rite of passage for a Black woman to portray a maid on the big screen. (Sanders, 2011). Critics accused the film of perpetuating the stereotypical representation of Black women as subservient maids and mammies and accused the film industry of praising Black actors only when they accept roles that adhere to those stereotypes. (Burton, 2012).

Stereotypical representations of the Black domestic as a mammy figure in *The Help* is significant to the examination of the contemporary discourses of Black motherhood. Yet, a singular focus on stereotype does not allow for an understanding of the complex cultural contexts that influence how Black mothers are constructed in media. The representation of Black domestics by itself does not position Black women as culturally, morally, and sexually deviant. In fact, the suggestion that Black actors should only consider and accept roles that represent Black people as respectable citizens fully assimilated into white culture denies the humanity of Black women and mothers by constraining the representational possibilities of their lived

experiences and discounts the influence systemic racism has on the limited narratives available to Black actors and media producers. Art historian Kobena Mercer (1990) speaks to the representational burden faced by actors who desire to portray multifaceted and complex characters who may not meet the standards of Black respectability. Mercer (1990) argues, "Artists positioned in the margins of the institutional spaces of cultural production are burdened with the impossible role of speaking as 'representatives' in the sense that they are expected to 'speak for' the black communities from which they come" (p. 62). In other words, the expectation that the scant representational opportunities available to Black people speak to the lived experiences of every Black person in the diaspora places an undue burden on Black actors and artists to represent Blackness in a manner that is palatable to white audiences without reinforcing the controlling images fostered by white supremacy. Therefore, a singular focus on the representation of the mammy stereotype in *The Help* reinforces a representational burden that demeans Black domestics and the actors that seek to bring those characters to life. Instead, I go beyond simply pointing out mammy performances in *The Help* by situating Black domestics within the larger representational and political context of the film's production to consider how they contribute to the contemporary discourses of Black motherhood.

In 2020, *The Help* experienced a resurgence in popularity on the Netflix internet movie streaming service. The social uprisings that occurred after the extrajudicial racialized deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd at the hands of the police led to the demand for anti-racist educational resources in the United States. Reading lists and movie recommendations about topics related to the Black Lives Matter Movement curated for white people looking to educate themselves about the lived experiences of Black people in the United States flooded social media. Netflix added to the marketplace of anti-racist educational resources by creating a Black

Lives Matter Collection that included movies such as Spike Lee's *Da 5 Bloods,* Ava DuVernay's *13th,* and Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* (Spangler, 2020). There was an increased focus on stories about the lived experiences of Black people created by Black people, yet white audiences chose to learn about racial relations in the United States by watching *The Help*—making it the most watched movie on Netflix during the summer of 2020 (Aquilina, 2020). According to journalist Tyler Aquilina (2020) activists took to social media to critique those who are looking to learn about the Black experience by viewing it through the lens of whiteness.

> Despite the bounty of films by black artists available to stream (some of which are now available for free) in this time of crisis, many viewers are turning to *The Help*—a movie written and directed by a white man, based on a book by a white woman, about a white woman's quest to document the plight of black maids—instead (paragraph 1).

Although the film adaptation of *The Help* was released in 2011, it remains a significant site for understanding the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood because even at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, *The Help* is being used as a tool to understand contemporary race relations and control the conversations had about Black mothers and their families specifically.

In this chapter, I argue the film adaptation of *The Help* is a contemporary production grounded in the neoliberal logics of post-racial and post-feminist ideologies that seeks to uphold and stabilize white supremacy while at the same time refusing to acknowledge how the intersection of racism and sexism influence the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood. I first examine how the logic of neoliberalism within the ideologies of post-racism and post-feminism influence the discourses of Black motherhood. Next, I situate the controlling image of the mammy figure within the representational context of the Black domestic. Finally, I examine how the representations of the Black domestics in *The Help* contribute to the discourses of Black

motherhood by highlighting three discursive themes: appropriate maternal labor, mothering white womanhood, and the stabilization of white supremacy.

Neoliberal Logics of Post-Racism and Post-Feminism

Neoliberal logics inform the post-racial and post-feminist ideologies reinforcing the racial and gendered inequalities that reinscribe power to the cis-gender, heterosexual, white male social elite. As a political and economic ideology, neoliberalism encompasses "the political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). Neoliberal ideologies circulate through media and privilege free market solutions to racism and sexism by shifting the responsibility for reconciling these social problems from the government to the individual. Foucault (2008) suggests neoliberalism functions as an

> [i]nverted social contract. That is to say, in the social contract, all those who will the social contract and virtually or actually subscribe to it form part of society until such a time as they cut themselves off from it. In the idea of an economic game, we find that one originally insisted on being part of the economic game and consequently it is up to society and the rules of the game imposed by the state to ensure that no one is excluded from this game in which he is caught up without having explicitly wished to take part (p. 202).

In short, Foucault argues neoliberal political values breaks down social relationships by forcing the human experience into an economic framework. Because of this modified social contract, racial and gender discrimination become individual issues divorced from the systemic issues of class and capitalism.

Yet, proponents of neoliberal political and economic ideologies fail to consider the social and political ramifications of relinquishing the responsibility for social welfare to the free market (Brown, 2005). According to political theorist Wendy L. Brown (2005),

> [N]eoliberalism is not simply a set of economic policies; it is not only about facilitating free trade, maximizing corporate profits, and challenging welfarism. Rather, neoliberalism carries a social analysis which, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to the practices of empire. Neo-liberal rationality…is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; rather it involved extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player (p. 40).

Neoliberalism, thus, reimagines the human experience as a link between one's identity and her ability to produce an income or the ability to produce another human being who can produce an income (Foucault, 2008). When the human experience is linked with neoliberal logics, we lose the opportunity to examine how the relationship between race, gender, and class influences both economic and social policies. Yet, neoliberalism contributes to the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood by discounting how race, gender, and class influence the social and material conditions of Black mothers and their families.

As a contemporary production designed for a contemporary audience, *The Help* is situated within post-racial and post-feminist ideologies and is grounded in neoliberal logics. Post-racial and post-feminist ideologies function similarly and intersectionally for Black people and white women by claiming race and gender are no longer factors in our lives because the Civil Rights and feminist movements successfully eradicated racism and sexism (Joseph, 2012). Specifically, the ideologies of post-racism and post feminism marginalize race and gender by claiming those constructs are unimportant to the life chances of Black people and white women in the political and social spheres. Instead, neoliberal logics demand a focus on individual personal responsibility and meritocracy while post-racism and post-feminism ignores how the existing racial and gendered social order limits one's access to the tools required to achieve and maintain individual success. Patricia Hill Collins (2005) does not explicitly address the ideologies of post-racism and post-feminism in the book *Black Sexual Politics: African*

Americans, Gender, and the New Racism. Yet, Collins (2005) does point to how the racial and gender privilege of the white male social elite (Mukherjee, 2006) is maintained by a "new racism" informed by the intersection of the ideologies of post-racism and post-feminism and is predicated on the increased mediated representations of Black women that are not necessarily grounded in explicitly constructed stereotypes. Since my goal is to examine how the representations of Black domestics in *The Help* contributes to the construction of the discourses of Black motherhood, it is important to consider how post-racial and post- feminist discourses inform each other.

The ideology of post-racism is developed out of a trajectory of theories developed to interrogate the formation of racial identity, racial relationships, and the meaning of race in the United States (Omi & Winant, 2015). In the book *Racial Formation in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2015) argue racial inequality has been theorized in two crucial ways: biological and cultural. Biological theories imply racial inequalities are the result of genetic differences between Black and white people. Cultural theories view race as existing as parallel to the un-raced white (and therefore default) society. Thus, cultural theories reduce race to "a preference, something variable and chosen, in the way one's religion or language is chosen" (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 22). As a cultural theory of race, colorblindness shifts the focus away from race as an organizing principle of society. Similarly, the ideology of post-racism, according to Roopali Mukherjee (2014), serves as a turning point in the national conversation about racial inequality by shifting the focus of racial relations towards a discourse that attributes Black/white racial relations to "market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks' imputed cultural limitations" (Gallagher, 2003, p. 2) instead of systemic racial inequality.

Similar to the ways in which post-race posits the ideology that race is no longer a factor in the life chances of Black people in the United States, post-feminism claims the feminist movement is unnecessary because women have achieved equality with men (Projansky, 2001). Specifically, post-feminist ideologies depoliticize systemic gender inequalities and reinforce the racial and gender hierarchy by focusing on the commodification of individual female identities in a manner that aligns with the neoliberal values of choice, freedom, and meritocracy (McRobbie, 2004; Projansky, 2001). Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (2007) defines post-feminism as

> [i]nherently contradictory, characterized by a double discourse that works to construct feminism as a phenomenon of the past, traces of which can be found (and sometimes even valued) in the present; postfeminism suggests that it is the very success of feminism that produces its irrelevance from contemporary culture (p. 8).

The perceived irrelevance of the feminist movement manifests itself in a decreased support for feminism, an increase in the visible backlash against feminist principles, and a manifestation of a version of feminism that allows women to deny the social influence of the feminist movement while simultaneously appearing to publicly support feminist ideals (Hall & Rodriguez, 2003). The focus post-feminist ideologies have on the "pastness" of the feminist movement acts as a mechanism to conflate women of all races into a marketable cultural product that centers the white racial experience of gender (Projansky, 2001). Consequently, I argue, the mediated representations of Black domestics in *The Help* contribute to the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood by both decontextualizing the racialized and gendered lived experiences of Black domestics from the systemic racism of a pre-Civil Rights United States and absolving white women of the responsibility for maintaining a racialized and gendered social order in a film that does not explicitly reference the issues of race and gender.

The Black Domestic as a Maternal Signifier for Black and White Women

Under the current post-racial and post-feminist discourses, the increased representation of Black people in popular culture does not shield media producers from the charge of reproducing stereotypes grounded in the controlling images of Black womanhood. In fact, Collins (2005) argues, "the new racism relies more heavily on the manipulation of ideas within the mass media. These new techniques present hegemonic ideologies that claim that racism no longer exists. They work to obscure the racism that does exist, and they undercut anti-racist protest" (p. 54). Hence, the increased presence of Black people in media does not qualitatively translate to equal and race-neutral representation, consumption, or interpretation (Collins, 2005; Jhally & Lewis, 1992). It is important to consider how the racialized and gendered representations of the Black domestic as a mammy figure contributes to the discourses of Black motherhood in The *Help* because racial and gender ideologies are significant to the forms of cultural knowledges audiences bring to their consumption and interpretation of media texts.

Previously, I argued the release of the film adaptation of *The Help* was marked with controversy because it represented Black women as subservient maids and maternal figures for white women in the racially charged 1960s. Critiques of *The Help* found the representation of Black domestics in the film problematic because it was yet another appearance of the controlling image of the mammy figure neatly packaged for white audiences in a post-racial and post-feminist narrative of an "unlikely friendship." The representation of the mammy figure in *The Help* is significant in a historical narrative presented to a contemporary audience because as Patricia Hill Collins (2008) argues, the mammy figure was "created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service" (p. 80). The representation of the mammy figure in a contemporary film, such

as *The Help,* works to restabilize the white racial and gender hierarchy during a period when Black people were making more political and social gains in the United States.

The dark-skinned, asexual mammy who is more loyal to her white family than her own and "knows her place" is the white dominant culture's aspirational maternal figure for Black women (Collins, 2008). In accepting her subordinate role, the mammy's key role as mother figure was to socialize her Black children into their proper place as subordinate citizens in dominant culture. According to Collins (2008), Black mothers "[a]s members of African-American families who are most familiar with the skills needed for Black accommodation…are encouraged to transmit to their own children the deference behavior that many are forced to exhibit in their mammified [domestic service] jobs" (p. 81). In other words, by accepting her subordination, the mammy's key role as a mother figure to her Black children was to socialize her children into their proper place as subordinate citizens in dominant culture.

The nostalgic representation of the Black domestic as a mammy figure in *The* Help is significant to understanding the discourses of Black motherhood because it uses the representation of a Black maternal figure to restabilize whiteness within the current post-racial social order. According to Collins (2008) "Employing [and representing] Black women in mammified occupations [such as domestics] supports the racial superiority of White employers, encouraging middle-class White women in particular to identify more closely with the racial and class privilege afforded their fathers, husbands, and sons" (p. 80). The representation of Black domestics in *The Help* adds to the social meanings of racial relationships between Black and white people by constructing a discourse of Black motherhood that is grounded in the historical controlling image of the mammy. The mammy figure is an exemplar of the representation of an unequal power balance that limits the number of schemas available for interpreting racial

interactions (Shohat & Stam, 1994). The stereotype of the mammy figure centralizes a defined model of acceptable Black motherhood that forces Black women to use their maternal labor in service to white womanhood.

In *The Help,* the representation of the Black domestic as a mammy figure is juxtaposed against the cinematic trope of the white savior, or the white female protagonist who takes on the responsibility of rescuing the Black domestics from racial discrimination (Hughey, 2010a). White savior tropes centralize and normalize the white experience through the representation of Black people as unable to escape their social and cultural marginalization without the guidance and leadership of a single white actor (Cammarota, 2011; Hughey, 2010a; Shome, 1996). Films, such as *The Help*, employ the neoliberal logics of post-racial and post-feminist ideologies to emphasize the ethics of individual responsibility and charity as responses to systemic and institutionalized racial segregation. Consequently, Black mothers and their families are marginalized by a discourse that positions us as economically, politically, and socially disadvantaged because of their inability to be saved by the white savior figure.

The white savior trope contributes to the racialized discourse that privileges whiteness by representing Black mothers and their families as lacking the agency to overcome their marginalized circumstances because they are culturally, morally, and sexually deviant. Generally, research on the white savior trope is found in race, film, ethnic studies, and whiteness literatures. Studies of the white savior trope generally focuses on the textual analysis of Black/white binaries in full-length U.S. and film releases (Vera & Gordon, 2003). Raka Shome (1996), however, extends the discussion of the white savior trope beyond a Black/white racial binary in her examination of the film *City of Joy,* a film that positions the white savior figure outside of the United States in a so-called impoverished "Third World" country. Other studies

emphasize how film reviewers mediate the white savior trope for both movie producers and consumers (Hughey, 2010b). Further still, education professor Julio Cammarota (2011) examined how the consumption of media representations of the white savior trope influences the misrepresentations of the Black people's agency in shaping our historical and contemporary achievements. The filtering of Black achievements through the lens of the white savior trope influences the way students internalize the racialized discourses of Black people as victims of a "culture of poverty" (Cammarota, 2011; Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965).

The signifying practice of stereotyping reinscribes the racial and gendered social order by reducing social groups to a few essentialized characteristics represented in media as fixed and unchanging (Hall, 1997). Media producers can represent several identity constructs including race, gender, and class stereotypically even though all social groups do not bear the political weight of stereotypes equally. According to Shohat and Stam (1994),

> The facile catch-all invocation of "stereotypes" elides a crucial distinction: stereotypes of some communities merely make the target group uncomfortable, but the community has the social power to combat and resist them; stereotypes of other communities participate in a continuum of prejudicial social policy and actual violence against disempowered people, placing the very body of the accused in jeopardy (p. 183).

Stereotypes have the most currency when pointed towards groups such as Black women and mothers, who have limited access to social power (Hall, 1997). By positioning the white savior trope against the representation of the mammy figure in *The Help* provides a framework for understanding how the Black domestic contributes to a discourse of Black motherhood as acceptable only if it services the dominant ideology of whiteness. Unlike mediated representations of whiteness, mediated representations of Blackness veer toward the stereotypical because the racial power imbalance demands stereotypes of Black people serve as a

model for the behavior of Black people. Specifically, any representation deviating from images deemed palatable to white people traps Black people in "a position where any reflection of a more typical black experience…is 'stereotypical'" (Jhally & Lewis, 1992, p. 138). Conversely, representations of whiteness (stereotypical or otherwise) are allowed a more diverse and complex reading because these representations are not required to signify an entire racial group (Dyer, 1997).

Discourses of Black motherhood presented in *The Help* are dependent on the stereotypical representation of Black domestics as mammies and function in relationship to the shifting gendered representation of white womanhood in the movie. The mammy figure, as represented by the Black domestic in *The Help*, works to support the reimagining of a white maternal labor existing outside of the limitations of the private sphere activities of childcare and domestic labor (Anderson, 2000; Welter, 1966; Wooten & Branch, 2012). The mammy figure works as a counterpoint to the ideology of Victorian womanhood which only conferred acceptable motherhood to white women (Hale, 1998; Welter, 1966; & Wooten & Branch, 2012) and allowed white women to feel entitled to the labor of Black women after Reconstruction (Hale, 1998). According to Historian Grace Elizabeth Hale (1998), white women maintained their entitlement to Black labor through the construction of "mammy fiction."

> In the stories told about "mammy," however, these African American women were rarely responsible for setting in motion events that taught white children the power of their racial identity. White children in their own autobiographical recollections learned difference through recognizing as "other" someone other than "mammy." And this recognition occurred under the direction of other whites (Hale, 1998, p. 103).

The consumption of Black women, specifically the mammy figure as represented by Black domestics, became the foundation of the white household. The consumption of Black women's domestic labor in the white household redefined what it meant to be a white woman and a white

mother.

> White southerners associated with black women all the sentimental values of middle-class womanhood—mammies natured children, loved unconditionally, and lived for others. White women, then could leave the home and still be ladies not only because African American domestic workers performed the labor there but because they absorbed the celebrated yet constricting gender conventions associated with motherhood (Hale, 1998, p. 105).

For white women to have Black women mother their kids, it was important to reconstruct women's gender roles. The mammy's job was to exclusively care for the future of white children, which culturally contradicted ideas about the public and private sphere of white motherhood.

Discourses of Black Motherhood in *The Help*

In *The Help,* I have located three themes of Black motherhood as contributing factors to the discursive construction of Black mothers within popular culture: (1) Black women are the appropriate choice for maternal labor in white homes; (2) Black women's maternal labor should stabilize the white racial order; and (3) racism is an individual, not a systemic issue. The first discursive theme of Black motherhood represented in *The Help,* "Black women are the appropriate choice for maternal labor in white homes," suggests Black women's domestic labor in white homes is both natural and inevitable. The inevitability of Black women performing domestic labor in white homes is emphasized by white women's domestic incompetence in their own homes and Black women's inability to provide a proper home environment for their children. Theme number two, "Black women's maternal labor should stabilize the white racial order," aligns the representation of Black domestics with the historical controlling image of the mammy (Collins, 2008). In *The Help,* Black domestics embody the mammy controlling image through a dedication and commitment to reinforcing the inherent social value of the white

women they care for even as they are unable to provide the same care and concern for their own children.

Lastly, the theme of "racism is an individual, not a systemic issue," uses the neoliberal logics of post-racism and post-feminism to reduce systemic racism and sexism to issues of personal responsibility and individual temperament. Racism in *The Help* reinforces the contemporary post-racial and post-feminist social order by divorcing racism and the responses to it from the systemic oppression faced by Black domestics in the 1960s-era in which the film is set and the contemporary-era in which the film is produced. Situating racism solely within the realm of individual actions allows *The Help* to absolve white people of the task of addressing racism on a systemic level and blame the perpetuation of racism on Black people who bring up the topic. Since post-racial and post-feminist logic dictates that racism is no longer an issue for Black people, *The Help* represents racism as an issue that white people cannot do anything about, but Black people can continue to perpetuate because white people are done with the issue. Thus, *The Help* uses the nostalgic representation of Black maternal labor as a tool to stabilize white supremacy within a contemporary moment by valuing Black motherhood only when it services the ideology of whiteness.

Black women are the appropriate choice for maternal labor in white homes

The term appropriate labor, according to Melissa E. Wooten and Enobong H. Branch (2012), signifies "the fluid and negotiated nature of the image of the worker divorced from the image of a man or men's bodies" (p. 295). Wooten and Branch (2012), racialize their construction of appropriate labor by considering how the reproductive labor of Black domestics contributes to the maintenance of the racialized social structures both within and outside the white home. Specifically, the increased industrialization and consumerism of the 1960s allowed

white women to maintain the gendered expectations of domesticity (Welter, 1966) by marginalizing the maternal labor of Black women. According to Wooten and Branch (2012),

> The growth in the popularity of domestic servants coincided with an expanding number of household tasks that were classified as appropriate work for someone other than members of the household itself. Employing domestic servants enabled middle-class women to strike a balance between the reality and ideals of domesticity (p. 299).

Consequently, the devaluation of the relationship between white womanhood and domesticity because of the racialization of the management and performance of domestic labor (Wooten & Branch, 2012) allowed white women to pursue increasing occupational and civil service opportunities. The decoupling of femininity from domestic labor allowed white women to redefine a woman's role from the producer of domestic to the manager of domestic labor. Black women become the appropriate substitute for the labor white women were no longer required to perform because they did not meet the standard of womanhood.

The Help contributes to the discourses of Black motherhood by constructing Black mothers and domestics as separated from their status as women by constructing Black women's domestic labor as more appropriate in white homes in three distinct ways: by positioning Black women as the natural caregivers to white children; by positioning white women as incompetent domestic figures in their own homes; and by positioning Black women as unable to provide a proper domestic environment for their children and families.

Black women as natural caregivers to white children

The Help frames Black domestics as natural caregivers to white children almost immediately. From the very beginning of *The Help*, the relationship between Black domestics and the white children they care for are represented as natural and inevitable. The movie's framing constructs the lens in which audiences are to view the film's narrative and by extension

the contemporary racial order in which the film is produced. Aibileen Clark, a Black woman washing dishes in her home and responding to the questions of an unseen Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan, is introduced at the beginning of the movie. Skeeter is a white woman who is interviewing Aibileen for a book she is writing about Black domestics' experiences working for white families in Jackson, Mississippi. During this exchange, Aibileen's position as a professional maid and caregiver for white children is framed as not only appropriate, but inevitable.

> Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan: And did you know, as a girl growing up, that one day you'd be a maid?
> Aibileen Clark: Yes ma'am I did.
> Skeeter: And you knew that because…
> Aibileen: My mama was a maid. My grandmama was a house slave.
> Skeeter: Do you ever dream of being something else (Taylor, 2011, 1:36)?

After Skeeter asks Aibileen about her dreams outside of domestic work, Aibileen nods affirmatively, but she is not shown answering the question or voicing a desire that does not centralize the care of white families and their children. Instead, Skeeter asks Aibileen an unrelated follow-up question. Skeeter asks, "What does it feel like to raise a white child when your own child's at home being looked after by someone else?" Aibileen begins to answer Skeeter's question, but after she glances at a photo of her son on the wall she stops. Aibileen is then shown explicitly looking away from her son's picture before she is shown caring for Mae Mobley, the daughter of her employer, in the Leefolt home. The scenes showing Aibileen caring for Mae Mobley are juxtaposed with Aibileen recounting her career caring for white children through a voiceover.

> Aibileen: I done raised 17 kids in my life. Looking after white babies, that's what I do. I know how to get them babies to sleep stop crying and go on the toilet bowl before their mamas even get out of bed in the morning (Taylor, 2011, 2:21).

The emphasis on Aibileen's career caring for white children and the marginalization of her hopes and dreams outside of being a maid works to construct the Black domestic as the natural caregiver for white children. Since Aibileen "always knew" she would be a maid, and is not able to discuss her own children, *The Help* demands Black domestics focus their career aspirations and their domestic energy towards the maintenance of white families. The positioning of the Black domestic as the natural caregivers for white children in a film grounded in 1960s-era racial nostalgia contributes the discourses of Black motherhood by reproducing the controlling image of the mammy figure as the ideal for Black women and mothers.

White women are incompetent domestic figures in their own homes

The representation of white women in *The Help* as unable to care for their children or their homes contributes to the prevailing discourse of Black motherhood that positions Black mothers as the appropriate maternal labor in white homes. A significant portion of the film focuses on white women's inability to provide for the social and emotional development of their children despite having the financial means to provide for a Black domestic. After Aibileen describes her career caring for white children, she transitions to describing the maternal incompetence of her current employer, Elizabeth Leefolt.

> Aibileen: Miss Leefolt still don't pick Baby Girl [Elizabeth's daughter Mae Mobley] up but once a day. The birthing blues got a hold of Miss Leefolt pretty hard. I done seen it happen plenty of times, once babies start having they own babies (Taylor, 2011, 4:00).

Aibileen's concern with Elizabeth's inability to care for her children continues after Aibileen agrees to be interviewed for Skeeter's book about Black domestics in Jackson, Mississippi. In her interview, Aibileen describes how Elizabeth is not caring for her daughter, Mae Mobley.

> Aibileen: I reckon I'm ready to talk about Miss Leefolt now. Baby girl still gotta wear a diaper when she sleep at night. And it don't get changed till I get there in the morning. That's about 10 hours she gotta sleep in her own mess. Now Miss Leefolt pregnant with

> her second baby. Lord…I pray this child turn out good. It's a lonely road if a mom don't think her child is pretty.
> Skeeter: That's very true.
> Aibileen: Miss Leefolt should not be having babies. Write that down (Taylor, 211, 56:29).

The scene showing Skeeter interviewing Aibileen about her concern for Mae Mobley's wellbeing is juxtaposed against another scene showing Aibileen distraught at the sight of Mae Mobley's dirty diaper. Aibileen correcting Elizabeth's parenting mistakes emphasizes white women's inability to perform maternal labor in their own homes. Consequently, *The Help* represents Black women as the appropriate choice for performing domestic labor in white homes.

In *The Help,* middle-class white women become more closely aligned with the managerial status of their husbands by bringing in Black domestics to perform maternal labor in their homes. Womanhood for white women, is thus, redefined by their ability to manage the labor in their home, not necessarily perform the domestic labor themselves (Wooten & Branch, 2012). Therefore, the attainment of a Black domestic becomes a marker of class status for white families. The representation of Black domestics in *The Help* reinforces both the racial and class status of middle-class white women by highlighting lower-class white women's inability to perform domestic labor and their inability to perform as a manager of Black domestic labor.

Aibileen's best friend in *The Help* is a Black domestic named Minny Jackson. Minny worked for Hilly Holbrook, the movie's antagonist, before she was fired for attempting to use the bathroom at the Holbrook residence. Hilly spread a rumor that Minny was a thief making it difficult for Minny to get a new job. Aibileen, knew Minny could obtain a job with Celia Rae Foote, a white woman who was shunned from the social circles of the middle-class white women of Jackson, Mississippi because she is believed to be, according to Minny, "white trash," and therefore outside the reach of Hilly's "lies." Minny makes the trip to Celia's large plantation-

style home in hopes of obtaining a new job as a domestic. Because Celia was not born into the middle-class social circles of Jackson, Mississippi, she is represented as an incompetent housekeeper who is performing a class position that she is unable to obtain.

Celia's first onscreen appearance shows her greeting Minny by running out of her home barefoot and covered in flour. As Celia and Minny walk through the home, the film shows Celia's kitchen full of dirty dishes and covered in flour. During their conversation, Minny also informs Celia that she is burning her upside-down cake.

> Celia Rae Foote: I'm Celia Rae Foote.
> Minny Jackson: I'm Minny Jackson. You, um…cooking something. [Minny points to the flour on Celia's face.]
> Celia: One of those upside-down cakes from the magazine. It ain't working out too good. [Celia brushes the flour off her clothes.] Come on, let's get you a cold Coca-Cola. Come on. This here is the kitchen.
> Minny: What in the hell?
> Celia: I guess I got some learning to do.
> Minny: [Scoffs] You sure do (Taylor, 2011, 49:57).

After Celia and Minny finish touring the home, Minny agrees to work as Celia's domestic help. While working out the details of the job, Celia informs Minny that she does not want to tell her husband she has hired a domestic. Celia wants her husband to believe she can handle the responsibility of caring for their home and future children.

> Minny: Hold on a minute. We gots to talk about some things first.
> Celia: Oh.
> Minny: I work Sunday through Friday.
> Celia: No, you can't work at all on the weekends.
> Minny: OK. What time you want me here?
> Celia: After 9:00, and you gotta leave before 4:00.
> Minny: OK…Now…What your husband say you can pay?
> Celia: Johnny doesn't know I'm bringing in help.
> Minny: And what Mr. Johnny gonna do when he come home and find a colored woman in his house?
> Celia: It's not like I'd be fibbing. I just want him to think I can do this on my own. I really need a maid.
> Minny: I'll be here tomorrow morning about 9:15.

Celia: [Chuckling] Great (Taylor, 51:55).

The working relationship Minny has with Celia illustrates how Black women are represented as the appropriate choice for domestic labor in the white home. Celia does not have the skills necessary to prepare meals for her husband or clean their home in an acceptable manner. Celia's desire to make her husband believe "I can do this on my own" lends credence to an economic system that positions white women as the managers of Black women's domestic labor. Furthermore, Celia's willingness to pretend to be a competent domestic laborer works to reinforce white women's devaluation of domestic labor by reinforcing her position as outside of the middle-class values of white womanhood. Because Celia wants to learn how to perform the domestic labor herself, Celia is devaluing herself as a white woman by aligning herself with a type of labor performed by the Black domestics who are not considered women.

Black women are unable to provide an appropriate domestic environment for their children

The Help reinforces the discourse of the Black mother as the appropriate choice for maternal labor in white by representing Black women as unable to provide an appropriate domestic environment for their children. Black domestics become the most appropriate choice to perform maternal labor in their white homes because they are failing at the tasks of protecting their children from danger and providing for their children's future. In *The Help*, the Black domestics are represented as inappropriate mother figures to their own children in multiple scenes. Aibileen carries the grief of her son's death, Minny has difficulty protecting herself and her children from an abusive husband, and Yule May, the domestic who replaced Minny at the Holbrook residence, steals from Hilly Holbrook to obtain extra money to put her sons through college.

> Yule Mae: Miss Hilly…I would like to ask you and Mr. William something. My twin boys graduated from high school, both on the honor roll. Me and my husband, we been saving for years to send them to Tougaloo. We're short about $75 on one of the tuitions.
> Mr. William: Whoo! I am late. I gotta get going. See you tonight, honey.
> Hilly: OK. Go on.
> Yule Mae: Well, now we're… [clears throat] … faced with having to choose which son can go if we don't come up with the money. Would you consider giving us a loan? I'd work every day for free till it was paid off.
> Hilly: That's not working for free, Yule Mae. That's paying off a debt.
> Yule Mae: Yes, ma'am.
> Hilly: As a Christian, I'm doing you a favor. See, God don't give charity to those who are well and able. You need to come up with this money on your own. OK?
> Yule Mae: Yes ma'am.
> Hilly: You'll thank me one day (Taylor, 2011, 46:24).

After Hilly refuses Yule Mae's request for a loan, Yule Mae pockets a ring she finds as she cleaned behind the sofa in the Holbrook residence. Yule Mae is then violently arrested in front of Aibileen for stealing the ring while Hilly watches from her car. The representation of Yule Mae as willing to turn to crime to provide for her children's education reproduces the discourse of Black motherhood that positions Black mothers as culturally deviant and inappropriate role models for their children. Thus, Black women become the appropriate labor for white families because they are unable to provide appropriate domestic labor for their own families.

Minny's lack of stable two-parent home for her children also positions her as an unable to provide an appropriate domestic environment for her children. The instability in Minny's home environment is due to the presence of her an abusive husband Leroy. In *The Help,* Leroy is constant concern for Minny and her children, yet he is only mentioned in the movie three times, and he never appears onscreen. Leroy is first heard offscreen yelling and throwing things at Minny while she is on the phone with Aibileen. Next, Leroy is represented in two of Aibileen's voiceovers. During the first voiceover, Aibileen expresses concern about Leroy taking Minny "from my world" if she does not find a new job after losing her job with the Holbrooks. In the

second voiceover, Aibileen explains the "job for life" offer Minny receives from Celia and Johnny Foote gave Minny the strength to free herself and her children from Leroy's abuse. After Minny teaches her how to cook, Celia cooks a large meal to thank Minny for the work she has done in her home. Underscoring the scene of Minny being serve the food Celia has finally cooked correctly, Aibileen announces, "That table of food gave Minny the strength she needed. She took her babies out from under Leroy and never went back." Aibileen does not say nor is it referenced anywhere else in the film where Minny took her babies or how her "job for life" provided Minny with the tools to care for her children. Minny becomes the appropriate person to perform domestic labor in Celia's home because she is unable to depend on a male partner to provide for her and has very few employment options in pre-Civil Rights-era Jackson, Mississippi.

Lastly, Aibileen's inability to keep her son safe from violence contributes to the discourse of Black mothers as inappropriate maternal figures for their children, and therefore wholly appropriate for domestic work in white homes. When Skeeter learns the publisher will not print her book until she finds other domestics willing to participate in the project, she, Aibileen, and Minny and concerned they will not be able to find other volunteers willing to tell their stories for the book. The three women consider fabricating additional domestics and stories to appease the publisher. Skeeter does not want to create fictional domestics to complete the book because "it wouldn't be real." Aibileen recounts the story of her son's death to convince Skeeter to keep working to tell the stories of Black domestics because if the book is not published, then Aibileen will not be able to keep her son's memory alive.

> Aibileen: Don't give up on this, Miss Skeeter.
> Skeeter: It wouldn't be real.

> Aibileen: They killed my son. He fell carrying two-by-fours at the mill. Truck run over him, crushed his lung. That white foreman threw his body on the back of a truck. Drove to the colored hospital…dumped him there and honked the horn. There was nothing they could do, so I brought my baby home. [Voice breaking] Laid him down on the sofa right there. He died right in front of me. He was just 24 years old, Miss Skeeter. Best part of a person's life. Anniversary of his death comes…every year, and I can't breathe. But to y'all, it's just another day of bridge. You stop this…everything I wrote, he wrote, everything he was gonna die with him (Taylor, 2011, 1:08:51).

In this moment, Aibileen is exercising her agency by pleading with Skeeter to amplify her voice and her story. Yet, the implicit omission of racism or white supremacy in the story of the death of Aibileen's son and Aibileen's dependence on a white woman to keep her son's memory alive by publishing both his and her stories positions Aibileen as incapable of performing the maternal tasks of protecting her child from violence and advocating for her child without assistance. The omission of race as a factor influencing the stability of Black families in *The Help* subjects Black mothers to a neoliberal post-racial/post-feminist logic that blames them for their marginalized material and social conditions. Because Black women are incapable of overcoming their economic and familial circumstances without the assistance of white women, Black women, then become the inappropriate choice to perform maternal labor in their own homes. Thus, *The Help* contributes to the discourse of Black motherhood by representing Black domestic labor as more appropriately used in white homes.

Black women's maternal labor should stabilize the white racial order

According to sociologist Andrea O'Reilly (O'Reilly, 1996), motherhood is a racially codified and constructed institution that naturalizes the experiences of middle-class white women. The historically defined Victorian-era assumptions of womanhood demanded white women behave as the moral authority for the children in their care. Black mothers could not exercise the same moral authority over their children because they were not considered women.

> Only white and middle-class women could wear the halo of the Madonna and transform the world through their moral influence and social housekeeping. Slave mothers, in contrast, were defined as breeders, placed not on a pedestal, as white women were, but on the auction block (p. 89).

Instead, the controlling image of the mammy (Collins, 2008) represented by the Black domestic in *The Help* provided white people with the idea Black maternal figure—a Black woman whose "love, doting, advice, correction, and supervision were reserved exclusively for white women and children" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 74). The Black domestics in *The Help* are represented as embodying the controlling image of the mammy by committing their maternal labor to teaching white women their inherent social value and denying their children the care and concern they provide to their white children.

Teaching white women their value

In *The Help,* Black domestics are represented as embodying the controlling image of the mammy through their commitment to the act of mothering white women to understand their inherent social value. Black domestics in *The Help* are represented as committed to their white children from their early childhood. Aibileen functions as a stand-in for the affection and concern Mae Mobley, the toddler-age child of her employer Elizabeth Leefolt, does not receive from her own mother. Aibileen's main function in the movie is to teach the white Mae Mobley how to perform her role as a valuable and valued white woman within the social order. Because Aibileen does not believe Elizabeth treats her daughter with enough care and concern, Aibileen teaches Mae Mobley to repeat the phrase, "You is kind. You is smart. You is important." After Mae Mobley finally learns how to use the toilet on her own, Elizabeth spanks Mae Mobley for urinating in one of the toilets strew along Hilly Holbrook's lawn. Aibileen, then pulls Mae Mobley to the side and gets her to repeat the phrase. And the end of *The Help,* Aibileen is fired

from her job at the Leefolts as retaliation for helping Skeeter with her book. Before Aibileen leaves, she tells Mae Mobley, "I need you to remember everything I taught you, Ok?" In response, Mae Mobley replies, "You is kind. You is smart. You is important." Aibileen's final caretaking gesture of Mae Mobley has her defending the child to Elizabeth. Aibileen demands Elizabeth to "give my sweet girl a chance." Even as Aibileen is stripped of her position as Mae Mobley's primary maternal figure, Aibileen maintains her commitment to her "sweet girl" by ensuring Mae Mobley understanding her value as a white woman.

The commitment Black domestics have to mothering white women into their inherent social value fuels both the main and the secondary plots of *The Help.* In the main plot of the movie, Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan pitches a book about white families from the prospective of the Black families they employ. During her pitch, Skeeter assumes a mutual love between Black domestics and their white families despite Black domestics being unable to "use the toilets in our houses." Before Skeeter's book pitch, *The Help* flashes back to a conversation between Constantine and a teenage Skeeter. Constantine acts a maternal figure to Skeeter by providing her with life lessons and support she cannot receive from her mother.

> Constantine: What you doing hiding out here, girl?
> Skeeter: I couldn't tell Mama I didn't get asked to the dance.
> Constantine: It's all right. Some things we just got to keep to ourselves, right?
> Skeeter: All the boys say I'm ugly. Mama was third runner-up in the Miss South Carolina pageant.
> Constantine: I wish you'd quit feeling sorry for yourself. Now, that's ugly. Ugly is something that goes up inside you. It's mean and hurtful, like them boys. Now you're not one of them, is you?
> Skeeter: [Shakes head no]
> Constantine: I didn't think so, honey. Every day…Every day you're not dead in the ground, when you wake up in the morning, you're gonna have to make some decisions. Got to ask yourself this question: "Am I gonna believe all them bad things them fools say about me today?" You hear me? "Am I gonna believe all them bad things them fools say about me today?" All right? As for your mama, she didn't pick her life. It picked her. But

> you…you're gonna do something big with yours. You wait and see (Taylor, 2011, 23:53).

The "something big" Constantine refers to her conversation with Skeeter is the book she pitches in the previous scene. Constantine's encouragement serves as a counterpoint to Skeeter's mother minimizing her career aspirations in hopes Skeeter will find a husband and have children.

The book proposal and fuels the second plot of *The Help* by allowing Skeeter to investigate the whereabouts of Constantine (her surrogate Black mother figure) and why she no longer works for her family. Once Skeeter, Aibileen, and Minny locate enough Black domestics willing to contribute their stories to the book, the publisher tells Skeeter she needs to include a story about her experiences growing up with a Black domestic. To do so, Skeeter demands her mother tell her what happened to Constantine. Skeeter gets visibly upset when she learns her mother fired Constantine for being "old and slow." In response to her mother's revelation, Skeeter confesses that Constantine was a better mother figure to her because she "needed someone to look up to" and Constantine did her mother a favor by raising her. Skeeter's confrontation with her mother is juxtaposed with a scene showing Constantine packing a suitcase in preparation for a move to Chicago with her daughter. As Constantine exits her home, she stops to examine a growth chart with marks for both Skeeter and her daughter Rachel. Constantine's relationship with Skeeter is emphasized by the camera lingering on Skeeter's name on the growth chart. The action of lingering on Skeeter's name on the growth chart instead of Rachel's name also functions to emphasize Skeeter's social value, by deemphasizing the value of Constantine's child. The representation of Constantine as the main mother figure for Skeeter and the one who instills Skeeter with a belief that she will do "something good" reinforces both the

historical controlling image of the mammy figure and the discourse of Black motherhood that requires Black women to teach white children their value in the social order.

Class divisions do not prevent Black domestics from maintaining their commitment to mothering white women into understanding their inherent social value in *The Help.* Similar to Constantine teaching Skeeter her value social value, Minny is committed to protecting Celia from "them fools" who say bad things about her. Celia comes to the Leefolt residence unannounced with a pie baked by Minny and seeking friendship with the middle-class women in the bridge club. Once Hilly, becomes aware Celia is the one knocking on the door, she instructs the women of the bridge club to hide until Celia leaves. Later, when Celia explains to Minny what occurred, Minny instructs Celia to not have any interaction with the women of the bridge club because they think she is "white trash."

> Minny: Don't be taking those women any more pies, you understand?
> Celia: [Nods to indicate yes] They made me stand there like I was the vacuum salesman. Why, Minny?
> Minny: 'Cause they know about you getting knocked up by Mr. Johnny. Mad you married one of they mens. And especially since Miss Hilly and Mr. Johnny had just broke up, too.
> Celia: So Hilly probably thinks I was fooling around with Johnny when they were still going steady.
> Minny: Mm-hm. And Missus Walters always said Miss Hilly still sweet on Mr. Johnny, too.
> Celia: No wonder! They don't hate me. They hate what they think I did.
> Minny: They hate you 'cause they think you white trash.
> Celia: I'm just gonna have to tell Hilly I ain't no boyfriend stealer. In fact, I'll tell her Friday night at the benefit.
> Minny: You don't need to be going to that [charity] benefit [dinner], Miss Celia. Did you hear me? Now you just stay home (Taylor, 2011, 1:33:28).

After Celia attends the Junior League benefit dinner against Minny's advice, Celia questions her place as a white woman and mother in Jackson's middle-class social circles and contemplates leaving the area. Minny is so committed to Celia remaining in Jackson and assuming her rightful

position in middle class-society she tells Celia about the "terribly awful" thing she did to Hilly. Thus, Minny takes the blame for Hilly's angry towards Celia and for preventing Celia from accessing the social circles she desires.

> Celia: I'm not right for this kind of life, Minny. I don't need a dining room table for 12 people. I couldn't get two people over here if I begged. I can't do this to Johnny anymore. That's why I gotta go back to Sugar Ditch.
> Minny: You can't move back to Sugar Ditch. [Sighing] Lord. I reckon it's time you knew. Sit down. So Miss Hilly thought you knew about the terrible awful. That you was making fun of her. It's my fault she pounced on you. If you leave Mr. Johnny…then Miss Hilly done won the whole ball game. Then she done beaten me…and she done beat you (Taylor, 2011, 1:46:44).

By emphasizing their commitment to ensuring their white counterparts achieve access to their rightful social status, the Black domestics in *The Help* reinforce the controlling image of the mammy as the maternal figure for Black women. Furthermore, the representation of the mammy figure as embodied by the Black domestic contributes to the discourse of Black motherhood by positioning Black maternal labor as only valuable if it serves to better the social circumstances of white women.

Denying their own children care and concern

Unfortunately, the care and concern Black domestics provide for the white women and girls in *The Help* is not available to their own children. Black domestics are unable to show their children their inherent social value because they are consumed with teaching their children to care for white families. Minny's oldest daughter Sugar is forced to drop out of school to become a domestic because the family needed the extra income after Minny lost her job with the Holbrooks. As they are waling to catch the bus, Minny instructs her daughter on the dos and don'ts of working in a white home.

> Minny: You cooking white food, you taste it with a different spoon. They see you put the tasting spoon back in the pot, might as well throw it all out. Spoon, too. And you use the

> same cup, same fork, same plate every day. And you put it up in the cabinet. You tell that white woman that's where you're gonna keep it from now on out. Don't do it and see what happens. When you're serving white folks coffee, set it down in front of them. Don't hand it to 'em, 'cause your hands can't touch. And don't hit on they children. White folks like to do they own spanking. And last thing. Come here. Look at me. No sass-mouthing. No sass-mouthing. I mean it (Taylor, 2011, 47:59).

Since Minny's daughter is forced in the domestic role of serving white families, she is not provided access to the care and concern Minny is able to provide Celia. The lack of access Sugar has to her mother's care reinforces the controlling image of the mammy by foreclosing the available options Minny has to emotionally support her children because she must prematurely send her child out into the domestic labor market. Thus, Minny's emphasis on Celia's value as a white woman (even if she is a white woman who exists outside of middle-class social circles) is reinforced by the lack of emotional support Minny is unable to provide for her children. Therefore, the focus Black domestics have on their white families and the lack of focus Black domestics have on their own children contribute to the discourses of Black motherhood by positioning Black women as the key socializers for both Black and white families within the contemporary racialized social order.

Racism is an Individual, *not* a Systemic Issue

The Help functions as a post-racial/post-feminist white nostalgia film (Mukherjee, 2006) pointing to a time in U.S. history when racism and sexism where more explicit. Post-racial and post-feminist ideologies work intersectionally to legitimize a racial and gendered social order by centralizing the experiences of white women while depoliticizing the racialized and gendered experiences of Black women (Kennedy, 2017). In the book *Historicizing Post-Discourses Postfeminism and Postracialism in United States Culture,* women and gender studies scholar, Tanya Ann Kennedy (2017) argues, *The Help* depends on a representation of a Civil Rights-era

U.S. as both a relic of the past and a necessary generational moment allowing the film's contemporary producers and viewers to absolve themselves of the social ramifications of understanding contemporary system racial inequalities. Specifically, *The Help* covertly stabilizes the ideology of whiteness by challenging attempts to subvert the existing racial social order by positioning the racialized relationships between Black domestics and their white employers as a function of individual actions and not the consequence of systemic racism. Consequently, *The Help* represents racial inequality as a choice made by Black domestics because white people are no longer concerned with the issue of race or racism. Since racism is no longer a concern for white people and Black domestics are the only ones mentioning the topic; *The Help* concludes there is nothing that can be done about racism.

Systemic racism as an individual issue

The major plot of *The Help* represents racism and the challenge to racism as both the products of individual actions. The racial inequalities of pre-Civil Rights-era Jackson, Mississippi remain unacknowledged by those who seek to uphold or challenge the existing social order. Hilly Holbrook's introduction of her "Home Health Sanitation Initiative" requiring white homeowners in Jackson to modify their homes to include a. separate bathroom for the domestics they employ reinforces the primacy of white womanhood through the subjugation of the Black domestic as the other. By allowing Hilly to introduce the initiative at the private residence of Elizabeth Leefolt during their bridge club, the film's producers frame the issue of separate but equal bathrooms in Jim Crow-era Jackson, Mississippi as a personal problem—not a systemic issue affecting the lives of Black people in the United States during the 1960s.

> Elizabeth: Hilly, I wish you would just go use the bathroom.
> Hilly: I'm fine.

> Missus Walters: Oh, she's just upset because the nigra uses the guest bathroom and so do we.
> Elizabeth: Just go use mine and Raleigh's.
> Hilly: If Aibileen uses the guest bath, I'm sure she uses yours, too.
> Elizabeth: She does not.
> Hilly: Wouldn't you rather them take their business outside? Tell Raleigh every penny he spends on a colored's bathroom he'll get back in spaces when y'all sell. It's just plain dangerous. They carry different diseases than we do. That's why I've drafted the Home Health Sanitation Initiative A disease-preventative bill that requires every white home to have a separate bathroom for the colored help. It's been endorsed by the White Citizens' Council.
> Skeeter: Maybe we should just build you a bathroom outside, Hilly.
> Hilly: You ought not to joke about the colored situation. I'll do whatever it takes to protect our children (Taylor, 2011, 15:04).

The Help frames the racism exhibited by Hilly's introduction of her "Home Health Sanitation Initiative" as the concern of an overtly and explicitly racist individual. Yet, Skeeter's response to Hilly's racism is also framed as an individual action divorced from Jim Crow segregation. When Skeeter proposes she write a book about white families from the prospect of Black domestics, she uses Hilly's racist focus on "separate but equal" bathrooms to advance her career.

> Skeeter: Miss Stein, you said in your letter to write about what disturbs me, particularly if it bothers no one else. And I understand that now. I'd like to write something from the point of view of the help. These colored women raise white children, and in 20 years, those children become the boss. We love them and they love us, but they can't even use the toilets in our houses…Margaret Mitchell glorified the mammy figure, who dedicates her who life to a white family. But nobody ever asked Mammy how she felt about it (Taylor, 2011, 26:06).

Skeeter successfully convinces Aibileen, Minny, and other Black domestics to help her write the book about their experience working for white families. *The Help* represents the success of Skeeter's book as a decisive victory against Hilly's overtly racist ideas because Hilly is forced to pretend the book does not actually take place in Jackson, Mississippi so she does not out herself as the victim of the "terrible awful" thing Minny did to her. Thus, Skeeter has solved racism in Jackson and the issue of race is closed.

The purpose of Skeeter's book was to highlight the experiences Black domestics have working for white families. Yet, Skeeter, Aibileen, and Minny had a difficult time recruiting other domestics who were willing to contribute their stories because of the racism unmentioned in the film. A turning point in the film is the moment when Skeeter is called over to Aibileen's house to find her home full of Black domestics will to help with "the stories." In the scene, Skeeter takes notes as she listens to the Black domestics recount their experiences with their white employers. Two stories from two unnamed Black domestics are juxtaposed to highlight the difference between a good white employer and a bad white employer. In the first story, an unnamed Black domestic worker recounts her experience working for a white employer who purchased extra land for her so she would not have to risk her life to get to work.

> Maid 1: I used to take a shortcut every day when I went to work at Dr. Dixon's house. Cut through that farmer's lower forty to get there. One day this farmer was waiting for me with a gun. Said he'd shoot me dead if I walked on his land again. Dr. Dixon went and paid that farmer double for two of those acres. Told him he was gonna start farming, too. But he bought that just for me, so I could get to work easy. He did (Taylor, 2011, 1:30:04).

In the second story, another Black domestic highlights her experiences working for a "mean woman" who made it difficult for her to get a new job as a domestic for another family because people in the town assumed she was "owned" by the family who originally employed her.

> Maid 2: I worked for Miss Jolene's mother till the day she died. Then her daughter, Miss Nancy, asked me to come and work for her. Miss Nancy is a real sweet lady. But Miss Jolene's ma done put it in her will that I got to work for Miss Jolene. Miss Jolene's a mean woman. Mean for sport. Lord, I tried to find another job. But in everybody's mind the French family and Miss Jolene owned me. Owned me (Taylor, 2011, 1:30:39).

By providing equal space to stories of both "good" and "bad" white employers, *The Help* positions racism as the purview of individual actors who can choose whether to engage in racist behavior. More importantly, by highlighting a story about a white employer willing to protect his

Black domestic from an overly racist individual, *The Help* reimagines the racially charged 1960s as an era without systemic racism. And if systemic racism did not exist in the 1960s, then racism should not be a factor in the lives of Black people after the Civil Rights movement.

Black people perpetuate racism

If systemic racism is no longer an issue for the Black domestics of Jackson, Mississippi because the individuals who engage in overtly racist activities are challenged by individuals who have the "courage" to do what is right; then the Black domestics who mention race become the ones responsible for perpetuating the system of racism. After Minny begins working for Celia, a woman outside of Jackson's middle-class social circles; Minny becomes responsible for teaching Celia the rules for interacting with Black domestics as Celia is ignorant to the current racial social order. Minny's work teaching Celia how to interact with Black domestics begins almost immediately after she is hired to work for Celia.

> Celia: I know. It's an awful lot to do. Five other maids have already turned me down. Let me at least get you some bus money.
> Minny: Now, uh…when you hear me say I don't want to clean this house?
> Celia: Wait. So you'll do it? [Shrieks] [Laughing happily]
> Minny: Ooh. No hugging. No hugging.
> Celia: I'm sorry. This is the first time I've hired a maid (Taylor, 2011, 51:12).

Later in the movie, *Minny* continues to teach Celia about the rules to interacting with Black domestics. After Minny teaches Celia how to cook chicken, Minny begins to each lunch in the kitchen. As soon as Celia sits at the table to have lunch with Minny in the kitchen, Minny attempts to convince Celia to eat in the dining room.

> Celia: There you are. I'm starved. Looks so good.
> Minny: We done been over this, Miss Celia. You supposed to eat in the dining room. That's how it works. Here, let me take your plate back.
> Celia: I'm fine right here, Minny (Taylor, 2011, 1:06:11).

By teaching Celia how she is supposed to interact with a Black domestic, *The Help* represents Minny as the one perpetuating racial inequality because Celia is not interested in seeing the differences between herself and Minny. Yet, by hiring Minny to teach her how to cook and maintain her home for her husband, Celia has access to a modicum of acceptable womanhood because she is financially able to have her own "help." Despite Minny's presence as a domestic figure in Celia's home, Minny is able to teach Celia her inherent value as a white woman, but she cannot teach her the rules of racism. After Celia's husband Johnny offers Minny a job for life "if she wants it" (Taylor, 2011, 2:08:20), Minny is represented as accepting responsibility for perpetuating a system of racism that did not involve Celia and Johnny. By representing Black domestics as perpetuating the system of racism, *The Help* contributes to the discourses of Black motherhood by positioning Black domestics within the neoliberal logics of personal responsibility and meritocracy. Minny's ability to obtain a job with Celia and her husband is dependent on her hard work and her temperament with her employer; not because racism limited the occupational opportunities for Black women during the 1960s.

Nothing can be done about racism

In *The Help,* the neoliberal logic present in the ideologies of post-racism and post-feminism misogynoir is not a factor influencing the lives of Black domestics. Race becomes an unnamed system not benefitting white women and not exploiting Black women. Still, Black domestics in the movie are required to uphold the invisible systems of racism by showing gratitude to Skeeter for providing them with a means to tell their stories and by absolving Skeeter of her white guilt after she received a job offer from the publisher of her book. Towards the end of the movie, Skeeter, and Aibileen, and Minny are examining copies Skeeter's book signed by Black church members in over two counties. Skeeter tells Minny and Aibileen she was offered a

job in New York she does not want to take because she has caused too many problems for the Black domestics in Jackson. Aibileen and Minny dismiss the potential for racist backlash to Skeeter's book as "bad things" no one can do anything to change. Both Aibileen and Minny work to reassure Skeeter by telling Skeeter they will both be okay because they have each other. Aibileen and Minny both encourage Skeeter to take the job in New York because they believe Skeeter's life is the only one who will be negatively impacted by the response to the book.

> Aibileen: Churches over two counties signed our books. All for you and me.
> Skeeter: It's beautiful.
> Aibileen: What's wrong?
> Skeeter: I got a job offer from Harper and Row in New York.
> Aibileen: Congratulations!
> Skeeter: I'm not taking it.
> Aibileen: What you mean you not taking it?
> Skeeter: I can't just leave you two here when things are getting bad from a mess that I created.
> Aibileen: No. If bad things happen, ain't nothing you can do about it. And now it's for a reason we can be proud of. I don't mean to rub salt in your but you ain't got a good life here in Jackson. Plus, your mama's getting better.
> Minny: You ain't got nothing left here but enemies in the Junior League. You done burned every bridge there is. And you ain't never gonna get another man in this town. Everybody know that. So don't walk your white butt to New York, run it! Looky here, Miss Skeeter. I'm gonna take care of Aibileen. And she's gonna take care of me.
> Aibileen: Go find your life, Miss Skeeter (Taylor, 2011, 2:11:18).

Yet the racist backlash Aibileen suggested they could not do anything about had real consequences in the film. At the movie's conclusion, Aibileen is accused of stealing silver from Elizabeth Leefolt by Hilly Holbrook. Hilly convinced Elizabeth to fire Aibileen because it was the only way for her to get revenge for Skeeter writing a book containing an embarrassing story about her. Aibileen becomes a victim of an unnamed system no one can do anything about while Skeeter has permission from Aibileen and Minny to go "find her life" and pursue a career as a writer in New York. The Black domestics of Jackson, Mississippi are now responsible for the material and social conditions in which they find themselves because the overtly racist Hilly

Holbrook is defeated by the socially conscious Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan who is now able to move on from the issue of racism.

Conclusion

Minny's job with Celia allows her to leave her husband, but she is still a Black domestic for a white family. Aibileen is fired from her employer Elizabeth Leefolt and the behest of Hilly as revenge for helping Skeeter write a book about Black domestics in Jackson, Mississippi. Skeeter moves to New York to start her writing career absolved of her responsibility to the Black domestics of Jackson by Minny and Aibileen. The conclusion of *The Help* reinstates the racial ideology of white supremacy without acknowledging how race and gender inform the actions and the material consequences of the film's characters. In doing so, *The Help* uses a nostalgia for white racial stability to contribute to a discourse of Black motherhood and culturally, morally, and sexually deviant by positioning Black maternal labor as valid if, and only if, it serves the ideology of white supremacy. Specifically, the representation of the Black domestic as the embodiment of the historical controlling image of the mammy reinforces a racialized maternal ideal designed to exploit the labor of Black women in white homes while denying Black mothers the opportunity to provide their children with the same care they provide to their white families.

In *The Help,* the Black domestic functions as a signifier for the controlling image of the mammy. The mammy figure functions in *The Help* acts as a sincere fiction of whiteness (Vera & Gordon, 2003) or "deliberately constructed images of what it means to be white" (p. 15). In other words, representing a Black domestic as a mammy figure is necessary to construct the representation of white women as catalysts for a post-racial and post-feminist movement that depends on the logics of personal responsibility and meritocracy. According to historian Grace Elizabeth Hale (1998),

> The mammy figure revealed, perhaps more than any other construction of the culture of segregation, a desperate symbolic as well as physical dependence of on the very people whose full humanity white southerners denied and the centrality of blackness to making of whiteness (p. 113).

Furthermore, the Black domestic in *The Help* reinforces a post-feminist discourse seeking to universalize womanhood while maintaining the racialized focus on whiteness. Specifically, a film such as *The Help* allows whites to point to the film as evidence of improved Black/white racial relations (Quinn, 2011) by referencing a specific point of U.S. history where racial roles were discrete, stable, and privileged white norms and behaviors. Furthermore, the representation of Black domestics' maternal labor in *The Help* functions as a signifier of the social and material conditions of both Black and white mothers in a so-called post-racial United States.

To maintain the cult of true womanhood (Welter, 1966), white women's gender roles were regulated to the private sphere of domestic and maternal duties. As industrialization allowed gender roles to become more fluid, white women's work in the home was redefined (Crowley, 1996; Wooten & Branch, 2012), from one responsible for home maintenance to one who is responsible for managing the racialized workforce responsible for performing those duties for her. Black women were deemed uniquely qualified for the domestic labor in the white home because their race prevented white people from seeing Black women as either women or mothers. Put simply, white women needed the maternal labor of Black domestics to define and redefine their position within the racialized and gendered social hierarchy. The rise of the Black domestic worker in the white home marked the shifting of the appropriate nature of maternal labor for white and Black women allowed white women to reform the stand of "true womanhood" (Welter, 1966) requiring mothers to perform the bulk of the domestic duties and parental tasks to the role of a household manager in charge of the domestic labor of Black

women (Wooten & Branch, 2012). The representation of Black women's domestic labor in *The Help* contributes to a discourse of motherhood that privileges Black domestics' loyalty to white families by marginalizing their ability to care for their families. Consequently, Black women are deemed inappropriate mothers to their own children (Dreher, L, 2015).

In this chapter, the discourses of Black motherhood are represented in *The Help* in three specific ways. Firstly, Black domestics are represented as the most appropriate choice to perform maternal labor in white homes. As the appropriate labor in white homes, Black domestics were considered the natural and inevitable caregivers for white children. The representation of white women as unable to perform the domestic labor in their own homes further positions Black domestics as the appropriate labor for white homes by forcing Black domestics to correct the domestic failures of their white employers. Conversely, Black mothers are deemed the appropriate labor in white homes because they are unable to provide a proper domestic environment for their families in their own homes. Secondly, in *The Help* Black women's domestic labor functions to teach white women their inherent social value. Unfortunately, the commitment Black domestics have to their white families does not occur in their homes. Instead, Black domestics are required to teach their children how to serve white families. Finally, the discourses of Black motherhood are situated within the logics of post-racist and post-feminist discourses by positioning systemic racism as an individual issue defined by personal temperament. Since systemic racism does not exist for white people, *The Help* represents Black domestics as the ones perpetuating racial inequality by discussing the topic. And because white people have moved on from race and Black people are the ones perpetuating racial inequality; there is nothing that can be done about systemic racism. The representation of the historical controlling image of the mammy as embodied by the Black domestic is steeped in a nostalgic

narrative of the presumed racial stability of a pre-Civil Rights-era United States. The film's release during the tenure of the first Black president and First Lady further highlights a desire to maintain the stability of whiteness within the neoliberal logics of post-racism and post-feminism.

CHAPTER 3: "AND I COME HERE AS A MOM": THE NEOLIBERAL STRATEGIES OF MICHELLE OBAMA'S MOM-IN-CHIEF DISCOURSES

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined the nostalgic discourses of Black motherhood through the representation of the Black domestic as a maternal figure to white women in the film adaptation of *The Help.* When DreamWorks released the film in 2011, the United States was halfway through the second year of Barack Obama's first presidential term. The focus *The Help* placed on Black women's subservient status in 1960s-era Jackson, Mississippi during the tenure of the first Black First Lady of the United States (FLOTUS) represented a nostalgia for the racial relationships of a pre-Civil Rights era that centered white womanhood at the expense of Black mothers (Collins, 2008; Mukherjee, 2006). As FLOTUS, Michelle Obama countered the representation of the subservient Black domestic worker in *The Help* even as she was subjected to the prevailing discourses of bad Black motherhood because "the role of the first lady is a race-gendered institution that produces a controlling image of white womanhood that simultaneously privileges white femininity that subordinates black womanhood" (Handau & Simien, 2019, p. 485). During Obama's tenure in the White House, Obama challenged the historical and contemporary discourses of Black motherhood represented in *The Help* by choosing to focus her attention on her two daughters and branding herself as mom-in-chief. Yet, the decision Obama made to construct her brand within the framework of motherhood also functions to construct Black mothers and their families as sexually, morally, and culturally deviant.

Since the beginning of the 2008 presidential campaign cycle, journalists framed Michelle Obama and an angry Black woman who was sexually deviant by juxtaposing her public persona against the context of normative white motherhood—a role which historically excluded Black

women (Meyers & Goman, 2017). Obama was an unacceptable representative of mainstream women and families in the United States because her identity as a Harvard Law School-educated Black woman married to the father of her children contradicted the racialized and controlling discourses of Black women perpetuated by the ideologies of white supremacy. In short, Michelle Obama was a political liability to a then-potential Barack Obama presidency by merely existing as an educated Black woman with a professional career. Media positioned Michelle Obama as a representative of the stereotypical characteristics it perceived present in all Black women by referring to her as "uppity," "emasculating," "baby mama," and "angry Black woman." Still, the most infamous misgynoiristic critique of Obama occurred after a 2008 campaign stop in Wisconsin. In her speech, Obama stated, "For the first time in my adult life, I am really proud of my country because it feels like hope is making a comeback" (Bond, 2008). The above quote was used by political pundits and rivals to characterize Obama as unfit to reside in the White House and by proxy, argue Barack Obama was unfit to lead the United States. Michelle Obama has had to address that statement throughout her eight years as FLOTUS and after she left the White House (Obama, 2018). Media characterization of Michelle Obama was so problematic that the Barack Obama presidential campaign created a public relations effort specifically designed to make the then-future First Lady appear softer and more relatable to white mainstream audiences (Meyers & Goman, 2017).

Michelle Obama's hypervisibility as a Black woman and wife to the then-potential first Black president provides a context for understanding how her mom-in-chief discourse functioned to repackage her for public consumption in two distinct ways. Firstly, it allowed the future-FLOTUS to position herself as similar to the white voters who were skeptical of a Black man running the United States and a Black family occupying the White House (Cole, 2008).

Secondly, by defining herself as mom-in-chief, Obama adjusted to "stand straight in a crooked room" (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 271) by engaging in political strategies that allowed her to maintain a sense of self in the face of the systemic misogynoir she faced as a Black woman on the global stage. Obama navigated these two competing goals by filtering her public persona through the lens of motherhood by performing what Ralina L. Joseph (2018) called strategic ambiguity or

> a way of pushing back against that discrimination…through a coded resistance to postracial ideologies. It entails foregrounding crossover appeal, courting multiple publics, speaking in coded language, and smoothing and soothing fears of difference as simply an incidental sidenote. Strategic ambiguity comes about when a privileged minoritized person…gauges microaggressions in a room and uses the failure to name racism…to claim a seat at the table (p. 3).

Obama used strategic ambiguity to confront the stereotypical discourses of Black women and motherhood while asserting herself as an acceptable representative of mainstream U.S. families. The emphasis Obama placed on motherhood, as a Black woman, had to engage with the racialized and gendered demands of the FLOTUS position that centered the white-dominant "cult of womanhood" (Borrelli, 2012) and constructed the First Lady as the de facto mother of the nation (Tapia, 2011).

Generally, this chapter adds to the literature about Michelle Obama as a complex representation of Black womanhood/motherhood within the historically racialized and gendered confines of the First Lady. Some studies focused on the significance of Obama being the first Black woman to hold the position of FLOTUS (Natalle & Simon, 2015; White, 2011) while other studies considered how Obama fits within the trajectory of white First Ladies (Moffitt, 2010; Williams, 2009). Likewise, researchers focused on Obama's relationship to the multitude of complex and intersectional constructions of womanhood; with specific attention to the media

response to her public persona and physicality (Dow, 2014; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2011; Meyers, 2013). Furthermore, scholars considered the rhetorical interventions Obama made in her political speeches (Natalle & Simon, 2015) and how she existed within an assumed post-racial epoch marked by the election of her husband as the first Black President of the United States (POTUS) (Brown, 2012; Joseph, 2018).

My work builds on Joseph's conceptualization of strategic ambiguity (Joseph, 2018) to examine how Obama used her mom-in-chief discourse to both challenge and reinforce prevalent discourses of Black motherhood. On one hand, Obama's mom-in-chief discourse acted as a challenge to the historical controlling images of Black womanhood that constructed mothers as morally, sexually, and culturally deviant because it allowed her to assert herself as a Black woman who was neither forced to care for white children nor who was unwilling and unable to care for her biological children. On the other hand, Obama's mom-in-chief discourse reinforced neoliberalism within the populous, while she demanded respectability from the Black people who suffered under neoliberal policies. Furthermore, this chapter builds on communication scholar Marian Meyers' (2013) examination of the ways in which YouTube acts as a site of struggle for understanding on mediated representations of Obama on the internet reinforce and challenge the existing stereotypes of Black womanhood. In this chapter, I argue Obama's mom-in-chief discourse manifested itself in three different First Lady roles: in her official role as a political supporter for the POTUS; in her role as letter of official FLOTUS social causes and initiatives; and in her role as a celebrity and aspirational figure for Black audiences. I perform a discourse analysis of videos of Obama's speeches representing each of the above-mentioned mom-in-chief performances.

To begin, I examine videos of Michelle Obama's Democratic National Convention (DNC) speeches from 2008, 2012, and 2016. Obama's DNC appearances are significant because they cover the entire trajectory of her as FLOTUS. At the DNC, Obama acted as a political supporter for her then-presidential candidate husband; then as an experienced First Lady supporting her husband's reelection; and finally, as a celebrity figure supporting Hillary Clinton's presidential candidacy. Next, I examine Obama's mom-in-chief performances in launch videos for her key FLOTUS initiatives: *Let's Move!* (2010), *Reach Higher* (2014), and *Let Girls Learn* (2015). Since First Ladies are expected to use their time in the White House to address social causes (Winfield, 1997), the initiatives chosen by Obama are emblematic of her movement between the gendered obligations of the First Lady and the expectations she faced as the first Black woman to assume the role. Finally, I analyze Obama through the lens of a celebrity/popular culture figure for Black people using her appearances at the 2015 *Black Girls Rock!* Awards ceremony and her 2015 commencement speech at the historically Black Tuskegee University[9]. Using the above texts, I argue Obama deployed her mom-in-chief discourse to speak to both white and Black audiences about Black maternal experiences in ways that challenged and reinforced a stereotypical discourse of Black motherhood.

Using Motherhood to Frame the First Black FLOTUS

Michelle Obama is difficult to situate within mainstream media coverage of U.S. First Ladies because the position represents "white middle- to upper-class femininity in America" (Anderson, 2005, p. 2). Obama's identity as a Harvard-educated Black woman was incompatible

[9] It's important to note that the DNC speeches were addressed to mainstream majority white audiences while the speeches at the *Black Girls Rock!* awards ceremony and Tuskegee University were delivered to primarily Black audiences because, as the first Black FLOTUS, Michelle Obama was required to speak to and represent both audiences without significantly alienating either one.

with the racialized and gendered mandate that mainstream white U.S. families be represented by a white FLOTUS. By referring to herself as the mom-in-chief, Obama asserted herself as a FLOTUS who would indeed fulfill the obligation to prioritize the needs and experiences of white families even as she used strategic ambiguity to wink toward Black audiences who saw her dedication to her own children as revolutionary (Joseph, 2018). The presentation of herself and her family as similar to white and middle-class voters allowed Obama to use motherhood to challenge the prevailing frameworks of Black mothers and First Ladies and strategically position herself as the antithesis of the angry Black woman who was not "proud of her country" and the bad Black mother dependent on government assistance to care for her children (Ayee et al., 2019; Hayden, 2017). More importantly, the mom-in-chief discourse deployed by Michelle Obama challenged and complicated the racialized and gendered expectations of Black mothers and First Ladies by acting as a discursive frame that controlled the conversation about her performance as a First Lady, a Black woman, and a Black mother.

The 2008 presidential campaign is foundational to the construction of Michelle Obama's mom-in-chief discourse. To make the case for the election of her husband, Obama aligned herself with the cause of motherhood by aligning her concern for her daughters' futures with the concerns mainstream white families have for their children's futures. When Obama used motherhood as a tool to support Barack Obama's presidential campaign, she was able to court the mainstream voters needed to secure Barack Obama's presidential victory by highlighting her family's adherence to mainstream U.S. values. Two months before the 2008 presidential election, Obama formally used the term mom-in-chief in an interview with *Ebony* magazine to solidify how she planned to perform her role as the potential First Lady. According to Obama, her job in a then-nascent Obama administration was "to be mom-in-chief…making sure that in

this transition, which will be even more of a transition for the girls…that they are settled and that they know they will continue to be the center of our universe (Cole, 2008, p. 84). Thus, the formal introduction of Obama's mom-in-chief discourse in a magazine that specifically targeted Black audiences connected the goals of challenging the discourses of Black mothers as culturally, morally, and sexually deviant with constructing a FLOTUS platform that will allow Obama to support the president's policies without appearing overly political (Anderson, 2005).

Yet, Michelle Obama was criticized for asserting herself as mom-in-chief. White feminists argued Obama's choice to pursue motherhood over her career as a Harvard-educated lawyer was a betrayal of the second-wave feminist movement (Hayden, 2017; King, 2010; Traister, 2008). The white feminist criticism of Obama's choice to prioritize motherhood is couched in the assumption that white women are victimized by maternal requirements that privilege the career aspirations of men (Hayden, 2017) by confining women to the private sphere. According to motherhood studies scholar Andrea O'Reilly (2006), the maternal constraints of concern to white feminists include,

> 1) children can only be properly cared for by the biological mother; 2) this mothering must be provided 24/7; 3) the mother must always put children's needs before her own; 4) mothers must turn to the experts for instruction; 5) the mother is fully satisfied, fulfilled, completed, and composed in motherhood; and finally, 6) mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy, and money in the rearing of their children. (p. 43).

The emphasis Obama placed on a motherhood which aligned with the historically and culturally conservative expectations of white domesticity grounded in the "cult of womanhood" (Borrelli, 2012) created a disconnect that positioned Black women outside the discursive boundaries of the FLOTUS role by reinforcing a narrative that Black women are unable to care for their own children and therefore are inappropriate choices to represent mainstream mothers in the United

States (Tapia, 2011). White feminists' inability to consider the ways in which Black women are excluded from the definition of true womanhood and its standard of racialized and classed motherhood discounted the Black women who viewed Obama's mom-in-chief discourse as revolutionary. By representing herself as a Black woman who is fully capable of and willing to care for her own children, Obama challenged the discourse of Black mothers as morally, sexually, and culturally deviant (Ayee et al., 2019; Harris, 2012).

Michelle Obama's assertion of her mom-in-chief identity made her a significant figure to Black women traditionally left out of the motherhood conversation due to socioeconomic factors and prevailing racialized and gendered cultural assumptions about Black people. According to author Deesha Philyaw (2016),

> Low-income and working-class women, Black women, and other women of color don't see their mothering experiences and concerns reflected in the mommy media machine, and we get the cultural message loud and clear: Affluent white women are the only mothers who really matter (paragraph 19).

Obama added to the representation of Black mothers in popular culture by publicly asserting her desire to focus her time in the White House on her children and causes that affected the lives of children and their families in the United States. Yet, it is easy to reduce Obama's focus on her children as a "mommy wars" debate of working versus stay-at-home mothers or define it as a glass ceiling shattering moment for Black mothers. Neither discussion is useful for understanding how Obama challenged the dominant discourses of Black motherhood while she simultaneously reinforced problematic characterizations of Black motherhood. As FLOTUS, Obama deployed her mom-in-chief discourse as a political supporter for the Democratic Party (Harris-Perry, 2011), through her official FLOTUS initiatives, and as a celebrity and aspirational figure for Black audiences (Meyers & Goman, 2017). Therefore, it is important to consider

Obama deployed and solidified her mom-in-chief discourse as FLOTUS in order to understand how the representation of Obama as a Black maternal figure contributed to the popular discourses of Black motherhood.

Contextualizing Michelle Obama's Mom-in-Chief Discourse

The mom-in-chief discourse was significant to Michelle Obama's tenure as First Lady because the FLOTUS position is ultimately one defined by motherhood. Motherhood, however, is a gendered and racialized institution with different expectations for Black and white women. On one hand, prevailing discourses of Black motherhood assume Black women were not willing or able to care for their own children (Collins, 2008). On the other hand, white women were defined by a femininity that required them to produce and care for their children within the domestic sphere (Welter, 1966). Enslaved Black women could not meet the standards of appropriate white femininity because they were considered as property—not women. Nevertheless, enslaved Black women's maternal labor was needed to maintain the institution of slavery even as they were separated from their families, forced to work, and required to care for the children of their enslavers. In the Jim Crow-era south, a similar standard of appropriate white femininity shifted white women's maternal labor from the producer of domestic work to the manager of Black women's maternal labor. Consequently, Black women were forced to care for white children to the detriment of their own families. Specifically, Black women's inability to meet the standards of appropriate white femininity made them the inappropriate choice to care for the children in their home, yet wholly appropriate to care for children in white homes.

More contemporarily, Black women were punished for our perceived inability to maintain a two-parent heteronormative family that mirrors the dominant white family structure with restrictive welfare reform policies and forced sterilization (Limbert & Bullock, 2005; Office

of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965; Roberts, 1997). Black women who engaged in domestic work or subjected to welfare-to-work policies (Roberts, 1997) were not afforded the luxury of being fully present in their children's lives because they were still required to use their maternal labor to maintain white supremacy (Collins, 2008). By choosing to assert herself as mom-in-chief, Obama used her privilege to make a statement about how the institution of motherhood constrains Black women who choose to care for their children instead of maintaining their careers. And by asserting her agency as a mother, Obama demanded mainstream recognition of Black womanhood because womanhood is intimately and discursively connected to motherhood.

Michelle Obama's mom-in-chief discourse added to the construction of respectability politics because she used it to represent herself as a member of an intact Black family, which according to the prevailing cultural conversation about Black people, is an ahistorical anomalous entity. The mom-in-chief discourse and the politics of respectability share the goal of representing Black people and culture as no different from white people and therefore worthy of equal treatment under the law and in society (Higginbotham, 1994). A relic of the 19th century abolitionist movement (Higginbotham, 1994; Rhodes, 2016), respectability politics focuses on regulating the sexuality and body autonomy of Black women. According to Black studies scholar Jane Rhodes (2016), Black newspapers and film reinforce the importance of Black women's adherence to respectability politics by demanding we represent sexual purity as the "standard-bearers" who are "responsible for racial progress" (p. 203). Obama's performance of respectable Black womanhood allowed her to "challenge the dominant representation of Black womanhood in the public imagination, where one-dimensional images of them as promiscuous, seductive, and sexually irresponsible circulate" (Thompson, 2009, p. 7).

Tradition dictates the FLOTUS must support her husband in a very specific and gendered manner, as such, Obama's mom-in-chief discourse cannot be separated from her husband's administrative policies or his political career. A First Lady's social style, according to communication scholar Karrin Vasby Anderson (2005), is partially derived from her position as "a social partner to her husband" (p. 7) and assumed "political power is rooted not just in the public sphere but also in private interactions…[O]ne implication of defining political power in this manner is the collapse (or, at least, intermingling) of public and private spheres" (p. 8).Specifically, the social style of the FLOTUS needed to be appropriately feminine (Anderson, 2005) and reflect the POTUS's policies without appearing too political (Burns, 2008; Handau & Simian, 2019; Wekkin, 2000). The FLOTUS should assert herself in a manner that does not challenge the perception of the president's masculinity and she should appear to be fully on board with the direction which he is taking the country. As the first Black FLOTUS, Obama had the added burden of challenging the historical controlling images of Black womanhood (Collins, 2008) which news media used to frame her as unfeminine, emasculating, and inappropriate for maternal labor in the private sphere (Wooten & Branch, 2012) but unworthy of the public sphere of politics (Handau & Simian, 2019). Therefore, Obama needed to construct a social style that represented and reinforced the political narrative of Barack Obama as a president for all U.S. citizens—not just the Black ones. The deployment of the mom-in-chief discourse allowed Obama to both strategically resist the characterization of herself as a socially deviant Black woman and relate to white audiences without explicitly mentioning race (Joseph, 2018). According to Ralina L. Joseph (2018), Michelle Obama

> [p]erforming euphemisms as rhetorical strategy and passing through coding herself as (an exceptionally glamourous "everymom" has the effect of winking at the insider audience

> (of women of color) while fostering acceptance and even adoration from the outsider audience (of White women) (p. 53).

Specifically, the mom-in-chief discourse appeared in Obama's core narrative strategies: implicitly telling Black people government intervention will not fix problems in Black communities; invoking her personal story to highlight the importance of hard work as a tool for success in the United States; and by decontextualizing motherhood to appeal to a universal audience.

By placing the onus for systemic racism and economic disparity on its victims instead of advocating for the government to intervene on these issues, Obama grounded her narrative strategies in the neoliberal logics of post-racism and post-feminism. Obama's usage of neoliberalism to signify herself and her family as privileged, respectable Black people far different from the stereotypical representations of Black people existing the larger cultural zeitgeist reproduced and reinforced two distinct and competing discourses of Black motherhood. On one hand, Obama used her mom-in-chief discourse to argue Black people should be treated respectfully and equally because the values and desires of Black mothers and their families are similar to those held by white families. On the other hand, Obama's mom-in-chief discourse marginalized Black mothers and their families by demanding they solve the problem of their limited material resources without help from the federal government. Instead, Obama used motherhood to argue anyone, regardless of race or upbringing could be a success in life if they have the grit and determination to excel.

The mom-in-chief discourse had some political advantages for Michelle Obama. It allowed Obama to acknowledge the racialized and gendered struggles of Black motherhood and provide an aspirational model for Black mothers and their families. Likewise, the mom-in-chief

discourse provided an avenue by which Obama could make the case to white audiences that her family operates in a manner similar to their own. The assertation of the mom-in-chief identity also afforded Obama the ability to control the narrative about herself and other Black mothers by performing the delicate dance of a whole, complex Black woman and a universal mother who resonated with Black people without being like the stereotypical Black people who would rather collect welfare than work to support their families. Yet, Obama used motherhood to demand Black mothers meet the standard of the white electorate by focusing on educating their families, eating healthier, and not looking for government intervention to deal with the sociopolitical issues which prevented many families from accessing healthy foods, or schools that could provide them with the best opportunities to enroll in college and graduate. Thus, the neoliberal logic of the mom-in-chief discourse provided cover for the maintenance of political policies that marginalized Black people under the Barack Obama presidential administration.

The Disruption of the Racialized and Gendered FLOTUS Framework

The FLOTUS position is not defined by the Constitution or the federal government, yet the woman occupying the role is still considered a political figure with responsibilities tied to her husband's presidential administration (Borrelli, 2012; Watson, 2000). According to communication scholar Lisa M. Burns (2008), in the book *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate: Press Framing of Presidential Wives,*

> the first lady assumes important duties and faces high expectations. [The position] lacks a clear job description, but being first lady is a matter of tradition probably more than any other U.S. institution. In over two hundred years a handful of women have shaped the first lady position through their personalities and their performance of her many roles. These women have been asked to live their private lives in the glare of the public spotlight, their every move subject to scrutiny (p. 3).

As such, the FLOTUS position is defined less by the government and more by the conflicting racialized, gendered, and cultural expectations grounded in the gendered ideologies of Victorian womanhood and republican motherhood and placed on the woman holding the office (Anderson, 2005; Burns, 2008; Handau & Simian, 2019). The ideology of Victorian womanhood relegated white women to the private sphere by making child rearing and domestic labor their chief responsibilities (Burns, 2008; Welter, 1966). White feminists argued white women should be allowed more access to the public sphere because they believed their moral superiority was an extension of their domestic labor (Burns, 2008). Conversely, republican motherhood validated white women's civic and political participation within the public sphere. Adherents to the ideology of republican womanhood did not believe in full equality of the sexes; instead, they claimed service to the state-sanctioned political order is an extension of their jobs as mothers (Burns, 2008). The role of the First Lady extended the ideology of republican motherhood by emphasizing

> such commitments as volunteerism, moral citizenship, beautification, health, and education—actions that were often viewed as falling outside the parameters of government activity, yet still within the scope of authority for the nation's twentieth-century republican mothers (Parry-Giles & Blair, 2002, p. 575).

In short, First Ladies were required to model appropriate femininity by representing the private sphere labor typically associated with the white home and family (Burns, 2008). Since Black women's maternal labor was not included in the racialized and gendered standards of Victorian womanhood or republican motherhood, Obama's identity as a Black woman immediately disrupted the institutional expectations of the FLOTUS position. Therefore, it is important to consider how race has implicitly defined the duties and obligations of the First Lady position (Handau & Simian, 2019).

In their study "The Cult of First Ladyhood: Controlling Images of White Womanhood in the Role of the First Lady," Megan Handau and Evelyn M. Simien (2019), expanded on the gendered ideologies that defined the discursive construction of the FLOTUS position by adding the element of race. Handau and Simiem (2019)

> contend that the institution [of the First Lady] is raced-gendered not merely as a result of societal expectations and traditional beliefs but because the white women who occupy the role of first lady conform to hegemonic femininity and reinforce racial stereotypes that intersect with other identity categories, such as class and sexual orientation (p. 486).

Thus, the FLOTUS position behaves as a racialized and gendered institution because it demands the woman assuming the role to adhere to racialized and gendered expectations held by society. Like her predecessors, Obama was held to the physical and behavioral standards of appropriate white femininity; yet unlike previous First Ladies, Obama also contended with a journalistic framework dependent on the racial stereotypes of Black womanhood (Collins, 2008; Handau & Simian, 2019; Meyers, 2013). Embodying motherhood allowed Obama to situate herself within the behavioral norms of hegemonic white femininity (Handau & Simian, 2019) while using her position as FLOTUS to challenge the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood. In her memoir *Becoming,* Michelle Obama (2018) acknowledged both the internal tension she experienced as a Black woman and the discursive conflict she created as the first Black FLOTUS.

> I understood already that I'd be measured by a different yardstick. As the only African American First Lady to set foot in the White House, I was "other" almost by default. If there was a presumed grace assigned to my white predecessors, I knew it wasn't likely to be the same for me. I'd learned…that I had to be better, faster, smarter, and stronger than ever…I wouldn't have the luxury of settling into my new role slowly before being judged. And when it came to judgement, I was as vulnerable as ever to the unfounded fears and racial stereotypes that lay just beneath the surface of the public consciousness, ready to be stirred up by rumor and innuendo (p. 284).

Obama used the mom-in-chief discourse to situate herself within the trajectory of white First Ladies by redefining herself as similar to her predecessors and a Black woman who would use

her platform to disrupt the "raced-gendered institution that produces a controlling image of white womanhood that produces a controlling image of white womanhood that simultaneously privileges white femininity and subordinates black womanhood" (Handau & Simian, 2019, p. 484). By situating herself within a role that would traditionally exclude Black women, Obama disrupts the FLOTUS framework that refused to acknowledge women who were not middle- and upper-class, heterosexual, or white (Anderson, 2005). Still, Obama used the position of FLOTUS to reinforce neoliberal ideologies and policies that privilege a racialized and gendered social order benefitting her middle- and upper-class cis-gender heterosexual white constituents (Anderson, 2005; Meyers & Goman, 2017).

Mediated Framing of Michelle Obama's FLOTUS Tenure

Journalistic framing practices influenced the representation of First Ladies in the public sphere even before the advent of television. In an examination of the implications of the journalistic framing of the First Ladies in 20th century newspaper and magazine articles, Burns (2008) examined how the history and gendered ideologies of the of the FLOTUS institution and are shaped by news gathering processes and practices. The examination of framing by communication scholar Robert M. Entman (1993) provides an entry point for understanding how framing acts as a discursive shorthand used to create models about institutions, such as the FLOTUS position, based on information deemed important o communicators. According to Entman (1993),

> [f]raming essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and and/or treatment recommunication for the item described (p. 52).

Journalists used their fixation on the First Lady's association with the president and with her public activities to define and frame the contours of the position. They engage in and with the collective cultural memory of gender in the U.S. to classify information about the FLOTUS, to construct the expectations of how she (and by proxy other women) should conduct herself, and to determine how audiences should receive the First Lady. In other words, journalistic framing of the First Lady created and echoed a larger narrative about gender that is commonly understood (Burns, 2008) as cisgender and white (Handau & Simian, 2019).

Journalistic attention to the FLOTUS position legitimated white women's political activities and expanding sphere of influence; yet it also limited the narrative possibilities of the role to concerns of the private sphere. The relationship between the First Lady and media, according to Burns (2008), is shaped by the disposition of the woman currently holding the office, the current social norms governing women's public activities, the marketability of news for and about women, and the institutional structures determining the availability of the First Lady to media outlets. Michelle Obama (2018) alludes to the politically undefined, yet gendered nature of the FLOTUS position when she claims,

> [t]here is no handbook for incoming First Ladies of the United States. It's not technically a job, nor is it an official government title. It comes with no salary and no spelled-out set of obligations. It's a strange kind of sidecar to the presidency, a seat that by the time I came to it had already been occupied by more than forty-three different women, each of whom had done it in her own way (p. 283).

Thus, the "forty-three different women" who have come before Obama assisted journalists in the co-creation of the gendered expectations associated with the role of FLOTUS. Furthermore, race is a key, yet unnamed, component to the framing of the FLOTUS position as the First Lady was charged with representing appropriate white domesticity and femininity (Handau & Simian, 2019).

The requirement that the First Lady focus her time in the White House on issues of the private sphere was stoked by the popular fear that she could compromise the presidency by wielding power she was not elected to have or exert a level of influence unavailable to the presidential advisors or Cabinet members (Brown, 2012; Wekkin, 2000). Media construct and reinforce how the First Lady should model acceptable white femininity and domesticity for women in the United States by scrutinizing and disciplining any First Lady who chose to step outside the gendered confines of the role (Burns, 2008; Wekkin, 2000). For example, First Ladies such as Bess Truman, Mamie Eisenhower, Jacqueline Kennedy, and Barbara Bush were all lauded for the ability to perform the duties of wives and mothers within the gendered confines of appropriate white womanhood and domesticity. Yet other First Ladies like Eleanor Roosevelt, Nancy Reagan, Lady Bird Johnson, Rosalynn Carter, Betty Ford, and Hillary Clinton were criticized for acting outside of the gendered expectation of the FLOTUS position (Borrelli, 2012). Unfortunately, Michelle Obama's tenure as FLOTUS did not expand the boundaries of the role to fit Black women; instead, the concern about the First Lady's influence on the president took a more racialized tact (Brown, 2012). According to English scholar Caroline Brown (2012) Obama was

> [a]ttacked with a starling lack of self-consciousness by the right wing, she was accused of everything from an egregious want of patriotism to possessing 'this Stokely Carmichael-in-a-designer-dress thing' (Williams, 2009). In a parodic advice column in the conservative National Review, Obama was portrayed as a shrill, vindictive bully obsessed with nursing imagined racial slights (p. 244).

Since the expectations of the FLOTUS position would not expand beyond the parameters of appropriate white femininity and domesticity, Obama used motherhood, and specifically her mom-in-chief discourse to adjust herself to the FLOTUS frame (Brown, 2012; Harris-Perry,

2011) even as she challenged the racism that sought to exclude a Black FLOTUS from the public imagination (Joseph, 2018).

An examination of the literature on First Ladies revealed several frames used to define and constrain the gendered performances of the woman holding the office. According to Burns (2008), journalists framed the FLOTUS using categories such as: public woman, political celebrity, activist, political interloper, and role model for women in the United States. Historian Robert P. Watson (2000) identified twelve FLOTUS roles which fit into three broad categories—social influence, political influence, and presidential partnership (p. 72). Furthermore, political communication scholar Betty Houchin Winfield (1997) argues journalists often frame the First Lady in four significant ways: as an escort, as an official representative of the United States, as a "noblese oblige" or one focused on charity works, and as an influencer and supporter of the president's policies. According to communication scholar Kimberly R. Moffitt (2010), "[t]here is no established lexicon for a woman like Michelle Obama who was a presidential candidate's wife but also an African American. As a result, the news coverage relied upon recycled stereotypes of African American women to discuss her" (p. 233). In short, the frames used to limit the activities of the First Lady to that of the private sphere do not consider how the construct of gender intersects with race in journalistic narratives about how Michelle Obama performed the role of FLOTUS.

In *African American Women in News: Gender, Race, and Class in Journalism,* communication and media scholar Marian Meyers (2013) used YouTube videos of Michelle Obama to situate her within four traditionally gendered FLOTUS frames: the First Mom, the First Wife, an advocate, and a celebrity. Meyer (2013), then highlighted how the misgynoiristic mis/representation of Black women influenced framed the online discussion of Obama as

FLOTUS using the racialized frames of the Black lady, Black woman, authentic voice, and the powerful Black bitch. The first frame, "the Black lady" frames Obama as a representative of middle-class Black womanhood—someone whose commitment to her heterosexual marriage partner (the president) and her children places her outside of the stereotypical single mother-led Black family discourse. Second, "the Black woman" frame focuses on the intersection of Obama's race and gender to cast her as the cause of white men's racial oppression. As such, Obama's race and gender became the most salient characteristics about her—the fact that she was the First Lady of the United States became irrelevant. Next, the "authentic voice" frame highlights the humor and personality Obama displayed when she was able to disregard the confines of the racialized and gendered expectations of the FLOTUS position. Finally, the "powerful Black bitch" frame draws on common stereotypes of Black womanhood like the "angry Black woman" and the "emasculating Sapphire" while endowing her with a level of power exceeding her social standing as a Black woman to claim Obama "has free rein to exercise her power [as FLOTUS] to serve her own selfish interests, and [can] extend her control beyond the Black community to affect the lives of White people" (Meyers, 2013, p. 68).

Communication scholar Tara Mortensen (2015) uses Goffman's theory of gender framing to argue both journalists and official White House sources frame Michelle Obama in a manner that adheres to gendered values of appropriate white femininity and domesticity associated with the role of FLOTUS. Nevertheless, Mortensen does not consider how race influences the choices journalists or White House public relations officers make to frame Obama as a "traditional" First Lady. According to Mortensen (2015),

> Mrs. Obama's "American" identity is more important than her racial identity because of her shared values and domesticity (Madison 2009). Her social class and her beauty,

> according to Madison (2009) made her Blackness acceptable for many, and a source of pride for Black people (p. 49).

To be clear, race *and* gender are equally significant to the mediated representation of Obama as the first Black FLOTUS and her mom-in-chief discourse functioned to challenge the journalistic frames that sought to exclude Black women from the position. Likewise, Obama used motherhood to position herself within the racialized and gendered frames of Victorian womanhood and republican motherhood (Burns, 2008) to manage her public image. Obama's willingness to contort herself to fit within the confines of the FLOTUS position, however, reinforced a model of race and gender that limits a greater understanding of the complexities of Black motherhood under the neoliberal policies of the Barack Obama presidential administration.

Mom-in-Chief Performances

Michelle Obama did not neatly fit within the FLOTUS framework because the established racialized and gendered traditions of the position privilege the performance of appropriate white femininity. My examination of Obama's mom-in-chief discourse considers how the intersection of race and gender influenced the public conversation about her performance as the first Black FLOTUS. In this chapter, I argue Obama's use of her mom-in-chief discourse both challenged and reinforced the prevailing discourses of Black mothers as culturally, morally, and sexually deviant by examining three specific types of FLOTUS performances during her tenure in the White House: as a political supporter at the Democratic National Conventions (DNC); as a representative of the United States government through the launch of her official FLOTUS initiatives; and as a celebrity keynote speaker for Black audiences.

Political Support at Democratic National Conventions

Political wives speaking at presidential conventions is a recent occurrence with the first political convention speech typically attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt in 1940 (Blair, 2001; Winfield, 1997). Roosevelt's DNC speech was controversial for a couple of reasons. Firstly, President Roosevelt did not attend the convention. He was not openly seeking a third presidential term, but he also did not actively discourage anyone from nominating him for the position. Secondly, by appearing at the DNC, Eleanor Roosevelt engaged in political discourse which was outside the acceptable gendered confines of the FLOTUS position (Blair, 2001). Barbara Bush, however, is credited with introducing the spouse speech at the Republican national Convention (RNC) in 1992 (Gleibs et al., 2018). The purpose of Bush's RNC appearance was to ensure Republican voters that her husband, George H.W. Bush would represent the values of the United States as president. According to political scientist Ilka H. Gleibs and their colleagues (2018) Bush "occupied an ideal and unique position from which to speak to construct the candidate and 'America' as sharing the same 'family values'" (p. 945). In her 2008 DNC speech, Michelle Obama followed a similar script of assuring voters that her husband, Barack Obama would represent the values and concerns of the voters. Yet, Obama also needed to convince U.S. voters that Black people and their families were similar to mainstream white families; and therefore, could represent and lead the nation.

Michelle Obama gave the keynote speech on the first night of the 2008[10], 2012, [11], and 2016 [12] Democratic National Conventions. At the 2008 and 2012 DNCs, Obama spoke in support of her husband's two presidential campaigns and in 2016, she spoke in support of Hillary

[10] The 2008 Democratic National Convention took place August 25-28, 2008, in Denver, CO.
[11] The 2012 Democratic National Convention took place September 2-6, 2012, in Charlotte, NC.
[12] The 2016 Democratic National Convention too place July 25-28, 2016, in Philadelphia, PA.

Clinton's presidential campaign. While Obama's key task in her 2008 DNC appearance was to garner support for the Democratic nominee for president, Obama also had to illustrate how she would conform to the expectations of the FLOTUS position—expectations grounded in the controlling images of white womanhood (Handau & Simian, 2019). According to journalist Jodi Kantor (2008),

> Michelle Obama's agenda is a double one. She must continue to refashion her own occasionally harsh public image in warmer tones. But that is only one of the two life stories she must sell to voters. Worried that Barack Obama's far-flung upbringing and his lack of deep roots leave some voters unsure and untrusting, the campaign is essentially substituting Michelle Obama's family background for his own (paragraph 8).

Obama used her mom-in-chief discourse to meet the dual requirements of her DNC appearance because it allowed her to project a softer, less threatening version of herself to appease mainstream U.S. voters. (Brown, 2012). By embracing motherhood, Obama was able to reframe herself in a manner that challenged the "angry Black woman" representation proliferated by conservated media after the "proud of my country" incident (Obama, 2018, p. 260). During Michelle Obama's 2012 DNC appearance, Barack Obama was the sitting president, and she was the current First Lady with an approval rating over 20 points higher than it was in 2008 (Tulumello, 2012). Obama's improved approval ratings and mom-in-chief discourse provided her with the social capital needed to "magnify the appeal of [President Obama's] political message" (Brown, 2012, p. 243). Obama ended her eight-year tenure as FLOTUS more popular than her husband (McCarthy, 2017), an aspirational figure for women, a potent political weapon, and a bonafide celebrity figure. In 2016, Michelle Obama made her third DNC appearance in support of former First Lady Hillary Clinton's presidential nomination. Michelle Obama's mainstream appeal and distaste for politics removed her from the caricature of "an unpatriotic

militant" (Howard, 2016, paragraph 2) and thus, made her an optimal surrogate for the Clinton campaign.

First Lady Initiatives

The First Lady is bound by tradition to use her platform as a public woman to honor the divide between labor performed in the public sphere and labor performed in the private sphere. Therefore, First Ladies' scope of influence was traditionally limited to performing duties that were popularly conceived as reinforcing wife, mother, and homemaker roles. As the wife of the president, however, the FLOTUS was also charged with providing personal and political support for his administration by supporting causes that aligned with the president's political goals without appearing to get involved with the deals of politics (Borrelli, 2011; Loizeau, 2015). Yet, "for modern First Ladies, the challenge has been to find their bearings and understand the enormous potentialities of the position without breaking rules or overstepping bounds" (Loizeau, 2015, p. 5). The term "co-presidency," which was defined by the fear of the United States government lead by a husband-wife-team was influenced by First Lady Roosevelt's involvement in political matters during her husband's administration (Loizeau, 2015). Because Hillary Clinton eschewed the traditionally gendered expectations of the First Lady during her time in the White House, she was also accused of desiring a "co-presidential" role in her husband's administration. In short, the more power the First Lady is assumed to have, the less popular the president became. It did not matter the degree in which a First Lady chose to engage with the political aspects of her husband's presidential administration (Loizeau, 2015).

Yet, a completely uninvolved FLOTUS was also not acceptable. First Ladies beginning with Martha Washington asserted their influence on the country by championing social causes in the White House (Watson, 2001). The social causes chosen by the FLOTUS acted as a "White

Glove Pulpit," which according to Watson (2001) is a distinct feminine means of asserting power, necessitated by the strict gender confines of the pre-suffrage and even post-modern era. For Michelle Obama, the femininity required of the social causes she selected also needed to situate herself within the historical trajectory of First Ladies and challenge the discourse of her as an emasculating, unfeminine, and controlling Black woman. According to Obama (2018),

> [a] First Lady's power is a curious thing—as soft and undefined as the role itself…I had no executive authority. I didn't command troops or engage in formal diplomacy. Tradition called for me to provide a gentle light, flattering the president with my devotion, flattering the nation primarily by not challenging it. I was beginning to see, though, that wielded carefully the light was more powerful than that. I had influence in the form of a being something of a curiosity—a Black First Lady, a professional woman, a mother of young kids (p. 372).

The initiatives Obama focused on as FLOTUS connected her identification with motherhood to the larger political discourse constructed by her husband's presidential administration with the racialized and gendered expectations associated with the position. As First Lady, Obama spearheaded four initiatives [13]: *Let's Move* (2010), *Joining Forces,*[14] with then-Second Lady Dr. Jill Biden (2011), *Reach Higher* (2014), and *Let Girls Learn* (2015). First, *Let's Move!* focused on the issue of childhood obesity. Second, *Joining Forces* highlighted the issues faced by families of active military. Next, *Reach Higher* had the goal of increasing the number of students who enrolled in and graduated from college. Finally, *Let Girls Learn* had the goal of increasing the available educational opportunities for girls globally.

(Black) Celebrity Appearances.

Media fascination with the public activities of the First Lady positioned her as a celebrity figure apart from her association with the president. The First Lady's celebrity status afforded

[13] See Appendix A for an in-depth description on the FLOTUS initiatives launched by Michelle Obama.
[14] This project does not examine *Joining Forces*. See Appendix A for a description of the initiative.

her the agency to act and speak independently of her husband (Burns, 2008, p. 11); as such, the First Lady's "independent voice" to signify dominant news and political interests by having her comment on public and cultural topics that will maintain the gendered, racial, and political status quo (Rakow & Kranich, 1991). The rebranding of Obama as mom-in-chief allowed her to define herself both within and outside the narrative constructed about her as a Black woman and as a First Lady, thus solidifying her celebrity status with both Black and white audiences (Meyers, 2013; Obama, 2018). As the first Black FLOTUS, Obama modeled Black womanhood and motherhood to the primarily Black female audiences who admired how she overcame the intersectional challenges of racism and sexism in both her personal and professional lives (Scott, 2017). Still, Obama's performance of the FLOTUS role functioned to discipline Black people into embracing a politics of respectability that aligned Black culture with white middle-class cultural norms. In this chapter, I use Obama's appearance at the *Black Girls Rock!* Awards ceremony and her commencement address to the historically Black Tuskegee University as exemplars of how she leveraged her celebrity status within Black communities to align the causes and initiatives she promoted with the goals of the Barack Obama presidential administration to audiences who are not specifically targeted by mainstream political news (Meyers, 2013).

Black Girls Rock! Awards (2015)

In 2006, Beverly Bond created the media organization *Black Girls Rock!* with the purpose of empowering Black women and girls. The organization's signature event, the *Black Girls Rock!* Awards airs on the BET cable network and highlights the achievements of Black women and girls in categories such as art, media, culture, and entrepreneurship (BGR! Network, n.d.). During her 2015 appearance at the awards ceremony, Obama spoke about the importance

of education in the lives of young girls by highlighting er experiences as a young Black woman growing up on the South Side of Chicago and as a mother to two daughters. Critics responded to Obama's in-speech declaration of "Black girls rock" with accusations of reverse racism because she did not mention white women and girls (Grant, 2015).

Tuskegee Commencement (2015)

On May 15, 2015, Michelle Obama gave a commencement address to the graduating class of the historically Black Tuskegee University. In the over 25-minute speech, Obama invokes the Tuskegee Airmen, the evens of Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama, and her experiences as the first Black FLOTUS to inspire her audience to use education as a tool to transcend the systemic racism they will endure once they leave the university setting. Furthermore, Obama ties both the historical and contemporary struggles of Black people with the backlash she has received as the first Black FLOTUS.

The Neoliberal Functions of Michelle Obama's Mom-in-Chief Discourse

Michelle Obama's mom-in-chief discourse supported the Barack Obama presidential administration in a manner traditionally required of First Ladies (Burns, 2008). As FLOTUS, Obama provided personal and political support to the president, led official initiatives supporting the administration's goals and policies, and represented the federal government as a celebrity figure in the White House and outside of official political settings. Obama used her mom-in-chief discourse to challenge stereotypical representations of herself as an unpatriotic and emasculating "angry Black woman," and "Barack's baby mama" by using her position as an outsider within the political landscape (Collins, 2008) to access, understand, and comment on the state of community infrastructures and the resources the federal government was willing and/or able to deploy to maintain those systems. Yet, Obama's mom-in-chief discourse used the

neoliberal logics of post-racism and post-feminism to absolve the Barack Obama presidential administration of its responsibility for enacting policies that could better influence the material conditions of his constituents in general and the conditions of Black mothers and our families more specifically.

I have located three themes of Michelle Obama's mom-in-chief discourse within her FLOTUS performances: (1) post-racial/post-feminist relatability; (2) personal responsibility grounded in neoliberal logics, (3) the demand of respectability from Black audiences. The first theme, post-racial/post-feminist relatability addresses Obama's attempts to relate to both Black and white audiences. As a presidential candidate's wife and the first Black First Lady, Obama had the task of making white audiences comfortable with her presence in the White House and comfortable with a Black man leading the nation. To accomplish this goal, Obama needed to position her husband as a president for all citizens—not just the Black ones. Nevertheless, the "proud of my country" incident made the task of making white audiences comfortable with the Obamas' presence more complicated because it required Michelle Obama to hyper-feminize her public persona in a manner more aligned with the appropriate white femininity (Handau & Simian, 2019). At the same time, Michelle Obama needed to assure Black audiences she was authentically Black and therefore understood the struggles of Black communities.

The second theme of personal responsibility grounded in neoliberal logics represents Obama's mom-in-chief discourse as a tool that places the onus on the individual to enact systemic change by absolving the government of its responsibility to its people. Obama's deployment of her mom-in-chief discourse to encourage individual responsibility has two competing goals. On one hand, Obama suggests the government is ill equipped to assist with the problems facing communities in the United States. On the other hand, Obama challenges the

argument of communities passively receiving material interventions from the U.S. government. Finally, the third theme, the demand of respectability from Black audiences focuses on the transcendence of the barriers preventing Black people from achieving success in the United States. By highlighting her humble origins as "a daughter raised on the South Side of Chicago" (C-SPAN, 2008, 2:29), Obama deployed her mom-in-chief discourse to give hope to people who want to transcend their racialized circumstances to live the American dream. Yet, by only tangentially mentioning race, Obama discounts the systemic barriers preventing Black mothers and their families from achieving their goals. Thus, Obama's mom-in-chief discourse allows her to act as both an inspiration for and a barrier to the success of Black mothers and their families.

Michelle Obama's deployment of her mom-in-chief discourse during Obama's above mentioned FLOTUS performances had three specific outcomes. Firstly, it allowed Obama to appear relatable to competing audiences—mainstream white voters and Black audiences excited about the prospect of a Black family in the White House. Secondly, Obama's mom-in-chief discourse enabled her to represent Black women and their families as similar to mainstream white families while demanding Black communities adhere to the politics of respectability. Finally, the mom-in-chief discourse provided Obama an avenue to resist the racialized and gendered confines of the FLOTUS role by positioning herself as a culturally authentic Black woman from the South Side of Chicago (Meyers, 2013). The three outcomes of Obama's mom-in-chief discourse are couched within a neoliberal framework grounded in personal responsibility and accountability. By using her mom-in-chief discourse to promote individual solutions to systemic political issues, Obama disempowered the Black mothers and families who are less likely to have access to the tools needed to better their material conditions, while she signaled her agreement with the middle-class white families who are less likely to believe the government

is responsible for providing handouts and/or welfare to the Black families they deem unworthy of support. In short, Obama deploys her mom-in-chief discourse to provide a neatly packaged and wholly digestible neoliberal message of personal responsibility, respectability, and resilience disguised as homespun wisdom relatable to both Black and white people.

Each of the themes discussed used the technique of strategic ambiguity posited by Ralina Joseph (2018) which allowed Obama to speak to both Black and white audiences in a manner that winked to the existence of racism while rarely addressing the issue directly. Obama's indirect challenge to racism and sexism allowed her to challenge the "cult of First Ladyhood" grounded in the confining representations of appropriate white femininity that typically excluded Black women (Handau & Simian, 2019). Yet, Obama's deployment of the mom-in-chief discourse as a tool of resistance did not translate into a bigger spotlight on the ways in which the intersection of racism and sexism constructs Black women and our families as sexually, culturally, and morally deviant. Instead, the mom-in-chief shield Obama constructed for herself functioned as a sword aimed at Black communities who did not have access to the material tool necessary to overcome the neoliberal policies of the Obama presidential administration.

"Like So Many American Families": Post-Racial/Post-Feminist Relatability

A key component of Michelle Obama's mom-in-chief discourse is the invoking of motherhood to minimize the importance of race to position herself as similar to the white audiences needed to support her husband's presidential campaigns and administration and her official FLOTUS initiatives. The apolitical frame of motherhood Obama constructed around herself allowed her to present as a traditionally and appropriately feminine First Lady to appease voters who are afraid an outspoken and overly political FLOTUS may unduly influence presidential decision-making (Brown, 2012; Wekkin, 2000). Likewise, Obama's usage of the

mom-in-chief discourse to control her public narrative allowed her to appear relatable to her other core audience of Black women—while still avoiding the issue of race. As a credible narrator for Black women and mothers, Obama can invoke our struggles without having to consider or address the political policies influencing the lived experiences of Black women. In short, the mom-in-chief discourse allowed Obama to act as a representative of racial progress in the United States without having to use her position as the First Lady to advocate for concrete policies within the Barack Obama presidential administration that will better the conditions for Black people (Bonilla-Silva, 2010).

Obama deployed her mom-in-chief discourse to her multiple audiences in conflicting ways throughout her tenure as First Lady. Yet, the theme of relatability is best seen through the lens of her role as political support for her then-candidate and incumbent president husband at the 2008 and 2012 Democratic National Conventions and as the outgoing First Lady and celebrity figure supporting Hillary Clinton's presidential nomination at the 2016 DNC. In all three speeches, Obama courted the voters needed by both Barack Obama and Clinton by using motherhood and family to position herself as a representative of the nation's values and struggles. Obama's description of her family as aligned with the traditional values of the white heterosexual nuclear family structure challenged the stereotypes of Black mothers as emasculating and unfeminine single parents who pass down the deviant cultural pattern of depending on the government to support their families (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965).

> I come here as a mom, as a mom, whose girls are the heart of my heart and the center of my world—they're the first things I think about when I wake up in the morning, and the last thing I think about before I go to bed at night. Their future—and all our children's future—is my stake in this election. And I come here as a daughter—raised on the South Side of Chicago by a father who was a blue-collar city worker and a mother who stayed

> at home with my brother and me. My mother's love has always been a sustaining force for our family, and one of my greatest joys is seeing her integrity, her compassion, her intelligence reflected in my daughters. My dad was our rock. And although he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in his early thirties, he was our provider, he was our champion, our hero. But as he got sicker, it got harder for him to walk. Took him longer to get dressed in the morning. You know, but if he was in pain, he never let on. He never stopped smiling and laughing—even while struggling to button his shirt. Even while using two canes to get himself across the room to give my mom a kiss. He just woke up a little earlier and he worked a little harder. He and my mom poured everything they had into me and Craig [Obama's older brother]. it was the greatest gift a child could receive never doubting for a single minute that you're loved and cherished and have a place in this world. And thanks to their faith and their hard work, we both were able to go to college. So, I know firsthand from their lives—and mine—that the American dream endure (C-SPAN, 2008, 2:08).

Obama used her positionality as a mother as a tool to align the concerns of Black families with those of white families without having to explicitly introduce race into the conversation. Conversely, Obama's challenge to the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood as culturally, morally, and sexually deviant does not alleviate the burden of racialized stereotypes for Black families. Instead, Obama's assertion of her family as specifically unlike the prevailing stereotypes of the Black family works to position her family as exceptional, and therefore worthy of leading the country and residing in the White House. Obama appealed to white voters by positioning her and her family's concerns as similar to theirs and by separating her and her family from the stereotypical Black families of concern to white voters to claim a solidary with all families in the United States. Conversely, Obama's 2008 DNC speech sought to provide "a mirror that does not reflect the prejudices and stereotypes of white perception but instead shows black people as they would like to recognize themselves—strong, independent, intelligent—a mirror that shows the dignity of black American life" (Jhally & Lewis, 1992, p. 36).

Still, the picture Michelle Obama paints of a Black family that does not adhere to contemporary stereotypical representations as broken, lazy, and unfit reinforces the same

narrative she sought to challenge by describing her family as typically American. The focus Obama places on how hard her father worked to provide for her family while her mother stayed at home to care for her and her brother reinforces the narrative of the broken Black family posited in *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (otherwise known as The Moynihan Report) (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965). The Moynihan Report concluded Black families could not be helped by governmental services or safety net programs unless we worked to align our family structures with the dominant norms of the white family. Because Obama grew up in a family that mirrored the white two-parent family norm, she can demand other Black families do the same before she advocated for programs that will improve their material conditions. Furthermore, Obama's attribution of her and her brother's college education to the hard work of her parents, despite the acknowledgement of her father's medical and physical decline, provides an argument against Black families expecting handouts from the government while suggesting her family is not like those families who need welfare benefits because they are not stable enough to survive without a governmental intervention.

In 2012, Michelle Obama returned to the DNC stage to support the re-election campaign of Barack Obama. At this time, Michelle Obama's rebranding as mom-in-chief positioned her as a celebrity figure, an in-demand public speaker, and a relatively traditional First Lady unconcerned with the inner-workings of her husband's presidential administration. During her second DNC appearance, Obama once again used motherhood to connect with the mainstream white voters needed to support her husband's re-election. The narrative told of Obama's family life at the 2012 DNC has her assuming the point of view of an observer of the Obama presidential administration, but a full participant in the domestic life of the Obama household. By maintaining her outsider-within position, Obama could challenge the discourse of her family as

unlike white voters and unappreciative of the opportunity Barack Obama has had to lead the country.

> Like, so many American families, our families weren't asking for much. They didn't begrudge anyone else's success or care that others had much more than they did...in fact, they admired it. They simply believed in that fundamental American promise that, even if you don't start out with much, if you work hard and do what you're supposed to do, then you should be able to build a decent life for yourself in an even better life for your kids and grandkids. That's how they raised us...that's what we learned from their example. We learned…that how hard you work matters more than how much you make...that helping others means more than just getting ahead of yourself. We learned about honesty and integrity—that the truth matters...that you don't take shortcuts or play by your own set of rules... and success doesn't count unless you earned it fair and square. We learned about gratitude and humility—that so many people had a hand in our success from the teachers who inspired us to the janitors who kept our school clean...and we were taught to value everyone's contribution and treat everyone with respect. Those are the values that Barack and I—and so many of you—are trying to pass on to our own children. That's who we are (ABC News, 2012, 7:30).

Obama's focus on the American Dream universalizes the experience of all citizens of the United States and does not consider any of the barriers that prevent Black mothers and our families from achieving the "decent life" that comes from "doing what you're supposed to do." In fact, the suggestion that there is a correct way to pursue success and that they were taught by their families what that correct way was, once again signals to white voters that the average Black family has not been taught how to correctly find success in the U.S. In Obama's appeal to voters to re-elect her husband President of the United States, she once again positioned her family's values as similar to those of the white audiences she wants to court. Yet, in doing so, Obama sets her family apart from the average Black family by highlighting how they contradict the prevailing stereotypes of Black behavior.

As the self-defined mom-in-chief, Michelle Obama asserted herself as a maternal expert willing and able to provide information she felt was crucial to families based on her maternal experience. In her 2012 DNC speech, she signified her position as the mother of her two girls is

of greater importance to her than the title of First Lady. Since Black women were historically prevented from asserting their maternal role because of slavery (White, 1999), welfare to work policies, and forced sterilization (Roberts, 1997), Michelle Obama's assertion that her job as a mother supersedes all others is a revolutionary challenge to the discourses of Black motherhood that suggest Black women are incapable and unwilling to care for their children. Furthermore, Obama's use of motherhood to advocate for her husband's re-election reinforced her desire to define her narrative as FLOTUS and a Black woman before she was "quickly and inaccurately defined by others" (Obama, 2018, p. 284).

> And let me tell you something, I say all of this tonight, not just as First Lady...no, not just as a wife. You see at the end of the day, my most important title is still "mom-in-chief." My daughters are still the heart of my heart and the center of my world, but let me tell you today, I have none of those worries from four years ago…Because today, I know from experience that if I truly want to leave a better world for my daughters, and for all of our sons and daughters...if we want to give all of our children a foundation for their dreams and opportunities worthy of their promise... if we want to give them that sense of limitless possibility—that belief that here in America there is always something better out there if you're willing to work for it, then we must work like never before...and we must once again come together and stand together for the man we can trust to keep moving this great country forward...my husband, our president, Barack Obama (ABC News, 2012, 22:50).

Still, Obama's assertion of her mom-in-chief status at the 2012 DNC was also couched in the narrative that the "something better" is only available "if you're willing to work for it" supports the neoliberal discourse of personal responsibility and individual accountability posited by those who believe the government should not provide for families who are unable to work to achieve the "American Dream." Thus, Obama aligned herself with voters who were willing to embrace a centralist approach to the presidency that would not automatically privilege Black families who did not align themselves with the goals of the average white family who did not believe in social safety nets for Black people.

Michelle Obama had a different relatability problem to solve at the 2016 DNC. Since she was exiting the position of the First Lady after her husband's two presidential terms, she no longer was required to convince white voters of her similarity to their families. Instead, she needed to encourage Black voters to vote in the election despite Barack Obama not being on the ballot. Obama's 2016 DNC speech is significantly different from her 2008 and 2012 speeches because it is the first to explicitly mention systemic racism faced by Black people in the United States. By explicitly mentioning race, Obama reinforced her position as a credible narrator for Black families whose lives have been influenced by the racism she has experienced as a Black mother and as the first Black First Lady.

> You see, Hillary understands that the president is about one thing and one thing only—it's about leaving something better for our kids. That's how we've always moved this country forward—by all of us coming together on behalf of our children—folks who volunteer to coach that team, to teach that Sunday school class because they know it takes a village. Heroes of every color and creed who wear the uniform and risk their lives to keep passing down those blessings of liberty…
>
> That is the story of this country, the story that has brought me to the stage tonight, the story of generations of people who felt the lash of bondage, the shame of servitude, the sting of segregation, but who kept on striving and hoping and doing what needed to be done so that today I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves—and I watch my daughters—two beautiful, intelligent, Black young women—playing with their dogs on the White House lawn. And because of Hillary Clinton, my daughters—and all our sons and daughters—now take for granted that a woman can be president of the United States. So, look, don't let anyone ever tell you that this country isn't great, that somehow, we need to make it great again. Because this, right now, is the greatest country on earth. And as my daughters prepare to set out into the world, I want a leader who is worthy of that truth, a leader who is worthy of my girls' promise and all our kids' promise, a leader who will be guided every day by the love and hope and impossibly big dreams that we all have for our children. So, in this election, we cannot sit back and hope that everything works out for the best. We cannot afford to be tired, or frustrated, or cynical. No, hear me—between now and November, we need to do what we did eight years ago and four years ago: We need to knock on every door. We need to get out every vote. We need to pour every last ounce of our passion and our strength and our love for this country into electing Hillary Clinton as president of the United States of America (PBS NewHour, 2016, 11:21).

The explicit mention of race in Obama's final DNC after eight years of strategically invoking race to define herself as a traditional First Lady and a respectable Black woman and mother who believes in the "American Dream" places the onus on Black voters to do the work of electing Hillary Clinton president because she is proof that Black people can achieve success for our children. Yet, in her appeal to Black voters, Michelle Obama seeks to flatten the gendered experiences of Black and white women into a historic "glass-ceiling" breaking moment of electing the first woman president.

"The most important person…is you": Neoliberal Logics of Personal Responsibility

Similar to the first theme of relatability, Michelle Obama's focus on personal responsibility appears multiple times throughout her tenure as First Lady. Yet, the theme of personal responsibility is best highlighted by examining Obama's official FLOTUS initiatives and her celebrity appearances. As FLOTUS, Obama used motherhood to construct a relatable and easily digestible argument against depending on the government to fix community problems when its people are perfectly capable of doing it by themselves. The mom-in-chief discourse became a neoliberal strategy used by Obama to deflect the government's role in systemic inequality by allowing her to place the onus on the individual to change their material circumstances without having to advocate for governmental policies that would provide resources to improve the educational opportunities and enhance community infrastructures for those said individuals. Obama's specific focus on the individual's ability to change the material conditions of their communities absolved the government of its responsibility to its citizenry, positioned herself as aligned with neoliberals who seek to eradicate the use of social safety net programs, and shamed Black constituents who depend on those programs. Furthermore, the mom-in-chief discourse functioned to support President Obama's centrist political appeal to

conservative ideologues by legitimating their fears of an oversized government intent on curtailing individual freedoms as it continued to pay lip service to progressive values and ideals.

The launch of Michelle Obama's official FLOTUS initiatives highlighted the importance of individuals working together to effect change in their communities without the expectation that the government be solely responsible for providing solutions to social problems. The three FLOTUS initiatives I examine in this chapter, *Let's Move!*, *Reach Higher*, and *Let Girls Learn,* are programs designed to support the work of the president and the federal government while engaging private sector resources; yet all three programs are couched in Obama's individual and personal goals of motherhood and childcare. Michelle Obama solidified her commitment to the mainstream white electorate by constructing a neoliberal framework of personal responsibility that did not require her to demand systemic governmental intervention from her husband's presidential administration Thus, Obama did the work of representing the goals of the Obama administration while using her mom-in-chief discourse to maintain her status as a traditionally apolitical First Lady.

Michelle Obama's signature FLOTUS initiative was the anti-obesity campaign *Let's Move!* launched in 2010. *Let's Move!* was designed as a public-private partnership which coordinated efforts between private food corporations and school lunch suppliers, media organizations, and a government task force "to solve the problem of childhood obesity in a generation, so that children born today will reach adulthood at a healthy weight" (The Obama White House, 2010, 9:32). During the *Let's Move!* launch, Obama thought it best to make "a human appeal as opposed to a regulatory one" (Obama, 2018, p. 337) by imploring individual parents to take responsibility for the choices they make about their children's health and nutrition. Obama's "human appeal" allowed her to relate her Chicago upbringing to that of the

average U.S. parent struggling to care for their children during the Obama administration. Thus, Obama framed the problem of obesity as a contemporary issue unrelated to the lack of funding for schools and governmental infrastructure.

> Like many of you, when I was young, we walked to school every day, rain, or shine—and in Chicago it was in the wind, sleet, snow, and hail…You remember how at school we had to have recess, had to have it. You had to have gym. We spent hours running around outside. When school got out, you couldn't even go inside until it was time for dinner. And then in so many households we'd gather around the table for dinner as a family and in my household and many, there was one simple rule. You ate what was on your plate—good, bad, or ugly. Kids had absolutely no say in what they felt like eating. If you didn't like it, you're welcome to go to bed hungry (The Obama White House, 2010, 10:44).

Obama's deployment of her mom-in-chief discourse constructed a nostalgic period of health, nutrition, and activity for children in the United States by positioning the previous generation of parents as more responsible than the ones who must make choices from the limited educational, nutritional, and community options contemporary parents must navigate to care for their children.

Later in the *Let's Move!* launch, Obama constructs the problem of childhood obesity by contrasting her nostalgic childhood with a bleaker story of children facing an obesity epidemic in a contemporary United States.

> But many kids today aren't so fortunate. Urban sprawl and fears about safety often mean the only walking our kids do is out the front door to a bus or car. And then cuts and recess and gym mean a lot less running around for our kids during the day, school day. And lunchtime may mean a school lunch heavy on calories and fat. And for many kids those afternoons spent riding bikes and playing ball until dusk have been replaced by afternoons inside with the TV on, and Internet, video games.
>
> And these days, with parents working so hard, longer hours, some cases, two jobs, they just don't have the time for those family dinners. And with the price of fruits and vegetables rising 50 percent higher than overall food costs over the past two decades, a lot of times they don't have the money. Or they don't have a supermarket in their community, so their best option for dinner is something from the shelf of the local convenience store or gas station.

> So, this is where we are. Many parents desperately want to do the right thing, but they feel like the deck is stacked against them. They know their kids' health is their responsibility—but they feel like it's completely out of their control (The Obama White House, 2010, 11:51).

Obama's construction of contemporary childhood as predicated on the inability of children to get a healthy amount of activity or share a meal with their entire family like she did as a child does not function as a critique of the government's role in defunding public school systems, stagnating wages, or providing insufficient resources needed to support safe communities.

The focus Obama places on comparing the acts of parents' generation with the actions of contemporary parents reinforced a neoliberal framework that boils a systemic issue such as childhood obesity down to individual choice. Obama's deployment of her mom-in-chief discourse allowed her to position herself as an expert on maternal and family issues in the United States. Consequently, Obama uses the knowledge she has obtained as a mother to highlight the importance of the *Let's Move!* initiative by recounting her experiences of making poor choices for her children to relate to parents whose personal struggles preventing them for making the correct choices for their children's health. Thus, Obama deployed her mom-in-chief discourse to signify the importance of individual responsibility to the task of parenting healthy children by using the example of a conversation she had with her children's pediatrician.

> And I know what that feels like because I've been there. Look, I live in a wonderful house and today I am blessed with more help and support than I could have ever imagined, but I didn't always live in the White House. And it wasn't that long ago that I was a working mom. I've shared this story struggling to balance meetings and deadlines and soccer and ballet. And there were plenty of nights when you got home so tired and hungry, and you just wanted to get through the drive through because it was quick, and it was cheap. Or they're the times that you threw in that less healthy microwave option because it was easy. And one day my pediatrician, thankfully with someone who's already doing what the American academy is going to do, pulled me aside and told me "You might want to think about doing things a little bit differently" (The Obama White House, 2010, 13:24).

Although Michelle Obama has not "always lived in the White House," the manner in which she invokes typical motherhood for the average U.S. citizen privileged the experiences of her mainstream middle-class white constituents who have more access to schools that provide afterschool activities or a job that provides them with the ability to afford private extra-curricular activities for their children. Therefore, Obama's mom-in-chief discourse acts as a neoliberal framework to demand the individual work harder to ensure their children's health and wellness without considering how the lack of material resources influences Black women and our families' ability to keep our children healthy. Put simply, Obama's focus on parental personal responsibility instead of the government's inability to enact policies that will assist with lowering the childhood obesity rate allows Obama to maintain her position as a traditional First Lady and representative of the Obama administration's policy goals without having to put the onus on the government to put in the work of supporting its citizens.

In 2014, the launch of the *Reach Higher* initiative, a program designed to increase the number of students who enroll and graduate from college, allowed Michelle Obama to deploy her mom-in-chief discourse to extend her focus on personal responsibility to the realm of education. During the program kickoff, also billed as the first "College Signing Day," Obama implored students to take more responsibility for their education by declaring their intent to attend a specific college with social media posts of themselves wearing their soon-to-be college colors and gear. The deployment of her mom-in-chief discourse allowed Obama to frame her desire for increased college admission and graduation rates as a function of maternal care and concern for the educational success of the country's children; yet it also allowed her to represent the government's desire to have the U.S. once again lead the world in college graduation rates.

> The fact is, a generation ago, our country had the highest percentage of college graduates in the world. But today we have dropped all the way to 12th. And that's unacceptable, right? That's not who we are. And all of you have a role to play to help get us back on top, because the education you get today won't just help you compete; it's going to help our entire country compete in a global economy (NOWCastSA, 2014, 19:42).

Furthermore, Obama's deployment of her mom-in-chief discourse to highlight the responsibility students have to themselves and the global reputation of U.S. juxtaposed the contradictory functions of the FLOTUS position by allowing her to act as a representative of the government while at the same time appear uninvolved in politics.

Still, Michelle Obama positions the responsibility students have to the government as greater than the responsibility the government has to the students it wants to improve the United States' standing on the world's collegiate stage. For example, Obama nodded to the government's role in providing support for students who want to pursue a college education; yet she recentered the neoliberal ethic of personal responsibility as the determining factor for educational success.

> You have come so far, you've climbed so high to get here, but you have got to keep reaching higher. And that's a message that I've been delivering not just to you guys here but to young people all across this country. Because while we adults have to do our part to give you the support you need—like building the best schools and training the best teachers in the world—really, at the end of the day, the most important person in your education is you. So, you decide whether you show up for class. You decide how many hours you put in that library. You decide whether or not you're going to ask for help or you're going to quit—that's on you (NOWCastSA, 2014, 17:47).

The demand for personal responsibility from students by Obama allows her to use the mom-in-chief discourse to deflect the role the government plays in the rising cost of tuition and the increasing student loan crisis preventing lower income students from enrolling and graduating from college. Obama's embrace of the neoliberal ethics of "grit" and "determination" as the only things needed for collegiate success allows her to use motherhood to marginalize the lived

experiences of Black mothers and our families who face the systemic barriers to providing education for our children. Ironically, the elevation of personal responsibility as a deciding factor in whether a student successfully enrolls and completes college by Obama is made more significant by the revelation in her memoir that a high school guidance counselor told her that she was not "Princeton material" (Obama, 2018, p. 65).

Nevertheless, Michelle Obama continued to promote the neoliberal ethic of personal responsibility in educational matters without providing clear examples of how the Obama administration was working to alleviate the systemic barriers preventing access to adequate school resources or the funding to pursue higher education. Specifically, Obama's final initiative as FLOTUS, *Let Girl's Learn,* focused on increasing the educational opportunities for girls around the world who lack the financial means to attend school, or who are forced to marry and have children before the reach teenage, or who risk "being hurt or kidnapped or killed by men who will do anything to stop girls from learning" (The Obama White House, 2015). Obama's deployment of her mom-in-chief discourse allowed her to frame the issue of inadequate educational opportunities for girls globally as a personal concern of hers because she is a mother of two girls and as a political concern of hers as a First Lady seeking to maintain the United States' political relationships with developing nations. Thus, Obama could act as a representative of her husband's political administration and maintain her position as an apolitical First Lady.

> And that's where this issue becomes personal for me and for Barack, because I see myself in these girls. I see our daughters in these girls. And like all of you, I just can't walk away from them. Like you, I can't just sit back and accept the barriers that keep them from realizing their promise. So, I know that I want to use my time and my platform as first lady and beyond to make a real impact on this issue (The Obama White House, 2015, 14:23).

Despite Obama's assertation that the education of girls is a systemic problem for governments to solve, she maintains that the individual is responsible for their educational success. The global experiences of "poverty," "violence," and inadequate educational opportunities are reduced to an inspirational narrative that should motivate children in the United States to take responsibility for their education despite having to navigate systems that prevent access to educational opportunities in similar ways. Furthermore, Obama invoked motherhood to center the "obligation" students have to focus on their education because that is the best method to change one's life circumstances.

> But while the focus of this work is international, I just want to be clear that for me, *Let Girls Learn* isn't just about improving girls' education abroad. It's also about reminding our young people of the hunger they should be feeling for their own education here at home.
>
> You see, through *Let Girls Learn*, I hope that more of our girls—and our boys—here in the US will learn about the sacrifices girls worldwide are making to get their education—how they're pushing forward in the face of poverty and violence, death threats, and so many other horrors. I want our young people to be awed by these girls, but more importantly, I want them to be inspired and motivated by these girls. I want our kids to realize that while their own school may be far from perfect—and believe you me, this guy here [President Barack Obama] is working hard to fix that—they still have an obligation to show up every day to that classroom and learn as much as they can. I want our kids to understand the transformative power of education. That's something that Barack and I understand from our own experiences—that's our life story, how a good education can lift you from the most humble circumstances into a life you never could have imagined (The Obama White House, 2015, 18:55).

For Obama, the mom-in-chief discourse functions a neoliberal dividing line between people who are worthy of governmental support and those who should work harder to improve their material conditions. By focusing her initiative on the support of girls internationally and highlighting "the hunger" students in the United States "should feel" in pursuing their education; Obama privileged the roles meritocracy and American exceptionalism should play in the lives of

children in the United States without considering how systemic inequalities influence the lives of lower income Black women and our families.

Specifically, Michelle Obama uses her position as a Black mother and the First lady to highlight the importance of Black students embracing the neoliberal ethic of personal responsibility. In her commencement address to the 2015 graduating class at the historically Black Tuskegee University Obama addresses the historic legacy of racism in the United States; yet she maintains the individual's role in obtaining educational and material success is sacrosanct.

> And you don't have to be President of the United States to start addressing things like poverty, and education, and lack of opportunity. Graduates today—today, you can mentor a young person and made sure he or she takes the right path. Today you can volunteer at an after-school program or food pantry. Today, you can help your cousin fill out her college financial aid form so she could be sitting in those chairs one day. But just like all those folks who came before us, you got to do something to lay the groundwork for future generations (Tuskegee Virtual TV, 2015, 23:45).

Obama's suggestion that students do not need to be "President" to address systemic issues in their communities again allows her to centralize a neoliberal ethic of personal responsibility that discounts the lived experiences of the very students she is attempting to inspire in her commencement speech. By invoking the responsibility Black students have the generations that come after them, Obama used her position as an influential Black celebrity, political figure, and mother to ignore the systemic injustices that make it difficult for Black people to enjoy generational successes.

"And if you Rise Above the Noise" Demanding Respectability from Black Audiences

The final theme, demanding respectability, centers Michelle Obama's usage of her mom-in-chief discourse to speak directly to her audience of Black constituents. By demanding respectability from Black people, Obama uses her mom-in-chief discourse in a manner similar to

the first theme of relatability to white audiences. The deployment of the mom-in-chief discourse allowed Obama to use the ideology of motherhood to position her and, by proxy, her husband's presidential administration's concerns as aligned with the concerns of mainstream white voters by positioning her family as unlike the stereotypical Black family concerns with receiving handouts from the government. Likewise, the mom-in-chief discourse allowed Obama to use her proximity to Blackness to promote a neoliberal ethic of personal responsibility that suggests the effects of racism can be transcended through hard work and determination.

The demand of respectability Obama makes to Black audiences is situated within her FLOTUS performance of the celebrity figure in a manner similar to how the first two themes of reliability and personal responsibility are situated within Obama's FLOTUS performances of personal support and leader of official First Lady initiatives. Thus, Obama's usage of her mom-in-chief discourse to position herself as an apolitical First Lady and a representative of the federal government while she maintained her appeal to both white and Black audiences. As the first Black FLOTUS, Michelle Obama was a highly visible Black woman and aspirational figure (Scott, 2017) uniquely positioned to demand respectability from Black people. The position of FLOTUS allowed Obama the ability to speak to the lived experiences of growing up and raising children as a Black woman while simultaneously upholding the racialized and gendered norms of the dominant white society the President and First Lady are expected to uphold. Specifically, Obama's demand for Black respectability does not manifest itself explicitly throughout her tenure as FLOTUS, as she is typically represented as avoiding a direct mention of race and racism to appease mainstream white audiences. Instead, Obama's usage of her mom-in-chief discourse allowed her to frame material success as a choice Black people must make to transcend the lack of material resources caused by systemic racism.

In 2015, Michelle Obama addressed the graduating class of the historically Black Tuskegee University. During her commencement speech, Obama discussed her time as FLOTUS and the racialized challenged she faced in the position. Obama deployed her mom-in-chief discourse to situate her ascent to the White House within the historical struggle of racism experienced by the Tuskegee Airmen and the contemporary experiences of inequality faced by graduates as they pursued their degrees and as they entered the job market. After recounting the role Tuskegee played in the progress Black people have made in the United States and the responsibility the Tuskegee Airmen had to both the United States and to Black people as race, Obama explained how she experienced the burden of racism as the first Black First Lady. Obama began by telling her audience that she understands the pressure of having the meet the racialized expectations of the dominant society. Obama sought to relate to the struggles of her audience by challenging the notion that she has not always had a life of privilege because she has not always been the First Lady. In her speech, she framed the scrutiny she received throughout Barack Obama's first presidential campaign as an obstacle she needed to overcome—not a symptom of the systemic racism influencing the life chances of Black people throughout the United States.

> Back when my husband first started campaigning for President folks had all sorts of questions of me: What kind of First Lady, would I be? What kinds of issues would I take on? Would I be more like Laura Bush or Hillary Clinton or Nancy Reagan? And the truth is those same questions would have been posed to any candidate's spouse. That's just the way the process works. But as potentially the first African American First Lady, I was also the focus of another set of questions and speculations; conversations sometimes rooted in the fears and misperceptions of others. Was I too loud, or too angry, or too emasculating? Or was I too soft, too much of a mom, not enough of a career woman?
>
> Then, there was the first time I was on a magazine cover—it was a cartoon drawing of me with a huge Afro and machine gun. Now, yeah, it was a satire, but if I'm really being honest, it knocked me back a bit. It made me wonder, just how were people seeing me.
>
> Or you might remember the on-stage celebratory fist bump between me and my husband after a primary win that was referred to as a "terrorist fist jab." And over the years folks

> have used plenty of interesting words to describe me. One said that I exhibited "a little bit of uppity-ism." Another noted that I was one of my husband's "cronies of color." Cable news, charmingly referred to me as "Obama's Baby Mama" (Tuskegee Virtual TV, 2015, 11:16).

Even though Obama provided concrete examples of the racism associated with the scrutiny she received as a presidential candidate's wife a part of the "process" of vetting a First Lady and "rooted in the fears and misconceptions of others," she does not root her experiences in systemic racism. Instead, Obama's experiences of racism are noticeability individualized.

For Obama, the mediated construction of her as a stereotypical "bad Black woman" who did not know her place was neither a function of the historical legacies of racism and sexism that constructed Black women as morally, sexually, and culturally deviant nor was it critique of the cult of first ladyhood (Handau & Simian, 2019) that constructed the FLOTUS position as a representation of appropriate white femininity. The racist backlash Obama received, according to her Tuskegee, was simply a personal obstacle she needed to overcome to success as the First Lady.

> I realized that if I wanted to keep my sanity and not let others define me, there was only one thing I could do, and that was to have faith in God's plan for me. I had to ignore all of the noise and be true to myself—and the rest would work itself out.
>
> So, throughout this journey, I have learned to block everything out and focus on my truth. I had to answer some basic questions for myself. Who am I? No, really? Who am I? What do I care about?
>
> And the answers to those questions have resulted in the woman who stands before you today. A woman who is, first and foremost, a mom. Look, I love our daughters more than anything in the world, more than life itself. And while that may not be the first thing that some folks want to hear from an Ivy-League educated lawyer, it is truly who I am. So, for me, being mom-in-chief is, and always will be, job number one (Tuskegee Virtual TV, 2015, 13:42).

Obama's choice to not focus on the public's opinion on her (even if that opinion is based on racist stereotypes) to "live her truth" is presented as the most viable route to obtaining political

and professional success and by extension respectability for Black people in the United States allows her to use her proximity to Blackness to make the case for personal responsibility from the Tuskegee graduates specifically and Black people more generally.

For Michelle Obama, racism is not simply an obstacle Black people must overcome to achieve material success it is also not a justification for giving up on the task of assimilating into the multicultural neoliberal project promoted by the Obama administration. In her Tuskegee commencement speech, Obama, on one hand, framed racism as a very real burden affecting the lives of Black graduates by euphemistically referencing the racial uprisings that occurred after the 2014 death of Michael Brown, Jr. in Ferguson, MO and the 2015 death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, MD. Yet, on the other hand, Obama argued against using the state-sanctioned extra-judicial racialized violence against Black people as an excuse to behave in an unrespectable manner. Obama argues racism

> can feel isolating. It can make you feel like your life somehow doesn't matter…[a]nd as we've seen over the past few years, those feelings are real. They're rooted in decades of structural challenges that have made too many folks feel frustrated and invisible. And those feelings are playing out in communities like Baltimore and Ferguson and so many others across the country. But graduates today, I want to be very clear that those feelings are not an excuse to just throw up our hands and give up. Not an excuse. They are not an excuse to lose hope. To succumb to feelings of despair and anger only means that in the end, we lose. But here's the thing—our history provides us with a better story, a better blueprint for how we can win. It teaches us that when we pull ourselves out of the lowest emotional depths and we channel our frustrations into studying and organizing and banding together—then we can build ourselves and our communities up. We can take on those deep-rooted problems, and together—together—we can overcome anything that stands in our way (Tuskegee Virtual TV, 2015, 20:43).

Thus, Obama's Tuskegee commencement speech contains two underlying, yet conflicting messages for both the graduates and Obama's larger Black audience. Specifically, Obama used her proximity to Blackness to relate to the burden of racism face by individual graduates while they pursued their degrees and the racism awaiting them as they leave university life. At the

same time, Obama defended the very system that marginalized Black people in life threatening ways by demanding Black people respond to extrajudicial racialized violence at the hands of the police by "pulling ourselves out of the emotional depths" to "build ourselves and our communities up." The demand for respectability made by Obama allowed her to position herself as a relatable celebrity figure for Black audiences as she maintains her role as a representative of The demand for respectability made by Obama allowed her to position herself as an understanding and relatable celebrity figure for Black audiences and a willing representative of the federal government's desire to maintain a social order that privileges whiteness by marginalizing the concerns Black people have about our abilities to survive interactions with the police.

Furthermore, by positioning education as the sole tool required for Black people to overcome racism, Michelle Obama foregrounds the narrative that people must change their material conditions by behaving in a socially acceptable manner. Put another way, the focus Obama placed on education when she is in front of Black audiences reinforced the stereotype that Black people are unaligned with the values of dominant white society and do not care to access the tools necessary to pull themselves out of their detrimental material circumstances without depending on the government. For example, Obama's 2015 appearance at the *Black Girls Rock!* Awards, she positioned education as "the secret to everything in life" to an audience celebrating the achievements of Black women and girls. For Obama, education is a tool Black girls and boys can use attain material success for themselves and their communities. Obama claims,

> [t]here is nothing more important than being serious about your education. That's the reason I am able to stand here tonight. Because look, I worked hard in school. Education was cool for me. I did my best on every paper, every test, every homework assignment.

> And I want every single one of our Black girls to do the same and our Black boys. I want them to do that all the way through high school, then college, and then beyond. I want you to work as hard as you can. Learn as much as you can. That is how you will go from being Black girls who rock to being Black women who rock. That is how you will unleash the genius, and the power, and the passion required to rock your communities, to rock our country, to rock this world. I love you all. I believe in you all. And I am confident that you all will shine brightly. Lighting the way for generations of girls to come. Thank you all. God bless (Black Girls Rock!, 2015, 5:43).

Obama placed her demand of Black respectability within an easily digestible package for Black children. Still, Obama's emphasis on how "education was cool" for her, Obama invokes the stereotypical Black child who believed they did not need to put in the effort in school because achieving good grades are equivalent to behaving like a white person. Obama's suggestion that Black children embrace education as a tool to overcome their upbringing positions Black families and our children as unwilling to accept the dominant values of white society and are therefore personally responsible for their material conditions until they are willing to behave respectability. It does not matter if the children Obama are addressing have access to the material resources to obtain a quality education—they simply need to work with the tools they are given. Thus, the reduction of Black women's and girls' ability to change their life circumstances and their community infrastructures to their ability to work hard and make good grades in school allowed Obama space to critique Black people's commitment to the respectable behaviors needed to align ourselves with the values of dominant white society.

In Michelle Obama's commencement address to Tuskegee University graduates, she emphasized the importance of respectable behavior and personal responsibility for Black people by contextualizing the practice within the history of systemic racism in the United States. Using Tuskegee University as an example of how Black people overcame the racism that left them inadequate educational opportunities and resources, Obama highlighted the need for Black

people to do the work of uplifting themselves without depending on the government for assistance. Instead, it is up to Black people to use the tools they were given to transcend the limitations of race to create an institution we could use for ourselves and pass down to the next generation of Black students who would attend the university.

> Because here is the truth—if you want to have a say in your community, if you truly want the power to control your own destiny, then you've got to be involved…
>
> That's what's always happened here at Tuskegee. Think about those students who made bricks with their bare hands. They did it so that others could follow them and learn on this campus, too. Think about that brilliant scientist who made his lab from a trash pile. He did it because he ultimately wanted to help sharecroppers feed their families. Those [Tuskegee] Airmen who rose above brutal discrimination—they did it so that the whole world could see just how high Black folks could soar. That's the spirit we've got to summon to take on the challenges that we face today (Tuskegee Virtual TV, 2015, 22:20).

Nevertheless, Obama's push for a spirit of grit and determine she deemed necessary to take on contemporary challenges faced by Black people beguiled her Black audiences into accepting a narrative that she, as First Lady, does not have access to the tools required to deal with systemic racism, educational inequality, and poverty. Obama usage of the mom-in-chief discourse in her Tuskegee commencement address to claim individual Black people in the United States were responsible for solving systemic racial and economic inequalities downplayed the role she as a representative of the federal government and her husband as the President of the United States had in manifesting the hope and changed advocated by the Barack Obama presidential campaign. Obama did the work of demanding respectability from the audience of Tuskegee graduates specifically and Black people in the United States generally through her promotion of a type of personal responsibility grounded in a post-racial and post-feminist neoliberalism that renders racial and gendered-based social inequalities irrelevant. As FLOTUS, Obama used her mom-in-chief discourse to highlight her proximity to Blackness to demand Black people align their

behavior within the dominant white ideology of meritocracy. Although Michelle Obama has access to the resources needed to advocate for policies that could assist with educational access, increased financial aid, and reduced poverty, she minimized the government's role in creating the infrastructure needed to supply opportunities for Black people to succeed in the United States. Black people are instead required to "channel the magic" of their history to uplift themselves and their communities without the benefit of programs and initiatives designed to increase opportunities for Black people to succeed. For Obama, Black people must simply "rise above the noise" of racism by embracing the politics of respectability so we can align our goals and norms with the dominant white society to be taken seriously be within the larger cultural zeitgeist.

Discussion

My examination of the mom-in-chief discourse deployed by Michelle Obama builds on the work of communication scholar Marian Meyers (2013) who examined the significance of YouTube to the branding and popularity of Michelle Obama. In her book *African American Women in the News: Gender, Race, and Class in Journalism,* Meyers (2013) found the ease of distributing a multitude of ideological viewpoints on YouTube makes the platform significant to the examination of the representation of Obama as both a Black woman and the first Black FLOTUS. My examination of Obama's performance of the FLOTUS roles of political support, leader of her official First Lady initiatives, and as a celebrity figure in public speeches available on various Internet platforms including YouTube allow for an understanding of how Obama's image as the first Black First Lady was constructed, managed, and disseminated in a manner that challenged and reinforced popular representations of Black women and mothers. Furthermore, my examination of Obama's usage of racialized and gendered discourses in her construction of

her mom-in-chief identity expands upon the work of communicational scholar Ralina L. Joseph's examination of strategic ambiguity in the book *Postracial Resistance: Black Women, Media, and the Uses of Strategic Ambiguity.* In her book, Joseph (2018) argues, strategic ambiguity is a post-racial technique used to pushback against the controlling images of Black womanhood without directly addressing the issue of racism. Put simply, the public deployment of race became a strategic choice Obama made when it best aligned with either her discursive goals or the larger political goals of the Barack Obama presidential administration.

Specifically, I argued Michelle Obama's mom-in-chief discourse functioned as a tool of strategic ambiguity by allowing her to position herself as the anthesis of the stereotypical representation of the sexually, morally, and culturally deviant "angry Black woman" prevalent in mainstream media. Conversely, I also argue, Obama used the technique of strategic ambiguity to position herself as a traditionally apolitical First Lady aligned with the values of mainstream white voters uncomfortable with the prospect of having a Black man lead the country and a Black family in the White House. Thus, the techniques of strategic ambiguity embodied in Obama's performance of motherhood reinforced the stereotypical discourses of Black motherhood she sought to challenge with the identity of mom-in-chief by decontextualizing the material consequences of the Obama administration's neoliberal policies and programs that influenced the lived experiences of Black women and mothers. In short, Michelle Obama essentially used Black mothers and our families to increase the Obama administration's political profile with her focus on the neoliberal ideologies of post-racism and post-feminism as solutions to problems within Black communities instead of advocating for access to material resources. The Black mothers and families who view Michelle Obama as an aspirational representation of

Black womanhood are unfortunately not the audience she courts with her mom-in-chief discourse even as she tailors specific messages to us.

The examination of the ways in which Michelle Obama invoked motherhood within the racialized and gendered confines of the First Lady (Handau & Simian, 2019) is significant because the institution of FLOTUS and motherhood are inherently linked (Tapia, 2011). Specifically, motherhood is crucial to understanding the racialized and gendered standards were held to during her tenure in the White House and the techniques of strategic ambiguity she used to fit within and challenge those standards. Handau and Simian (2019) argue Obama was held to a physical and a behavioral standard for her tenure as First Lady. Obama needed to maintain an appropriate feminine demeanor "consistent with the normative yardstick by which all women who occupy the office were measured—white, middle class, and heterosexual" (Handau & Simian, 2019, p. 488). Also, Obama needed to be free from career ambitions or political agendas and avoid public controversies. After the "proud of my country" controversy, it became increasingly more important for Obama to construct her identity as First Lady in a manner consistent with the traditional standards of the FLOTUS position grounded in the discursive construction of white womanhood (Handau & Simian, 2019).

Michelle Obama existed outside the racialized and gendered frames constructed around Black women and First Ladies because as a Harvard-educated Black woman, mother, and white she complicated the discourses that attributed virtue and whiteness to the FLOTUS and the discourses that attributed social, moral, and cultural deviance to Black women and our families. The dedication Obama showed to her husband and her children contradicted the stereotypical representation of Black women as heads of single parent families who must depend on governmental intervention to care for our children because we lack the ability to or the

willingness to care for ourselves. To fit within the FLOTUS frame, especially after the "proud of my country" controversy during Barack Obama's first presidential campaign, Michelle Obama underwent a makeover to fit an image of a First Lady that is more palatable to mainstream white voters—docile, apolitical, and white. Obama's mom-in-chief discourse was a means to position herself as a Black woman who could fit within the traditional white confines of the FLOTUS position while also allowing her to challenge the discourse of maternal deviance in Black women. The deployment of the mom-in-chief discourse allowed Obama to use respectability politics to challenge the stereotypical representation of Black motherhood by associating her Black body (a body less likely to perceived as a good mother) with the tropes of Victorian womanhood and Republican motherhood typically associated with white womanhood (Burns, 2008). The mom-in-chief discourse allowed Obama to both challenge the controlling images of Black women and mothers and define herself within the racialized and gendered confines of the FLOTUS role (Obama, 2018). Still, Obama's usage of motherhood to control her narrative and position herself as an acceptable First Lady for white audiences reinforced the discourses of Black motherhood as culturally, sexually, and morally deviant.

Motherhood, for Michelle Obama acted as a unifying discourse needed to cater to both Black and white audiences. On one hand, the mom-in-chief discourse allowed Obama to construct an image of herself as a traditionally apolitical First Lady who provided public support for policies and programs which centered the concerned of white middle-class families. On the other hand, the mom-in-chief discourse provided a tool Obama could use to challenge the racist and sexist assumptions of Black women as incapable of adhering to the standards of motherhood. As the first Black First Lady, As the first Black FLOTUS, Obama's ability to maintain her appeal to both Black and white audiences while she asserted a maternal identity that spoke to the

prevailing discourses of Black motherhood was significant because Black women have been historically excluded from assuming the roles of First Lady and mother. Furthermore, the performance of respectable Black motherhood by Obama was a boon for the representation of Black women as it complicated the existing stereotypes of Black women and mothers in popular culture. Yet. In Obama's discursive challenge to the discourses of Black motherhood lies a reinforcement of the same narratives she attempted to disavow.

Michelle Obama used her mom-in-chief discourse to challenge and reinforce the prevailing discourses of Black mothers as culturally, morally, and sexually deviant in three different FLOTUS performances: as political support for Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton; as the leader of her official FLOTUS initiatives; and as a celebrity figure and representative of respectable and aspirational Black womanhood for Black audiences. Obama's mom-in-chief discourse existed within the neoliberal post-racial and post-feminist frameworks that ignore the influence race and gender have on the life chances of Black women and our families. Particularly, Obama argued against depending on the government for solutions to individual community problems instead of advocating for the material resources needed for communities to enact the change she believed possible. The mom-in-chief discourse functioned as a technique of strategic ambiguity (Joseph, 2018) which allowed Obama to appear to challenge the racist and gendered stereotypes of Black mothers and our families even as she tiptoed around the issue of systemic racial inequality. There are three ways Obama deployed her mom-in-chief discourse to challenge the discourse of the bad Black mother figure even as she marginalized the lived experiences of Black women and our families in the above mentioned FLOTUS performances. They are relatability, personal responsibility, and demanding respectability from Black audiences.

The first theme of relatability was most present in Michelle Obama's performance of political support for Barack Obama's presidential campaigns and administrations. As political support, Obama was required to construct her identity to align with the traditionally apolitical standard of white femininity required of a political wife and potential First Lady. Michelle Obama's relatability to white audiences was crucial to capturing the mainstream white voters needed to secure Barack Obama's presidential victories as she represented the values her husband would bring to the role as president. In fact, concerns about Barack Obama's cosmopolitan upbringing and perceived foreignness required Michelle Obama represent her husband's ties to voters concerns with her own lived experiences growing up in a middle-class family on the South Side of Chicago (Kantor, 2008). Furthermore, the racialized and gendered response to Michelle Obama's "proud of my country" comments made during Barack Obama's first presidential campaign added a sense of urgency to the concerns Michelle Obama may not be relatable to white voters because it meant Barack Obama may not be the correct person to lead the United States. The public relations arm of the Obama presidential campaign used motherhood to refashion Michelle Obama into a softer, more palatable image of a First Lady that was more relatable to white audiences (Brown, 2012).

During the 2008 and the 2012 Democratic National Conventions, Michelle Obama constructed a narrative of herself and her family as relatable to the white audiences courted by the Barack Obama presidential campaigns. The construction of Obama and her family's values as similar "to the ones so many of you—are trying to pass on" (ABC News, 2012, 9:07) made a distinction between her family and the stereotypical Black families that allegedly refuse to work, require governmental assistance for material support, and exist outside of the heterosexual nuclear family structure. The distinction Obama made is significant because she relied on

racialized and gendered stereotypes to appear relatable to white audiences. Specifically, Obama's performance of political support throughout her tenure as First Lady included nostalgic stories from her childhood and her experiences raising children to illustrate her family's similarity to mainstream white families working to pursue their "American Dream." Furthermore, the use of motherhood to construct Obama's public identity as a political support for the Barack Obama presidential campaigns allowed her to further align herself with the traditional mainstream expectations of an apolitical First Lady uninterested in the details of governing the country. Instead, Obama asserts herself as a mother concerned only with the well-being of her daughters during their term in the White House. Thus, the "positive" representation of Michelle Obama as a Black mother figure who defied the stereotype of the "bad Black mother" required her to align herself and her family with the dominant ideology of the white family structure. The use of the mom-in-chief discourse to frame Obama's performance of political support as the First Lady allowed her to decontextualize the material conditions of Black mothers are our families were subjected to under the politics of the Barack Obama presidential administration. Rather, Obama's mom-in-chief discourse functioned to situate her within the trajectory of white First ladies while providing cover for the neoliberalism posited by the Obama presidential administration.

As FLOTUS, Michelle Obama used her mom-in-chief discourse to define familial relationships and the governmental response to those relationships by centering her personal experience as a mother. In short, the mom-in-chief discourse allowed Obama to represent herself as a softer, apolitical First Lady uninterested in influencing public policy, who understood the values of mainstream white voters. Likewise, the mom-in-chief discourse allowed Obama to frame the parameters of her job as a representative of the concerns of the federal government. As the leader of her official FLOTUS initiatives, Obama embodied the political tradition of

republican motherhood by situating her concern for the topics of eliminating childhood obesity and increasing educational opportunities both domestically and abroad as an extension of her concern for her two children. The focus placed on the well-being of the nation's children provided an opportunity for Obama to again challenge and reinforce the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood in two distinct ways. Since Black women's maternal labor was not historically valued in ways similar to the maternal labor of white women (Burns, 2008), it was significant for Obama to choose to focus on her children and issues related to the private sphere. Obama's embrace of motherhood in her promotion of her official FLOTUS initiatives provided a modicum of representation for Black women hungry for an image of Black woman who defied the stereotypes of Black motherhood within popular culture. Conversely, Obama's focus on motherhood in her FLOTUS initiatives allowed her to embrace the role of "first mother" and the influence that comes with being perceived as an expert maternal figure. Throughout Obama's tenure as FLOTUS, Michelle Obama references her two-parent family upbringing on the South Side of Chicago and the values of personal responsibility, meritocracy, and good work ethic she learned from her parents. As such, Obama was able to couch the concerns of the Obama administration within the narrative of motherwit and common sense. As result, Obama used her mom-in-chief discourse to advance the task of neoliberalism within the federal government by advocating for programs that place the onus of success on the individual instead of the federal government.

In a similar fashion, Michelle Obama deployed her mom-in-chief discourse as a celebrity figure and representative of aspirational Black womanhood in a manner that supports the concerns of the federal government. As the first Black First Lady and prominent Black woman, Obama was celebrated for her education, career, and ability to transcend the racist stereotypes

she endured in media by defining her political identity for herself. Obama's focus on motherhood throughout her tenure as FLOTUS challenged the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood that position Black women and our families as sexually, morally, and culturally deviant by presenting to mainstream white audiences an example of a Black woman capable of caring for her own children without material intervention from the government. Nevertheless, Obama's embrace of the values of the mainstream white voters translated into a reinforcement of the values of personal responsibility and respectability that marginalized the lived experiences of Black mothers and our families. In Obama's 2015 appearance at the *Black Girls Rock!* Awards and her 2015 commencement address to the historically Black Tuskegee University, she used her mom-in-chief discourse to demand respectability from her Black audiences by focusing on Black people's responsibility to the previous generations who endured racism, so they could achieve success in the United States. In particular, Obama tied her experiences as a mother and First Lady with the history of Black people in the United States to highlight her understanding of race and racism. For Obama, racism was not a systemic issue that influenced the life chances of her Black audiences. Racism was something Black people could and should transcend because it is something that she, Barack Obama, and the Black people from previous generations have done with less resources. The framing of racism as an individual issue Black women and their families could solve simply by working harder and getting and focusing on getting an education discounted the role the federal government played in limiting the material resources needed to change the material and educational circumstances in Black communities. More importantly, Obama's mom-in-chief discourse functions a type of racial gaslighting that acknowledged racism as a problem, while blaming Black people who do not behave in a respectable manner as the cause of the discrimination they endure in the United States.

Conclusion

The institution of motherhood is inherently linked to the position of the First Lady of the United States. As the first Black First Lady, Michelle Obama used her mom-in- chief discourse to situate herself within the racialized and gendered framework of the FLOTUS position which historically and traditionally excluded Black women *and* challenge the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood as culturally, morally, and sexually deviant. Still, the mom-in-chief discourse deployed by Obama reinforced the stereotypical discourses of Black mothers and their families by functioning as a technique of strategic ambiguity, or a way to discuss race without directly mentioning the topic (Joseph, 2012) unless the direct mention of race would support the Obama's discursive goal. In this chapter, I have argued Obama deployed her mom-in-chief discourse in the First Lady performances of political support, as the leader of her official FLOTUS initiatives, and as a celebrity and aspirational figure of Black womanhood.

Firstly, as political support, motherhood was a means for Michelle Obama to position herself and her family as similar to the mainstream middle-class voters courted by the Barack Obama presidential campaigns and administration. To relate to white audiences, Obama provided a representation her family as having similar values and a similar worth ethic to mainstream white families. The representation of Obama and her family as similar to white audiences also did the work of positioning her and her family as unlike the stereotypical Black family dependent on the government for material assistance. Next, Obama acted as a representative of the federal government and the Obama administration through her leadership of her official FLOTUS initiatives. The initiatives Obama chose to focus on during her FLOTUS tenure allowed her to define her public identity as an apolitical First Lady while promoting the post-racial and post-feminist neoliberal agendas of personal responsibility and meritocracy.

Obama used the credibility provided by her mom-in-chief discourse and her proximity to the president to promote individual solutions to the systemic issues of childhood obesity, educational inequalities, and lack of material resources. Consequently, Obama decontextualized the lived experiences of Black mothers and our families who faced the consequences of systemic inequalities and the lack of resources needed to enact the community changes she believed everyone should work together to obtain.

Finally, Michelle Obama's FLOTUS performance of a celebrity figure and representative of aspirational Black womanhood allowed her to represent the agenda of the Obama administration in settings outside of official White House and campaign environments. During her 2015 appearance at the *Black Girls Rock!* Awards and her 2015 commencement address to the historically Black Tuskegee University, Obama situated experience as the first Black FLOTUS within the trajectory of the larger historical experience of anti-Black racism to demand respectability from her Black audiences. Specifically, the mom-in-chief discourse deployed by Obama functioned to reinforce the stereotypical discourses of Black motherhood by claiming Black people have a responsibility to the United States and to the previous generation of Black people to transcend their circumstances by getting an education and not "succumb to feelings of despair and anger" (Tuskegee Virtual TV, 2015, 21:23) For Obama, the loss of Black life at the hands of extrajudicial racialized violence is not an excuse to behave in an unrespectable manner or engage in behaviors that do not align with the larger ideology of whiteness.

Still, Michelle Obama's mom-in-chief discourse directly intersects with the Black mothers grieving the loss of their children at the hands of extrajudicial racialized violence. Despite the genesis of the Black Lives Matter movement occurring during the tenure of the first Black President and First Lady, Obama's usage of her mom-in-chief discourse points to the post-

racial and post-feminist ideologies that posit a United States where the intersection of racism and sexism do not influence the lives of Black mothers and their families. Specifically, Obama's mom-in-chief discourse did the work of challenging the stereotypical representation of herself as a socially, morally, and sexually deviant Black mother. Yet, Obama's mom-in-chief discourse did little to challenge the racism that influenced the material conditions of Black women who have lost their children to extrajudicial racialized violence. In the next chapter, I examine the discourses of Black motherhood within the Black Lives Matter movement by examining the mediated representations of Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin, and Lesley McSpadden, the mother of Michael Brown, Jr., to understand how the death of their children influenced the larger conversation about Black motherhood.

CHAPTER 4: "JUST DON'T FOCUS ON THE DEATH": COMPETING DISCOURSES OF BLACK MOTHERHOOD IN MEDIATED REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

Introduction

In July 2013, the phrase "Black Lives Matter"[15] entered the contemporary lexicon as a social media hashtag. The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag first appeared in a viral Facebook post made by Alicia Garza after a Florida jury acquitted George Zimmerman of the murder of an unarmed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin (Alvarez & Buckley, 2013; Garza, 2016). After the "not guilty" verdict was announced, Garza posted an affirmation to those who were distraught over yet another example of the continued devaluation of Black lives. Garza's friend, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, responded to the post with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. With the help of Opal Tometi, who constructed the social media platform that allowed activists to connect with one another, Garza and Khan-Cullors began formally promoting the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag (Cobb, 2016). Garza, Khan-Cullors, and Tometi created the infrastructure and guiding principles for the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation (BLMGNF), a decentralized network of grassroots organizations, after a St. Louis County grand jury refused to indict Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson for the murder of the unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown, Jr. in 2014 (Davey & Bosman, 2014; Garza, 2016). Each affiliated organization operated independently with the ability to choose its structure and focus; however, to be recognized by BLMGF required a rigorous assessment of previous activism and an agreement with a set of guiding principles which included unapologetically affirming Black lives (Cobb, 2016).

[15] In this chapter, I use "#BlackLivesMatter" to refer to the social media campaign and accompanying hashtag and I use the phrase "Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation" to refer to the political organization. The phrase "Black Lives Matter" signifies the larger political movement and its accompanying ideologies and principles.

#BlackLivesMatter was not a popular hashtag when it first emerged on social media in 2013. After Darren Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown, Jr. in 2014, the hashtag grew to become a crucial part of the larger social media discourse about race and racism. In the three-week period following Brown, Jr.'s death, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag appeared 58,747 times per day (Pew Research Center, 2016). The day after a St. Louis County grand jury refused to indict Wilson for murder, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag appeared on Twitter 172,772 times. In the three weeks after the grand jury's decision, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was used on Twitter 1.7 million times (Pew Research Center, 2016, p. 17). When Twitter celebrated its 10th anniversary in 2016, #BlackLivesMatter was the third most influential social cause hashtag on the site (Pew Research Center, 2016; Sichynsky, 2016). Twitter users deployed the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag in several ways: to show support for and solidary with the larger Black Lives Matter movement, to comment on large news events such as the shooting of Black church members in Charleston, South Carolina, and to criticize the overarching Black Lives Matter movement and to show support for police and law enforcement (Pew Research Center, 2016). Specifically, opponents of the Black Lives Matter movement included the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag to their tweets to criticize the movement and/or to identify the subject matter of their posts and link them to the larger discussion of racial issues online.

The Moment of the Black Lives Matter Movement

The Black Lives Matter movement has a unique position within the Black struggle for equality in the United States. As a descendent of the Civil Rights movement, Black Lives Matter focused on the liberation of Black people with political organizing and direct-action techniques such as large-scale marches and protests. Unlike the Civil Rights movement, Black Lives Matter eschews the top-down organizing model which uncritically privileges charismatic Black male

leadership "over the arduous, undocumented efforts of ordinary women, men, and children to remake their social reality" (Edwards, 2012, p. xv). The "leaderless" organizing strategy of the Black Lives Matter movement is a significant challenge to what English scholar Erica R. Edwards (2012) defines as "one of the central fictions of black American politics: that freedom is best achieved under the direction of a single charismatic leader" (p. xv). Alicia Garza (2016) describes Black Lives Matter as a project which extends the single charismatic Black male leader framework used by Black liberation movements such as the Civil Rights movement when she asserts

> Black Lives Matter is a unique contribution that goes beyond extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and vigilantes. It goes beyond the narrow nationalism that can be prevalent within some Black communities, which merely call on Black people to love Black, live Black, and buy Black, keeping straight cis-Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans and disabled folk, take up roles in the background or not at all. Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements. It is a tactic to re(build) the Black liberation movement (p. 25).

More importantly, the affirmation of the Black lives typically marginalized by Black liberation efforts like the Civil Rights movement allows Black Lives Matter to challenge the hegemonic rhetorics of respectability used to determine who is worthy of the right to full citizenship in the United States (Fackler, 2016). Still, Garza does not discount the gains of the Civil Rights movement or place it in direct opposition to Black Lives Matter. Instead, Rev. Al Sharpton, as a representative of the Civil Rights movement's old guard, claimed the organizing tactics of the Black Lives Matter movement ran counter to the respectable (and non-violent) protest strategies used to fight for civil rights in the 1960s (Taylor, 2016). Thus, Sharpton and those who aligned themselves with his political philosophy of respectability, justified the systemic oppression the

Black Lives Matter movement fights against by demanding Black activists and the Black victims of extrajudicial racialized violence align their organizing tactics and identities with the expectations of white supremacy (Taylor, 2016).

Sharpton and other establishment leaders of the Civil Rights movement, however, were still invested in Black Lives Matter because it provided a potential entryway to maintaining discursive relevance and power in a supposedly post-racial era marked by the end of the legalized racial discrimination of Black people—a victory paradoxically won by the work of the Civil Rights movement. In the book *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, professor of African American studies Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2016) argues the political uprisings in areas like Ferguson and Baltimore were seen by Civil Rights establishment leaders and organizations like Sharpton, the NAACP, and the Congressional Black Caucus, as opportunities to rehabilitate their declining political reputations within Black communities and increase the Black representation in electoral politics through voter registration drives for the Democratic party. The vanguard of the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as the everyday activists demanding an end to the oppressive systems that overpoliced Black communities and prevented access to quality jobs, educational opportunities, and affordable housing did not appreciate how Sharpton and others attempted to reshape Black Lives Matter in a way that satisfied the goals of a small Black political elite by asserting themselves as the de facto leaders of direct political actions occurring before they arrived on scene.

The 2008-election of Barack Obama as the first Black president of the United States made him a symbol of the victories of the Civil Rights movement. Obama's election was supposed to signify a definitive end to the issue of race and racism in the United States because Black people now had the possibility to advocate for tangible racial progress and liberal whites

no longer needed to focus on the significance race plays in the lives of Black people (Mukherjee, 2016). Eduard Bonilla-Silva (2014) believes Obama's transformation into an aspirational figure for Black communities is understandable "in a country with a racial history such as ours and where successful black leaders end up killed (Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X), vilified (Malcolm X, Minister Farrakhan, and Reverend Al Sharpton), or ridiculed (almost all black politicians)" (p. 268). Ralina L. Joseph (2011) argues that Internet images of Barack Obama during the campaign period of 2007-2008 represent two specific types of anti-Black racism towards Obama: explicitly racist representations of Obama as an ape, a thug, and a terrorist and implicitly racist representations of Obama as a post-racial messiah and Black best friend to white people. President Obama's "accommodationist" politics in the White House betrayed the vision of a Black president willing to directly address issues and Black inequality that was advertised by Candidate Obama (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Taylor, 2016). Instead, Obama added to a small group of politicians from the Black elite economic and social classes who attempted to hold on to political power (Taylor, 2016) by maintaining what bell hooks (2012) referred to as the "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (p. 4). According to Bonilla-Silva (2014),

> [P]ost–civil rights minority politicians like Obama are not truly about deep change, but about compromise. If they were about fundamental changes to the American social order, they would not be the darlings of the two mainstream parties. Although some post–civil rights minority politicians may, from time to time, "talk the talk," their talk is rather abstract almost to the point of being meaningless, and they seldom if ever "walk the walk" (p. 262).

In other words, Obama is a prominent exemplar of an emerging Black political elite willing to reject calls for dismantling systems that disproportionately oppress poor and working-class Black people for incremental changes such as police reform and electoral majorities (Taylor, 2016). When those incremental changes failed to produce meaningful changes for the material realities

of Black people, Obama and Black politicians of his ilk used their political power to reinforce the stereotypes of criminality and lack of personal responsibility in poor and lower-class Black communities.

> Obama…publicly chastising African Americans for a range of behaviors that read like a handbook of anti-Black stereotypes, from parenting skills and dietary choices to sexual mores and television watching habits…work to close off the political space within which African Americans can express legitimate grievances about an economic recovery that has offered material relief to bankers and auto executives but only moral uplift to Black people (Taylor, 2016, p. 143).

Thus, the U.S. government and Obama absolved themselves of the blame for systemic inequality by perpetuating the culture of poverty discourses as the reason for under-resourced and overpoliced Black communities. By attempting to assert himself as a key leader of the political uprisings in Ferguson, Al Sharpton tied his ability to contain the protest activity to his ability to increase his political profile within the Obama administration (Taylor, 2016). In doing so, Sharpton reinforced and legitimated the accounts of Ferguson officials which blamed protesters for violent behavior even as the "police blatantly violated their rights to assemble" (Taylor, 2016, p. 160). Thus, Sharpton appeared to support the cause of Black liberation while attempting to use Black Lives Matter for political and personal gains.

In short, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement during Barack Obama's presidential administration situated the struggle to affirm the lives of Black people firmly within the so-called post-racial moment of the Barack Obama presidential administration. Specifically, the emergence of Black Lives Matter during the tenure of the First Black president and First Lady challenged the belief that the United States had moved beyond the inequality and oppression characterizing the state's relation to the Black population (Garza, 2016; Taylor, 2016). Likewise, the extrajudicial racialized deaths of Black people occurring during the tenure

of the first Black president also challenges the notion that the addition of Black people to systems designed to maintain white supremacy will dramatically change how Black people experience those systems.

#AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter: Racially Un/virtuous Victimhood

The hashtags #AllLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter acts as direct challenges to the legitimacy of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag and the larger Black Lives Matter movement. The Pew Research Center (2016) found both the #AllLivesMatter and the #BlueLivesMatter hashtags began circulating regularly in 2014 after the Ferguson uprisings. Both hashtags reached peak Twitter usage in July 2016 after attacks on law enforcement in the wake of the police killings of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, Minnesota (McCarthy, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2016; Potter, 2016). According to sociologist Nikita Carney (2016), the #AllLivesMatter hashtag was typically deployed by Twitter users who questioned the legitimacy of the Black Lives Matter movement by claiming a racial universality that collapsed "the specificities of different groups' experience in favor of a color-blind ideology that favors white supremacy" (p. 194). Alicia Garza (2016) connected the problematic use of the #AllLivesMatter hashtag with the larger systemic oppression of Black lives when she asserts, the deployment of

> "All Lives Matter" to correct an intervention specifically created to address anti-Blackness, [loses] the ways in which the state apparatus has built a program of genocide and repression mostly on the backs of Black people—beginning with the theft of millions of people for free labor—and then adapted it to control, murder, and profit off of other communities of color and immigrant communities. We perpetuate a level of white supremacist domination when we reproduce the tired trope that we are all the same, rather than acknowledging that non-Black oppressed people in this country are impacted by racism and domination and, simultaneously, benefit from anti-Black racism (Garza, 2016, p. 27).

Similarly, the #BlueLives Matter hashtag functioned as a component of a larger Blue Lives Matter countermovement designed to challenge the premise of the Black Lives Matter movement—that Black people are victims of extrajudicial racialized violence at the hands of the police (Blue Lives Matter, n.d.; Pew Research Center, 2016). The Blue Lives Matter countermovement began as a social media campaign and website in 2014 to support Darren Wilson and other police officers by countering what it believed was misinformation about law enforcement perpetuated by the Black Lives Matter movement (Blue Lives Matter, n.d.). Twitter users who deployed the #BlueLivesMatter hashtag expressed support for police officers and the Blue Lives Matter countermovement while using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag to blame the Black Lives Matter movement for violence against police officers. In doing so, those who deployed the #BlueLivesMatter hashtag framed the Black Lives Matter movement as a hate group responsible for the deaths of police officers (Cohen, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2016).

The Blue Lives Matter countermovement functioned as white backlash to the prominence and reach of the Black Lives Matter movement. It rhetorically erased Blackness from the Black Lives Matter movement while simultaneously highlighting the significance of race (Longazel, 2021). In an examination of mediated displays of support for the Blue Lives Matter countermovement, Longazel (2021) argues Blue Lives Matter can best be understood as a "descendent of blackface minstrelsy" in that it "abides by minstrelsy's characteristic, fantastical duality: envious 'appreciation' on one hand, degradation and violence on the other" (p. 93). In other words, by replacing "Black" with "blue," supporters of the Blue Lives Matter countermovement racialize themselves as "blue," and by doing so, they confirm the significance of race and the necessity of a movement focused on demanding the affirmation of Black Lives. Thus, the Blue Lives Matter countermovement can extract virtue associated with racial

victimization and articulate racial fantasies of Black subordination and compliance by repositioning police officers as the real targets of racial discrimination (Longazel, 2021, p. 91).

Similarly, law scholar Frank Rudy Cooper (2020) argued the Blue Lives Matter countermovement cloaked itself in "cop fragility" to shield the police from criticism about its treatment of Black people. Cooper builds on the white fragility theory posited by Robin DiAngelo (2018) to argue police officers, similar to whites avoiding discussions of race and racism, hold two specific beliefs that prevent them from having meaningful conversations about their role in perpetuating the racial oppression of Black people. Firstly, Cooper (2020) found that police officers tend to believe that they are objective arbitrators of the nature of criminal activity and therefore they are the ones that decide the validity of police actions. Secondly, the "bad apples theory," according to Cooper, functions to frame police misconduct as the product of rogue actors and not symptomatic of a flawed institution. The results of cop fragility manifest themselves within the Blue Lives Matter countermovement in three ways: (1) blaming Black people for their victimization; (2) positioning the police as the real victims of racial discrimination; and (3) divorcing the discourse of the Civil Rights movement from its racialized focus on the subjugation of Black people in the United States.

#SayHerName: Black Women's Lives Matter Too

The Black Lives Matter movement, the accompanying #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, and the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation are prominent political interventions created by three queer Black women. As such, the Black Lives Matter movement adds to the historical trajectory of Black women organizing against the intersectional oppressions faced by Black people (Collins, 2008; Lindsey, 2017; Neville & Hamer, 2015). Still, Black feminist writers and Black women activists critiqued the Black Lives Matter movement for its specific focus on the

Black male victims of extrajudicial racialized violence—even though Black women and girls are also victimized by racialized and gendered police violence. More importantly, Black women victims typically do not generate a significant amount of media attention or public outrage. Critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw argues the public and media invisibility of the Black women and girls killed by police is an issue of framing. In her TED Talk, "The Urgency of Intersectionality," Crenshaw (2016) argues,

> When facts do not fit with the available frames, people have a difficult time incorporating new facts into their way of thinking about a problem. These women's names have slipped through our consciousness because there are no frames for us to see them, no frames for us to remember them, no frames for us to hold them. As a consequence, reporters don't lead with them, and politicians aren't encouraged or demanded that they speak to them.
>
> Now, you might ask, why does a frame matter? I mean, after all, an issue that affects black people and an issue that affects women, wouldn't that necessarily include black people who are women and women who are black people? Well, the simple answer is that this is a trickle-down approach to social justice, and many times it just doesn't work. Without frames that allow us to see how social problems impact all the members of a targeted group, many will fall through the cracks of our movements, left to suffer in virtual isolation (3:17).

In 2014, the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) co-founded by critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw and political scientist Luke Charles Harris, in conjunction with the Center for Intersectionality and Policy Studies (CISPS) sought to intervene in the erasure of Black women victims of police violence by launching the #SayHerName hashtag and campaign. When we "say her name," in discussions of police violence that rarely include the stories of Black women and girls killed by the police, according to Crenshaw (2016), we expand the premise of the Black Lives Matter movement by expanding the frame of Black victims of extrajudicial racialized violence to also include Black women.

The #SayHerName hashtag and campaign allowed Sandra Bland's death in police custody to receive social media and traditional legacy media coverage unavailable to the Black

women and girls killed by the police before the hashtag appeared (Borda & Marshall, 2020). In 2015, 28-year-old old Sandra Bland relocated to Texas from Naperville, Illinois to begin a job with her alma mater, Texas Prairie View A & M. On July 10, Bland was pulled over on a rural highway in Texas for failing to signal. She was arrested for disobeying an officer and charged with assault. Three days after her arrest on July 13, Bland was found dead in a Waller County jail cell. Officials ruled Bland's death a suicide by hanging (African American Policy Forum & Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies, 2015; Borda & Marshall, 2020; Ohlheiser & Larimer, 2015). Bland's family rejected the official cause of death and maintained she was killed by the police (Ohlheiser & Larimer, 2015).

May 20, two months before Sandra Bland was killed by the police, AAPF and CISPS hosted a vigil to honor the memory of Black women and girls killed by the police (African American Policy Forum, n.d.).The same week AAPF and CISPS (2015) released the report, *#SayHerName: Resisting Police Brutality Against Women*, to highlight the typically ignored stories of Black women and girls who have lost their lives to the police; to demand the state be held accountable for their deaths; and to promote "a gender-inclusive approach to racial justice that centers all Black lives equally" (p. 2). In their report, AAPF and CISPS (2015) argue,

> None of [the] killing of Black women, nor the lack of accountability for them, have been widely elevated as exemplars of the systemic police brutality that is currently the focus point of mass protest and policy reform efforts. The failure to highlight and demand accountability for the countless Black women killed by police over the past two decades includes Eleanor Bumpurs, Tyisha Miller, LaTanya Haggerty, Margaret Mitchell, Kayla Moore, and Tarika Wilson, to name just a few among scores, leaves Black women unnamed and thus underprotected in the face of their continued vulnerability to racialized police violence (p. 1).

The usage of the #SayHerName hashtag on social media and the prevalence of the #SayHerName campaign shaped the way Black women and girls, including Sandra Bland, were

covered in online and traditional media. The #SayHerName campaign replaced the stereotypical frames used by social media users and journalists to talk about Black women and girls killed by the police with alternative, complex, and nuanced analytical frames that allow for the creation of more comprehensive narratives about the perpetuators and victims of state violence (Borda & Marshall, 2020, p. 138). Before #SayHerName, communication scholars Jennifer L. Borda and Bailey Marshall (2020) argue, mainstream media coverage of Black women killed by the police depended on police spokespersons for an understanding of the facts of the case, obtained few quotes from the victim's family or witnesses, and only minimally referenced the victims in news stories (p. 147). Furthermore, Black women victims of extrajudicial racialized violence were characterized as criminals in the news coverage of their deaths even in the absence of evidence supporting criminal activity or wrongdoing. After #SayHerName became a trending topic on social media, the number of stories about Black women killed by the police began to increase and the coverage of those Black women focused less on stereotypes and more on humanizing the victims.

The Importance of Mothers to the Black Lives Matter Movement

The supporters and opponents of the Black Lives Matter movement focus their rhetoric on visually racialized and gendered public bodies—the victims of police violence and the perpetuators of said violence. Thus, the private embodiment of identity becomes a publicly and visually contested lens through which we can understand the social value of race and gender in a political moment characterized by the neoliberal ideologies of post-racism and post-feminism (Cacho, 2012; Da Costa, 2016; Molina-Guzmán, 2010); Tasker & Negra, 2007). The multiple and competing discourses of race and criminality associated with the Black Lives Matter

movement, spin-off efforts, and counter movements are mediated for popular audiences through social media websites, internet news platforms, and traditional broadcast and cable news outlets in a manner that recruits audiences into making value-laden decisions about the people who are worthy to live and the people who deserve to die (Cacho, 2012). Lisa Marie Cacho (2012), professor of Latinx studies, argues the value attached to life and death functions as a characteristic of white supremacy.

> [T]he "universal" experience of sudden loss and unexpected death is represented through a particular and specific dead body—a body reconstructed and idealized to mobilize the interests and investments of an imagined white fraternity to secure its cultural, political, social, and economic dominance (Cacho, 2012, p. 153).

Thus, the Black mothers who must publicly carry the legacies of the children they lost to extrajudicial racialized violence have the added burden of building the defense of their children within a framework of social value that is both intelligible and palatable to white audiences (Killen, 2018). The work these Black mothers perform to humanize and defend their children within the public sphere is complicated by the gendered expectations of motherhood as a private sphere task performed or managed by white women and the racialized discourses of Black women as unsuitable for the task of mothering children in our own homes (Collins, 2008; Welter, 1966; Wooten & Branch, 2012). In other words, Black mothers must contend with the gendered and racialized discourses that devalue the maternal labor of Black women and the humanity of the Black children in our care.

In the previous section, I argue the #SayHerName campaign and hashtag sought to expand the dominant frame of a Black male victim of racialized police violence constructed by the Black Lives Matter movement to also include Black women and girls who did not survive their encounters with the police. According the AAPF and the CISPS (2015), the mothers of

Black men and boys are often privileged in the discussion of extrajudicial racialized violence because they are the ones who "are often asked to speak only about their fears of losing their sons, brothers, partners, and comrades" (p. 7) even as they maintain leadership roles in social movements. Thus, Sybrina Fulton's and Lesley McSpadden's public defense of their sons' characters and use of their grief to shape their activism relegated them as keepers of the symbolic loss of Black men and boys in *all* Black communities (Al'Uqdah & Adomako, 2018; Killen, 2018). Gender and women's studies scholar Manoucheka Celeste (2018) situates Fulton and McSpadden within the trajectory of Black mothers' public mourning by arguing their mediated representation as "wailing Black women" works to bring attention to systemic injustices and provide space for community healing (p. 111). Furthermore, Celeste (2018), suggests the public mourning of Black mothers can function as liberatory acts that run counter to the stereotype of Black women as irrational and lacking control over their emotions (p. 112). According to Celeste (2018),

> This past decade black mothers have many instances to wail and protest, declare that Black Lives Matter, and demand that we Say Her Name. On February 26, 2012, teenage Trayvon Martin was shot and killed in Sanford, Florida. Months later on November 2, 2013, teenage Renisha McBride was shot and killed in Dearborn Heights, Michigan. On August 9, 2014, teenage Michael Brown was shot and killed by a law enforcement officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Their mothers mourned and wailed publically. The Martin case sparked outrage and protest, and prompted dialogues about racism in the U.S. Martin's death, became a part of a series of killings, which reinvigorated the civil rights movements and ushered in a new generation of social justice activists and strategies. Yet, the cries of their mothers, particularly Michael Brown's mother moments after he was shot, seemingly brought a city to its knees and many of those watching around the world to their feet in protest. Michael's mother's voice joined a chorus of black women who had, and continue to publically mourn and call for justice, and communities responded (p. 124).

Unsurprisingly, Celeste (2018) juxtaposes the contemporary grief of Black mothers like McSpadden with the grief of Mamie Till-Mobley, the mother of Emmett Till—arguably one of

the most famous cases of a mother mourning the loss of her child to extrajudicial racialized violence. Till-Mobley's decision to give Emmett an open-casket funeral highlighted the tension between Black women's private concerns as mothers and the public challenge to the racist structures that cost Black people their lives.

In August 1955, Emmett traveled from Chicago to Mississippi to visit his uncle. Emmett's mother, Mamie, cautioned him not to engage in any activity that could find him the target of "white wrath" (Pool, 2015). A week after Emmett arrived in Mississippi, he was accused of whistling at a white woman named Carolyn Bryant. Four days later, Bryant's husband and another man took Emmett from his uncle's home at gunpoint in the middle of the night. The duo tortured and killed Emmett, then tied a cotton gin fan to Emmett's neck and threw him in the Tallahatchie River. Emmett's body was found on August 31, 1955 (Pool, 2015, p. 414). Till-Mobley defied a local sheriff's order demanding her son's body be immediately buried in Mississippi and insisted that Emmett be returned to her in Chicago for an open-casket funeral. During the four-day memorial, tens of thousands of people viewed the racialized violence enacted on Emmett's battered and bloated body. The funeral was covered extensively by Black print publications and most mainstream news outlets targeting whites (Pool, 2015).

Following the acquittal of Emmett's killers, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) recruited Mamie Till-Mobley to speak about her son's life and death (Al'Uqdah & Adomako, 2018). Till-Mobley's decision to show the impact of racist violence on herself, her child, and the nation acted as one of the catalysts for the Civil Rights Movement (Al'Uqdah & Adomako, 2018). In 2007, Carolyn Bryant recanted her story to historian Timothy Tyson (Weller, 2017). By using Till-Mobley's public mourning to contextualize McSpadden's grief, Celeste (2018) argues the public representation of the "wailing

Black woman" works to sustain the memory of the victims of extrajudicial racialized violence while they continue to fight for justice in their children's names. Thus, the public grief of Black mothers, according to Celeste (2018), allows Black women to speak to both contemporary and historical injustices faced by Black communities, even as she concedes news framing practices work to shape Black grieving mothers as culturally different from the audiences consuming their pain.

The literature on Black maternal grief as activism typically highlights the agency Black mothers use to defend the representation of their children as deviant thugs or themselves as unfit mothers to their own children. Communication scholar Felicia R. Stewart (2017) examined the letters written by Wanda Johnson, the mother of Oscar Grant III who was killed by a transit police officer in Oakland, California and Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin who was killed by a neighborhood watch volunteer in Sanford, Florida to Lesley McSpadden after her son, Michael Brown, Jr. was killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Stewart argues the letters written by Johnson and Fulton use their grief over the deaths of their sons to contextualize the grief McSpadden has after her son was killed. The letters seek to serve as a form of personal comfort for both McSpadden and the letter writers, while at the same time functioning as a call for justice for their slain children. While Johnson, Fulton, and McSpadden exercise their agency to demand the state take accountability for racialized violence, the social justice work they perform as they publicly grieve their children can also be viewed through the dehumanizing lens of the strong Black woman trope. According to Stewart (2017),

> Black mothers have long been viewed as strong, independent, and fierce. Viewed as positive attributes, these qualities can pose a burden for Black women (Parks, 2010) as the perception places an expectation that Black women are simply built to withstand tribulation and turmoil and can navigate easily through the hardships of life. This includes tending to the needs of others, particularly those in their in-group (p. 356).

Nevertheless, the letters Johnson and Fulton wrote to McSpadden challenge the discourse of Black maternal deviance and Black male criminality by constructing a narrative of resistance that reinforced the relationships they all have with their respective children while reframing their deaths as a tool to make a large-scale impact on society.

Human development and psychoeducational studies scholars Shareefah Al'Uqdah and Frances Adomako (2018) and political scientist Kimberly Killen (2018) focus on how the Mothers of the Movement, a group of Black mothers who have lost children to gun violence, used their grief to fuel their social activism and personal healing at the 2016 Democratic National Convention (DNC). Al'Uqdah and Adomako (2018) argue, the Mothers of the Movement highlighted the trauma experienced by Black mothers that is often marginalized in mainstream discourses about motherhood. Through their public mourning, Al'Uqdah and Adomako (2018) suggest the display of public grief by the Mothers of the Movement works to provide a sense of agency to each of the individual women grieving the loss of their children which can translate to a shared sense of agency within marginalized communities. Killen (2018) agrees with the assertion Al'Uqdah and Adomako (2018) make about the rhetorical purpose of the Mothers of the Movement's remarks at the 2016 DNC. Killen (2018) contends the Mothers of the Movement did indeed ground their rhetorical appeals for justice for their slain children in a sense of agency afforded to them by the political traditions of Black women using their positionality as mothers for the purpose of social justice (2008). When the Mothers of the Movement used their time to call "for stronger gun laws and changes to the relationship between the police and marginalized communities [they] refuse[d] to accept fault for their children's death, pointing [instead] to the broader systemic issue of racism" (p. 3). Yet, the appeals made by

the Mothers of the Movement were marginalized and denigrated because Black women do not fit within the racialized and gendered expectations of motherhood in the United States. According to Killen (2018), the Mothers of the Movement were not entitled to public acknowledgement by the nation because they were the "bad" mothers of "dead criminals" and deserved to be characterized as such (p. 5). Still, the Mothers of the Movement used their 2016 DNC appearance to refuse the characterization of themselves as bad mothers to deviant children by challenging the discourses of motherhood which defined a good mother by her race, gender, class, and/or citizenship status. It is important to note, however, there is limited evidence of a formal relationship between the Mothers of the Movement and any specific organization operating under the banner of Black Lives Matter. Yet, the work performed by the women who make up the Mothers of the Movement, both collectively and as individuals, highlights the tension between Black maternal grief and the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood that deem us unworthy of that grief. By mourning publicly and demanding justice for their dead children, the Mothers of the Movement centralize the significance of motherhood to Black women during this contemporary moment of racial reckoning defined by the Black Lives Matter movement.

In this chapter, I examine how Sybrina Fulton and Lesley McSpadden, two women who have made public appearances under the Mothers of the Movement banner, are represented in Internet news articles and videos about the deaths of their children. I am spoiled for choice of grieving mothers available for analysis because extrajudicial racialized murder is a systemic issue affecting the lives of Black people historically and contemporarily. Yet, I focus specifically on Fulton and McSpadden because their sons' deaths served as the catalysts for the Black Lives Matter hashtag, the BLMGNF, and the overarching Black Lives Matter movement. On February

26, 2012, Sybrina Fulton's 17-year-old son, Trayvon Martin was killed while visiting his father in a gated community in Sanford, Florida. Martin walked to a nearby 7-Eleven to get an Arizona Iced Tea and a pack of Skittles. George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer patrolling the community, pursued Martin on his walk back to his father's home. After Zimmerman called 911 to report a suspicious person in the area, he continued to go after Martin even though he was instructed by the 911 operator to end his pursuit. Other 911 callers reported a wrestling match on the ground, a scream for help, and a single gunshot. Martin was killed during his encounter with Zimmerman (Weinstein & The Mojo News Team, 2012). The first appearance of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag in 2013 was a response to Zimmerman's acquittal of the murder of Martin (Garza, 2016). Fulton started The Trayvon Martin Foundation with Trayvon's father, Tracy Martin, and son Jahvaris Fulton "to bring awareness to ending senseless gun violence" (The Trayvon Martin Foundation, n.d.).

Lesley McSpadden's 18-year-old son, Michael Brown, Jr. was killed by Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014. According to *The New York Times,* Ferguson police officials claim Wilson confronted Brown, Jr., who was walking in the middle of the street with his companion Dorian Johnson, to enforce a jaywalking violation. Brown, Jr., and Johnson ignored Wilson's command to walk on the sidewalk. Brown, Jr. and Wilson engaged in a physical altercation that involved a struggle for the gun inside of a police car. Witnesses say Brown, Jr. put his hands up to inform Wilson he was unarmed, but Wilson shot him an additional five times (Robles & Bosman, 2014). Brown, Jr.'s body was left out on the street for four and a half hours while the police blocked McSpadden from receiving information about her child (McSpadden & LeFlore, 2016). Later, Ferguson police leaked video of Brown, Jr. appearing to commit a strong-arm of cigarillos from a nearby store to justify his death, even though Wilson

had no knowledge of Brown, Jr. being associated with a robbery (Hennessy-Fiske et al., 2014). The decision to not indict Wilson for murder sparked weeks of protest in Ferguson and increased the visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement and the BLMGNF (Garza, 2016). McSpadden created The Michael O.D. Brown We Love Our Sons & Daughters Foundation in honor of her son. The organization has four purposes: advocating for justice; improving health outcomes; advancing education; and strengthening family (Michael O.D. Brown We Love Our Sons & Daughters Foundation, n.d.). McSpadden also unsuccessfully ran for city council in 2019 (Eligon, 2019).

Trayvon Martin's 2012 death made national news after social media brought high profile attention to the case. As a result, mainstream news outlets rushed to cover Martin's family, the political implications of extrajudicial racialized murder of Black people during the tenure of the first Black president, and the cultural and racial context of Martin's death in a nation who imagines itself as beyond the issues of race and racism. The death of Michael Brown, Jr. in 2014 prompted a similar response. Media coverage of Martin's and Brown's deaths focused heavily on the victims and their accused murderers, but it also depended on familiar racialized and gendered tropes of Black motherhood to tell the story. Martin's and Brown, Jr.'s respective mothers, Sybrina Fulton and Lesley McSpadden were pulled away from the private sphere task of mothering their children to defend the characters of their children in the public sphere (Tapia, 2011). There are several reasons why both Fulton and McSpadden were charged with carrying the political burdens of their children's deaths within a mediated landscape of 24-hour news cycles and content hungry social media feeds that were traditionally unkind to Black women. Firstly, Black motherhood remains a significant source of political angst for conservative politicians. Secondly, Black motherhood is a key discursive tool used by media to ascribe social

value to Black communities (Collins, 2005, 2008; Killen, 2018; Molina-Guzmán, 2010). Finally, Black women throughout history were charged with maintaining the respectability of the Black race by engaging in service work for churches, in our communities, and in social justice movements (Higginbotham, 1994; Lindsey, 2017; Thompson, 2009). As symbolic and visual representations of their specific children's characters and a more general Black identity (Tapia, 2011), Fulton and McSpadden engage in what Zoé Samudzi and William C. Anderson (2018) call "the dehumanizing mental gymnastics of appealing to white notions of innocence and perfect victimhood" (p. 77). Thus, the dual roles Fulton and McSpadden embody, as mothers who must represent their individual children while also standing in for all Black mothers necessitates an examination of how their representations are deployed in mainstream media to challenge and reinforce the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood in a contemporary moment of racial struggle facilitated by their children's deaths.

The deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, Jr. have occupied a significant space within the literature about extrajudicial racialized violence as a cause of Black death both historically and within the so-called post-racial moment defined by the tenure of Barack Obama as the first Black President of the United States (Curry, 2014; Hanchard, 2012; Noble, 2014). The tension between Obama as a symbol of racial progress and the numerous Black people killed at the hands of the state, according to Taylor (2016) highlights the limitations of Black electoral politics as a solution to systemic racism. Other research uses the deaths of Martin and Brown, Jr. to contextualize Black Lives Matter as a political moment and a cultural movement (Lebron, 2017; Taylor, 2016). What is rarely considered, however, is how grieving mothers of Black people killed by extrajudicial racialized violence are represented in the immediate aftermath of their children's deaths. Instead, Black mothers are discussed in ways that centralize a

relationship to a larger movement for social justice and position us as proxies for the criminality and lack of social value for Black children. Likewise, Black mothers who have lost their children to extrajudicial racialized violence are examined through the public embodiment of their private grief (Al'Uqdah & Adomako, 2018; Killen, 2018). By focusing on how Fulton and McSpadden are represented in internet news stories and videos about their children directly after their deaths, I intervene in a discourse of Black motherhood that claims Black mothers are responsible for raising criminal children who are of no value to a United States seeking to deny racism, or we are regulated to acting as symbols and activists for a larger social cause.

My analysis focuses on Fulton and McSpadden instead of their children, because the mediated representations of Fulton's and McSpadden's private maternal relationships with their children, their public displays of grief, and the elevation of both women as symbols of racial injustice and/or the cultural problems within Black communities are significant to understanding how Black womanhood and motherhood shape and are shaped by the neoliberal ideologies of post-racism and post-feminism. Specifically, the examination of the discursive framing of Fulton and McSpadden as grieving mothers of Black sons perceived as criminals, complicates their mothers' ability to effectively represent their children's characters within the public sphere or function as exemplars of the extrajudicial racialized violence influencing the lives of Black Lives who do not attract the same level of media attention. Furthermore, the examination of mainstream news on the Internet—a key element of the current public sphere—provides a framework for understanding the larger discourse about Black women and mothers. More importantly, my analysis allows for a critique of how news media coverage reinforces narratives grounded in white patriarchal ideologies that frame Black motherhood as responsible for Black male behavior by shifting the political, social, and cultural responsibility away from structural

racism (Collins, 2005, 2008). Ultimately, this chapter argues the media's framing of both Fulton and McSpadden, in a relationship to the respective deaths of their sons Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, Jr., works to reify the neoliberal ethos of personal responsibility by using them as signifiers of a deviant motherhood that resulted in the deaths of their children. To that end, I will examine the use of Black motherhood as a tool of political resistance within the context of the private/public motherwork of Black women. Next, I focus on the social and political devaluation of Black motherhood by considering the trajectory of the welfare queen controlling image and its impact on the maternal conditions of Black women resulting in the criminalization of Black mothers and by proxy, our children.

Motherwork as Political Resistance

Black motherhood is a significant site of study within a contemporary moment of racialized struggle characterized by the Black Lives Matter movement. In particular, the ways in which Sybrina Fulton and Lesley McSpadden use their grief to publicly demand the state be held responsible for the extrajudicial racialized violence that killed their children (Al'Uqdah & Adomako, 2018; Killen, 2018) highlights the importance of motherhood to the political activism of Black women (Collins, 2008). In "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood," Patricia Hill Collins (1994) uses the term "motherwork" to describe Black mothers' efforts to ensure the survival of ourselves, our children, and our communities in the face of economic exploitation. By situating the activism of Black women within the political context of motherwork, Collins (1994) challenges the gendered dichotomies present in the social construction of work and family as separate spheres (p. 46). Later, in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment,* Collins (2008) argues motherwork functions as a political consciousness held by Black women as they made meaning

of our lived experiences performing maternal labor in the "culturally distinct" Black and white spaces. Black women's movement both between and within a framework of white maternal logic that deemed motherhood a private sphere task devoid of concerns about economic security, physical safety, and maintenance of our cultural identity, and a Black maternal experience that did not prioritize using our maternal position to maintain power within a white heteronormative family structure fueled Black women activists' use of motherwork to address the "social institutions that frame their lives" (Collins, 1994, p. 53).

Motherwork, for Black women, has two major areas of concern: ensuring group survival within the institutional structures that govern the daily lives of Black people and the disassembly of those oppressive systems (Collins, 2008). On one hand, Black women used motherwork to create "Black female spheres of influence that resist oppressive structures by undermining them" to ensure group survival (Collins, 2008, p. 219). Black women activists working within existing systems crafted political strategies by using the lived experiences of Black people to create "independent and oppositional identities" with the goal of fostering a larger group consciousness. On the other hand, Black women formally organized against the institutional norms that have historically and contemporarily marginalized Black people. According to Collins (2008),

> Many [Black] women begin their political activism as advocates for African-Americans, the poor, or less frequently, women. But over time Black women activists come to see oppressions as interconnected and the need for broad-based political action. Rather than joining a range of organizations, each devoted to single-purpose issues, many Black women activists either start new organizations or work to transform the institutions in which they are situated (p. 233).

As such, the intersectional and interlocking oppressions based on race, gender, and class experienced by Black women provides us with a unique perspective for understanding the relationships between those systems (Collins, 2008). More importantly, the way a particular

Black woman chooses to perform motherwork is influenced by the position she holds in her community; she may choose to work within the system to ensure group survival, or she may decide to challenge oppressive institutions to dismantle them, or both.

Throughout history, Black women have consistently engaged with motherwork as the basis for activism in our communities. Enslaved Black women used their position as mothers to advocate for lighter workloads, to obtain extra rations for their families, and to resist the sexual advancement of their white male captors (Hine, 1979). In the early 20th century, Black women fought for women's voting rights because they believed it would help ensure the survival of their families and communities while challenging Black women's exclusion from the suffrage conversation. Yet, in lieu of full enfranchisement, Black women also fought for Black men to receive the right to vote because they believed it would still provide their families with access to a tool of United States citizenship (Lindsey, 2017). In the 1960s and 1970s, Black mothers receiving welfare assistance organized a lesser-known welfare rights movement existing alongside the Civil Rights and feminist movements. According to communication and women's studies scholar Mary E. Triece, the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) was created by Black mothers on welfare to intervene in the prevailing discourses of welfare reform that deemed Black women unworthy of governmental assistance. In *Tell it Like it Is: Women in the National Welfare Rights Movement,* Triece (2013) maintains

> Welfare legislation depended on the image of the "undeserving" poor—chief among that group, the "employable black woman"—in order to maintain a ready pool of low paid labor. Through demands for decent jobs with fair pay, activists redefined themselves as (potential) members of the workforce, and they challenged black women's regulation to low paying domestic positions (p. 69).

When Black mothers referenced their lived experiences within the welfare rights debate, they emphasized their credibility as caretakers for their children and paid workers. Thus, NWRO

challenged the public/private dichotomy that marginalized Black mothers' position within the institution of motherhood by advocating for welfare policies that would represent the economic realities of those living within the system.

In the 1980s, Black women politicized their grief to organize against police brutality in New York, doing work historian Keisha N. Blain (2018) considers a precursor to the contemporary organizing of the Mothers of the Movement. On October 29, 1984, 66-year-old Eleanor Bumpurs was killed by police officers seeking to evict her from her Bronx apartment (Blain, 2018; Raab, 1984). The police broke into Bumpurs' apartment after she refused to open the door and shot her twice with a 12-gauge shotgun. According to *The New York Times,* police believed Bumpurs was mentally ill and refusing to comply with an order to drop the knife she was holding. The family denied the allegations that Bumpurs was mentally ill or physically able to attack police officers (African American Policy Forum & Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies, 2015; Raab, 1984). The officers who killed Bumpurs were acquitted of her murder (Connelly & Douglas, 1987). In 1990, the Bumpurs estate settled with the New York City Police Department for $200,000 (African American Policy Forum & Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies, 2015).

Almost a year later, on June 12, 1985, 17-year-old Edmund Perry was killed by a plainclothes police officer. Perry was accused of assaulting and attempting to rob the officer. Perry's family disputed the claims made by police asserting Edmund "had no criminal record and no reason to commit a robbery" (Buder, 1985, paragraph 3). The family settled with Perry's mother, Veronica for $75,000 in 1989 (McFadden, 1989). After losing their loved ones to extrajudicial racialized violence, Veronica Perry and Eleanor Bumpurs' daughter, Mary, organized to end police brutality in New York and across the country. Specifically, Bumpurs and

Perry brought attention to the deaths of their family members and challenged the racialized stereotypes used to justify the deaths of Eleanor Bumpurs and Edmund Perry through their writing, public appearances, and mobilization of the tools of electoral politics and mass protests (Blain, 2018). Mary Bumpurs and Veronica Perry linked the New York City Police Department to the Ku Klux Klan, "to emphasize the historical legacies of racist violence in the United States and the role law enforcement played in maintaining it" (Blain, 2018, p. 110). Unfortunately, Veronica Perry died from a heart condition on October 4, 1991, and Mary Bumpurs went into seclusion after her settlement with the City of New York. Bumpurs continued to support efforts to end police violence, even though the police officer who killed her mother was never held accountable (Blain, 2018).

The Welfare Queen as a Signifier for the Devaluation of Black Motherhood

The controlling images of the jezebel and the mammy are vestiges of slavery used to construct a discourse of Black mothers as unfit to care for their children, but perfectly capable of caring for white children (Collins, 2008; Roberts, 1997). The welfare queen controlling image uses the racialized and gendered logic that constrained the lives of Black women and mothers during enslavement to deny us equal access to the government services needed to care for our families. Specifically, the controlling image of the welfare queen works to devalue Black mothers and the children they lost to extrajudicial racialized violence. As such, the welfare queen controlling image is significant to understanding the work Sybrina Fulton and Lesley McSpadden perform to defend their children's characters in public and to hold the state accountable for their children's deaths. My examination of the representations of Fulton and McSpadden in news articles and videos available online after the deaths of their sons, intervenes within the prevalent discourses of Black mothers as morally, culturally, and sexually deviant by

situating them within a historical and contemporary framework that devalues the maternal labor of Black women.

In *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty,* Roberts (1997) argues the construction and representation of Black women's sexual reproduction has social and political implications for the health of Black women and the social welfare of Black families. Roberts situates Black women's sexuality within the historical and contemporary attempts to control and regulate racialized reproduction, behavior, and social structures. During the period of Black enslavement, Black women's sexual reproduction and motherhood was valued only for its ability to provide a source of free labor. Once legalized slavery ended, the sexual reproduction of Black women became less valued. Thus, the governmental legislation of social programs created rules (and exceptions to those rules) which denied Black women access to family planning services and welfare benefits based on the stereotype that Black women produce socially unfit criminal children (Feldstein, 2000; Roberts, 1997). In 1965, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan argued in *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,* more commonly known as The Moynihan Report, Black children were the victims of a disordered family structure led by overly dominant mothers who emasculate the fathers of their children by working and leading their families. The consequence of the disordered Black family, according to Moynihan, is Black welfare dependency and confinement to a cycle of poverty (Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965).

As a presidential candidate, Ronald Reagan added to the discourse of deviant Black motherhood by popularizing the controlling image of the welfare queen (Bezusko, 2013; Floyd-Thomas, 2016). Reagan (The Washington Star, 1976) often described the archetypal welfare queen as a woman from Chicago with "80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards…and

collecting veteran's benefits on four nonexisting deceased husbands and…she's got Medicaid, getting food stamps and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income alone is over $150,000" (paragraph 4). As POTUS, Reagan's "War on Welfare" made use of the welfare queen trope to construct Black mothers as undeserving of governmental assistance because Black families were unwilling to disentangle from the culture of poverty posited by Moynihan (Bezusko, 2013; Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965). The War on Welfare used the stereotype of the welfare queen to blame Black mothers for the criminal activities of their children by tying the availability of social safety net programs to a two-parent nuclear family structure the government believed was lacking in Black communities (Bezusko, 2013). According to English scholar Adriane Bezusko (2013),

> The non-nuclear family was increasingly associated with anxiety, frustration, and dysfunction in order to explain the persistence of inequality. So-called "matriarchs" who remained on welfare during the rise of neoliberal economic policies were portrayed as culturally deviant for maintaining female-headed households and creating civil unrest among men. Their sons were characterized as unsupervised gang bangers (p. 47).

Women's gender and sexuality scholar, Julia S. Jordan-Zachery (2010) extends the use of the welfare queen controlling image to consider how it manifested itself in the debate about the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRAWORA) signed into law by President Bill Clinton to fulfill his campaign promise to "end welfare as we know it" (Carcasson, 2006, p. 655). Jordan-Zachery (2010) contends the political debate about the deconstruction of welfare in the 1990s was dependent on racial and gendered hierarchies that characterized women based on state's desire to use them for low-wage labor. As such, welfare became an institution grounded in racialized and gendered discourses that positioned Black women's sexuality as an immoral threat to society.

> [T]he image of the *Welfare Queen* is embedded in many stories of what is wrong with the welfare system. One of which is the black woman's relation to the labor force. According to the cult of true womanhood, a "lady" was not expected to participate in the paid labor force (this notion has multiple levels of inconsistencies that ebb and flow as a result of changes in the economy). A lady was one who remained in the private sphere dependent on the economic support of her husband. Due to the troupes of gender and race, this position was not available to black women…In the event that they were allowed to perform in this manner, the black women would too closely resemble white women. (Jordan-Zachery, 2010, p. 94).

As Jordan-Zachery (2010) illustrates, the welfare queen stereotype acts as a tool to position Black women as seeking access to entitlements that they do not deserve because they are not middle-class white women. Therefore, the welfare queen trope is a political tool used to devalue Black motherhood within the larger populous by positioning Black women and mothers as the immoral other.

The welfare queen controlling image, according to political scientist Ange-Marie Hancock (2003) moves beyond the application of passive stereotypes to the construction of a public identity—or a common language used to talk across academic disciplines and areas of expertise. The language of public identities is distributed within the public sphere using media discourses; and used by citizens when interacting with the government—thus, negatively influencing political decision-making by acting as an ideological "bridge between the public sphere and the individual citizen" (p. 34). The welfare queen public identity acts as a framing device for the discussion of public policy goals that appear racially neutral on the surface. As such, the construction of the welfare queen as a lazy, overly fertile, abuser of government systems and a drain on national resources who is a part of a lineage of single-parent families led by women (Hancock, 2003, p. 44), cannot be separated from the political goal of rolling back social safety net programs. The intentional deployment of the welfare queen public identity in political discourse "conflates a person's public action—receiving government benefits—with her

private identity (Hancock, 2004, p. 12), thereby justifying cuts to governmental services and forcing organizations who support under-resourced Black mothers "to educate the powerful" (Limbert & Bullock, 2005) instead of enacting policy that could provide Black families with more resources. Likewise, states with a demographic of people living below the poverty line that do not match the racialized and gendered stereotype of a welfare queen must challenge the myth that only bad Black women are on the public dole (Ernst, 2007) to maintain their stake in the welfare policy debate. Furthermore, the internalization of the welfare queen public identity by Black people allows for punitive welfare policies to remain unchallenged (Hancock, 2003; Hancock, 2004).

Media assists in the justification of restrictive social welfare policies by replicating a schema of deviance that contributes to the larger discourses of Black motherhood in popular culture. In a study about the representations of Black women on welfare in television news programs, political scientist Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. (1999) argues journalists adhere to racialized and gendered narrative scripts when reporting stories about welfare recipients. According to Gilliam, Jr. (1999), the narrative script used by journalists presents the public image of the welfare queen as a poor Black woman who is collecting welfare benefits because she chose to do so, not because she needs those benefits to support her family. In his study, Gilliam, Jr., (1999), showed subjects a news story that featured either a Black welfare recipient or a white welfare recipient. He found that viewers of the story featuring the Black woman were more likely to hold negative beliefs about Black women and mothers.

Communication scholars Rick Busselle, Alina Rybovolova, and Brian Wilson (2004) argue people are more likely to accept the mediated representation of Black mothers as welfare queens because "viewers are not motivated to think critically because [it] may interfere with

following the narrative, emotional involvement, and the pleasure of the experience" (p. 372). In *American Pietàs: Visions of Race, Death and the Maternal,* Ruby C. Tapia (2011) examines how the intersection of racialized and gendered stereotypes present in representations of maternal figures in visual and textual media work to provide a context for the discourses of Black motherhood. Tapia (2011) claims,

> [T]here is something far more complex, more insidious, and more fundamental to the racialized visions of the maternal than the crude visual stereotyping that in popular culture makes African American women crack addicts, Latinas hypersexual, and middle- and upper-class white women simply mothers would indicate. Engaging with this network to move beyond even the crucial acknowledgement of those experiences and representations of history, memory, and maternal experiences that racial atrocities have made fundamentally 'different' from marginalized communities. To engage in the racialization of history, memory, and the maternal in visual discourse—as both representation and practice—is to begin with the face…that the very categories of woman and mother do not exist, and have never existed, independently of race (p. 22).

Furthermore, the mediated discourses of the welfare queen are unconsciously reproduced on an individual level (Hancock, 2003) in a manner that may influence the self-concept of Black people who internalized the messages of their own cultural deviance and influence the mainstream media consumer's understanding of Blackness if they have little to no contact with Black people (Fujioka, 1999). Thus, the public identity of the welfare queen is a significant contribution to the discourses of Black motherhood because, it provides a framework for understanding how Fulton's and McSpadden's public defense of their children's characters functions within a mediated landscape that constructs Black mothers as responsible for inappropriately parenting criminal children.

Theoretical Frameworks

In this chapter, I use a Black feminist cultural studies approach to analyze how Sybrina Fulton and Lesley McSpadden are represented in online news articles and videos after their sons

were killed by extrajudicial racialized violence to foreground the lived experience and agency of Black mothers within a mediated landscape that often constructs Black mothers as morally, culturally, and sexually deviant. (Collins, 2005; Roberts, 1997). Specifically, Black feminist scholarship pays particular attention to how Black women's sexuality and maternal labor are used in media to reproduce the intersectional marginalization of Black women and mothers based on race, gender, and class (Bailey, 2021; Collins, 2005). I use a Black feminist lens in my examination of the discourses of Black motherhood replicated by mainstream media to challenge the position of Black mothers within popular culture by intervening within the ideological and political construction of Black motherhood as deviant. Finally, using a cultural studies approach to consider the complexities within a relationship between media discourse and the social body allows for the theoretical positioning of Black motherhood as central to U.S. discourses of "the public." This chapter engages with Stuart Hall's (1997) framework of representation to examine Black motherhood in the contemporary cultural movement characterized by the Black Lives Matter movement. Hall's framework for understanding representation allows for an interrogation of the stereotypes of Black motherhood enacted on Sybrina Fulton and Lesley McSpadden. More importantly, the controlling images of Black womanhood fuel the mediated representations of Black motherhood used by the public to make meaning of Black communities (van Dijk, 1987). Furthermore, the meaning made of the discourses of Black motherhood has social and political implications on the policies that influence the public generally and Black mothers specifically (Roberts, 1997). Therefore, I use these frameworks to foreground the body politic of Black mothers in the public sphere to examine our mediated representations not as normalized stereotypes, but as a valid and legitimate area of research within the fields of media studies, cultural studies, and motherhood studies.

The representation of Black women in media depends on racialized and gendered frames designed to reinforce a narrative serving the political and economic interests of media conglomerates. The framework for examining Black women's and mothers' representations in news stories is limited because gender representations typically focus on white women (Rakow & Kranich, 1991) and racialized representations typically focus on Black men (Meyers, 2013). When Black women and mothers are represented in news coverage, we are typically represented as spectators, witnesses, or crime victims (Meyers, 2013). Rakow and Kranich (1991) argue, white women are included in news stories to reinforce a homogenous female viewpoint designed to examine how public news influences the private sphere of the home. Furthermore, white male political domination is supported by the representation of white women in news because they neither act as authentic and authoritative subjects speaking of their own experiences, nor are their private sphere experiences represented as concerns of the public sphere. Rakow and Kranich (1991) consider how women are represented in news with an analysis of 46 stories in which women were central to understanding the meaning of the story. They found women were brought in to discuss the private consequences of public decisions, or to speak for "unusual cases, such as feminism" (p. 17). However, because all women are supposed to be the same, white women are the only ones that are allowed to speak for all women. Significantly, the construction of the discourse of Black motherhood, because when white women become the sign for all women, Black women are immediately excluded from the subject. Yet, Black women get caught in a double bind and when they contradict the social order, Black women are forced to represent the entire community. Thus, the news framing practices are significant to understanding the discourses of Black motherhood replicated within the mediated representations of Sybrina Fulton and Lesley McSpadden because Black women and mothers are at a disadvantage when getting

their stories told and respected. When Black women are not considered women in relationship to the media, it then becomes difficult to make the leap that they are mothers.

Discursive Themes of Black Motherhood on Display

Sybrina Fulton and Lesley McSpadden became prominent news topics and interview subjects after the deaths of their sons Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, Jr. While processing their grief, Fulton and McSpadden endured questions about their sons' characters, responded to updates on the status of criminal charges for their children's killers, were followed during funeral planning, and asked to calm protestors. After Martin was killed on February 26, 2012, Fulton was subjected to media scrutiny from news outlets seeking to examine the life and death of a Black male teenager in a manner palatable to white audiences. Two years later, on August 9, 2014, McSpadden was also required to stand in the media spotlight to contextualize the circumstances of her son's death within a political landscape that continues to view Black lives as unvaluable. Fulton's and McSpadden's use of motherwork, to publicly defend their children's characters and to advocate for the state to take accountability for their children's deaths, is complicated by the unwillingness of the United States to engage with the issues of race and racism. In my examination of Fulton and McSpadden in online news stories and videos about the deaths of their sons, I have located three representational themes reinforcing the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood: (1) inappropriate maternal figures; (2) Black maternal grief as a spectacle; (3) dehumanizing symbolism. Using these three themes, I argue mainstream news renders the motherhood of Fulton and McSpadden both invisible and hypervisible by forcing them to separate themselves from their grief to assert the value of their children's lives.

Inappropriate Maternal Figures

The first theme, "inappropriate maternal figures," highlights the construction of Black women as bad mothers whose cultural deviancy and inappropriate maternal supervision prevents us from being proper role models to our children. Journalistic focus on the ways in which Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, Jr. may have engaged in problematic or criminal behaviors before they were killed, forced Fulton and McSpadden to defend their children's characters, and by proxy, their maternal labor in the public sphere. In short, the shift away from the culpability of Martin's and Brown, Jr.'s killers to the roles the victims may have played in their deaths reinforces the discourse of Black mothers as responsible for the creation of criminal children. Media reports on incidents unrelated to the deaths of Martin and Brown, Jr. forced Fulton and McSpadden to re-shift the focus back to the issue of the extrajudicial racialized violence that took their children's lives. Fulton responded to reports implying Martin's school suspension for marijuana possession a week before he was killed was related to his death (Robles, 2012; Tama, 2012). Likewise, McSpadden addressed reports that Brown, Jr. committed strong-arm robbery minutes before he was killed, even though the officer who shot her son was unaware a robbery had even occurred (Botelho & Lemon, 2014; Crump, 2014; Eligon, 2014).Thus, the framing of Martin as a person engaging in problematic behaviors in school and the framing of Brown, Jr. as a hardened criminal works to cast doubt on the culpability of their killers; but it also works to reproduce the discourse of Black mothers as perpetually creating children who refuse to adhere to the dominant social order.

Communication scholar Marian Meyers (2004) argues news reporting strategies support "the values, beliefs and norms of a ruling elite that wields social, economic and political power within social formations" making "its ideological underpinnings appear natural, normal and

common-sensical" (p. 96). News reporting builds public support for issues elite groups are concerned with by hiding conservative ideologies under a cloak of neutrality. Specifically, the use of neutral language in news reports functions to delegitimize arguments that run counter to the norms and desires of the economic and racial elite (Meyers, 2004). Therefore, when interviewers ask Fulton and McSpadden to consider what their sons "could have possibly done" to cause their own deaths, they are using the tool of neutrality to shift the blame away from the systemic racism that killed Martin and Brown, Jr. to their mothers.

On March 19, 2012, Fulton and her attorney, Benjamin Crump, were interviewed on *The Today Show* by Matt Lauer. The questions used by Lauer were couched in a neutrality that allowed him to suggest that Martin was engaging in criminal behavior at the time of his death and Fulton was to blame because she was unaware of her son's propensity for violence.

> Matt Lauer: I know you've asked yourself this question a thousand times. What could have happened that night between these two men, your son and Mr. Zimmerman that resulted in this tragedy? When you think of any possible scenario, is there one you can come up with in your mind where your son actually tried to harm that neighborhood volunteer?
>
> Sybrina Fulton: No, I cannot. I just can say that I'm pretty sure my son tried to get away. He didn't know who this guy was. He's seen him as a stranger, so he was trying to, just get away from the situation.
>
> Matt Lauer: Anything in your son's past, Ms. Fulton, any run ins with the law, anything going on in his life at the time of the shooting that might have had him in a different state of mind—an agitated state?
>
> Sybrina Fulton: No, he was never agitated. He had never had a run in with the law. He was mild mannered. He was a nice kid.
>
> Matt Lauer: When you, and I know you didn't want to listen to the tape this morning, you have heard it, but you asked us not to play it for you this morning, but you heard Mr. Zimmerman at one point on that tape saying about your son, he's up to no good. There's something wrong with this guy. What do you think he was reacting to?

> Sybrina Fulton: He was acting, reacting to the color of his skin. He committed no crime. My son wasn't doing anything but walking on the sidewalk and I just don't understand why this situation got out of control (Today News, 2012, 0:10).

In her interview with Lauer, Fulton engages in a type of public motherwork that resists the narrative of her son as a criminal. And in doing so, Fulton also challenges her construction as an inappropriate maternal figure. Yet, the interview uses the journalistic technique of neutrality to reinforce the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood as deviant in order to critique the need to interrogate the extrajudicial racialized violence that kills Black people on a systemic level.

After Michael Brown Jr. was killed by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson, St. Louis County officials did not immediately release the name of the officer to the public. Instead, officials released surveillance photos and video that appeared to show Brown, Jr. robbing a convenience store (Eligon, 2014). Brown, Jr.'s family responded to the leak in an official statement released by their attorneys:

> Michael Brown's family is beyond outraged at the devious way the police chief has chosen to disseminate [a] piece [of mis] information in a manner intended to assassinate the character of their son, following such a brutal assassination of his person in broad daylight.
>
> There is nothing based on the facts that have been placed before us that can justify the execution style murder of their child by this police officer as he held his hands up, which is the universal sign of surrender.
>
> The prolonged release of the officer's name and then the subsequent alleged information regarding a robbery is the reason why the family and the local community have such distrust for the local law enforcement agencies.
>
> It is no way transparent to release the still photographs alleged to be Michael Brown and refuse to release the photographs of the officer that executed him.
>
> The police strategy of attempting to blame the victim will not divert our attention, from being focused on the autopsy, ballistics report and the trajectory of the bullets that caused Michael's death and will demonstrate to the world this brutal execution of an unarmed teenager (Crump, 2014).

Still, McSpadden's grief was publicly invalidated by framing Brown, Jr.'s death as justifiable by introducing the standards of the police use of force. On August 19, 2014, McSpadden appeared on *The Today Show* with Brown, Jr.'s father, Michael Brown, Sr., and their attorney Benjamin Crump. During their interview with Matt Lauer, Lauer constructed his line of questioning to invalidate the outrage about the extrajudicial racialized murder of Brown, Jr. with his focus on the legal norms which could lead one to believe the shooting was in fact justifiable. Specifically, Lauer asks Attorney Crump,

> Let me ask you about that force. And Ben, let me bring you in on this one. The St. Louis County prosecutor, Mr. McCullough said "police shootings are different from other shootings because officers by law are authorized to use force." And he said, "you have to determine whether the level of force in each case was appropriate or excessive." Ben, based on what you saw in that autopsy performed by Dr. Baden, are you confident that this was excessive (Today News, 2014, 1:57)?

Lauer's choice of questions for McSpadden, Brown, Sr., and Ben Crump were shaped to provide audience with a context for understanding how and why Brown, Jr. was killed. Yet, the interview used the language of neutrality as a cover for the deployment of the racialized and gendered scripts associated with Black maternal deviance to provide audiences with the answer. When Lauer centralizes the perspective of law enforcement while discussing Brown, Jr.'s death with McSpadden and her family, he reproduces the discourse of Black motherhood that denies Black women's ability to teach our children appropriate behavior. Since Black mothers are ill-equipped to teach our children how to behave within acceptable social norms, it is up to the police to physically regulate Black children's behavior—even if that regulation results in death.

Black Maternal Grief as a Spectacle

The second theme, "Black maternal grief as a spectacle," considers how the grief experienced by Fulton and McSpadden are rendered both invisible and hypervisible within the

larger mediated landscape. In particular, the repetition of Black death and pain, including Black maternal grief, as a form of mediated entertainment on television and social media desensitizes audiences to the plight of Black communities experiencing extrajudicial racialized violence (Celeste, 2018; Gray, 2013). According to sociologist Herman Gray (2013), "[t]he repetition of such stories may work more often to reinforce the normative ideals of white middle class circumstance rather than produce points of identification and empathy" (p. 256). As such, I argue news outlets reporting on and interviewing Fulton and McSpadden sought to universalize the experience of mothers mourning the deaths of their children while reinforcing the discourse of Black mothers as culturally and racially different from the mainstream audiences consuming their pain. Fulton's and McSpadden's grief can act as an entryway for understanding the material consequences of the extrajudicial racialized violence experienced by Black people (Gray, 2013), yet news reporting often forsakes a nuanced examination of racial justice and gun control for the "news ratings, increased advertising, and social media traffic" accompanying the media spectacle of Black death (Noble, 2014, p. 12). Furthermore, journalistic focus on Fulton's and McSpadden's maternal grief derails a larger conversation about race and racism in the United States by shifting the narrative away from the systematic nature of extrajudicial racialized murder of Black people to the individual experiences of Black mothers whose children died under similar circumstances.

After Martin and Brown, Jr. were killed, Fulton and McSpadden were repeatedly asked to recount the experience of learning their children were killed and publicly reveal the strategies they were using to cope with the increased media attention they were experiencing while they were planning their children's funerals. News stories provided little context for understanding what it means for Black mothers to lose a child to extrajudicial racialized violence. Instead,

Fulton and McSpadden were greeted with platitudinous offerings of condolences that fail to consider the racialized nature in which their children were killed. By forcing Fulton and McSpadden to explain the pain of losing a child to extrajudicial racialized violence, news outlets used representations of Black maternal grief to normalize the spectacle of Black death for audiences unaffected by the issue. Celeste (2018) contends

> Media does the work of legitimizing the system, while cultivating a feeling of distance or disidentification for viewers who can rest knowing they are safe in their homes…The spectacle of otherness exacerbates conditions for people who are legally, socially, and economically deemed non-citizens or exist on the fringes (p. 114).

Conversely, Celeste (2018) points to the historical example of Mamie Till-Mobley's public display of grief after the death of her son, Emmett Till and the contemporary examples of Fulton and McSpadden to suggest that Black mothers who engage in the public grieving of the children they lost to extrajudicial racialized violence have the power to galvanize social movements. I do not disagree. Black maternal grief does generate outrage in communities and on social media. Yet, the representations of Fulton and McSpadden in mainstream news rarely functioned to support a social movement against the material consequences of Black death. Mainstream news instead uses Fulton's and McSpadden's grief to shape a reaction to extrajudicial racialized violence in a manner that reproduces the dominant social order.

On March 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin's parents, Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin participated in an interview with *Time Magazine.* During the interview, Fulton was asked to recount how she learned of her son's death. Fulton responded with a detailed recitation of the visceral experience of hearing her son was dead.

> Elizabeth Dias: Ms. Sybrina Fulton and Mr. Tracy Martin. Thank you so much for being willing to speak with *Time* today. And may we start out by saying again we're so sorry for your loss. I know it's very difficult to talk about, but I'm hoping you all might walk

> me through what happened from when he [Trayvon Martin] left to come to Sanford, and through his death and the 24 hours that followed.
>
> Sybrina Fulton: After I got the phone call, I immediately called my mother and my sister, and I had a conversation with them. I was still in disbelief, and it just, all of a sudden hit me. And, I had to pull my car over because I was driving, and I just broke down. I just yelled. And I just could not believe that this was happening to me. I just couldn't believe it, that Trayvon was shot and killed. It just, it just was unimaginable for me as a mother, that he was not gonna be here. Once I made it home, I mean, I sat on the side of the road for maybe about 20 or 30 minutes until I got myself together. I drove home and when I got home, my family was there. We cried together. We prayed together and we're continuing to pray together so that we can all get through this because this is not just an incident that Tracy and I are going through. A lot of people are affected by this (Time Magazine, 2012, 0:00).

Fulton's description of her grief to *Time Magazine* shows both the pain of grieving the death of a child and the resilience necessary to contextualize her child's death within a discourse of race that devalues Black lives in the United States. Thus, Fulton sees her grief as a tool to mobilize a larger challenge to extrajudicial racialized violence. Yet, the calm demeanor held by Fulton while she explains in graphic detail how she learned her son was killed allowed *Time Magazine* the ability to provide their audiences with a voyeuristic gaze into the spectacle of Black death without burdening them with the responsibility of addressing the systemic racism endangering the lives of Black people every day.

McSpadden also sat for several interviews that required her to contextualize the details of her son's death for mainstream audiences. On August 14, 2014, McSpadden appeared on *Good Morning America* with her attorney Benjamin Crump to discuss the multiple autopsies performed on Brown, Jr., the release of the surveillance video that appeared to show her son robbing a convenience store, and the protests that emerged from the shooting. In the interview, Crump responds to a question Roberts poses about Brown, Jr.'s autopsy results. As Crump outlines the extent of the injuries suffered by Brown, Jr., McSpadden is shown visibly responding in anguish

to the recitation of harm experienced by her son. McSpadden's reaction to hearing the details of her son's death was intense enough to warrant a response from Roberts. Nevertheless, Roberts brushed past McSpadden's grief to get a response to her son's alleged criminal behavior and the protests that have resulted from her son's death.

> Robin Roberts: What has been the reaction from the family with these results that are now known? We should note that the examiner said, and these are his exact words, he was careful to say that "these autopsy results by themselves do not assign blame or justify the shooting." This is one of three autopsy reports. The federal government will conduct one coming up. Explain the need for multiple autopsies.
>
> Ben Crump: Well Robin, the family wanted to make sure that they had their own independent autopsy because there was no guarantee that the federal government was going to do an autopsy and if they did not do it, then we would just be left with the St. Louis Law enforcement officers autopsy and Leslie nor Mr. Michael Brown, Sr. wanted to rely on the same police department that executed her child in broad daylight. So, there was the need to have an independent autopsy and this independent autopsy showed that he was shot in his head, his eye, his arm, his hand, and it was very troubling to this family, so they had to get the truth out.
>
> [McSpadden visibly recoils]
>
> Robin Roberts: Oh, Leslie to hear what you are saying and what the preliminary results have shown. On Friday morning, we spoke with the governor of Missouri. We also spoke with the police chief of Ferguson, and this was following a peaceful night Thursday night in Ferguson, but then on Friday they released the name of the officer. They also, Leslie, released the security camera video of your son. Were you aware that they have that video and that they were going to release it at that time?
>
> Leslie McSpadden: No, I wasn't aware. I didn't know they were. And, I feel like it has nothing to do with what he did to my child.

McSpadden's grief, in the *Good Morning America* interview is not allowed the space to stand on its own. It is rendered hypervisible by the representation of the details of Brown, Jr.'s death and McSpadden's reaction to hearing the way her son was killed. Yet, McSpadden's grief was also rendered invisible by the immediate shift in interview focus to the protests in Ferguson and the release of the surveillance footage. The graphic way Brown, Jr.'s death is discussed for

mainstream audiences and the focus placed on the perspective of law enforcement works to construct Black maternal grief as a spectacle.

Finally, on August 25, 2014, McSpadden was interviewed on CNN by Don Lemon alongside Fulton and Valerie Bell, the mother of Sean Bell. A week before he was to be married, on November 26, 2006, 23-year-old Sean Bell was killed by undercover police officers outside of a strip club. (Buckley & Rashbaum, 2006). In the interview, which was conducted before Brown, Jr.'s funeral, Lemon used the grief experienced by Fulton and Bell to contextualize the sense of loss experienced by McSpadden. The details recounted by Bell, Fulton, and McSpadden contribute to the construction of Black maternal grief as a spectacle by again centralizing the visceral experience of Black pain and death. Likewise, Black maternal grief is also rendered invisible through the decontextualization of the extrajudicial racialized violence that killed the sons of Bell, Fulton and McSpadden.

> Don Lemon: And Lesley, you know it's hard and you're probably thinking right now that, I'm sure it doesn't seem real to you, but these ladies are examples that there's, you can survive this…and I don't know…I can't…maybe I'm not putting in the right words. Can you ever be whole again or can you ever… how would you put it?
>
> Sybrina Fulton: I don't. I don't think it's a matter of being a whole what I think it is, is a matter of a new life and this is the new life. This is, I can never go back to who I was and what I was because I'm missing something very precious in my life. Something very special.
>
> Valerie Bell: Losing my son was like losing a part of your body, but you remember, you remember what that part of your body has done for you. Like if you lose the arm, you knew what that arm did. So, my thing is keeping the memories that will keep you and carry you on.

Throughout the interview with Lemon, Bell and Fulton use their experiences losing their children to extrajudicial racialized violence to support McSpadden as she prepared to bury her son. The presence of all three women in the CNN interview also supports the narrative of police violence

as an issue affecting the lives of Black people throughout the United States. Nevertheless, the focus placed on how Bell, Fulton, and McSpadden have adapted to the loss of their children constructs extrajudicial racialized violence as a cultural issue which only affects Black people. Thus, mainstream white audiences can disengage from the discourses of racialized violence in the United States because the issue does not affect their everyday lives and the Black mothers who have lost children to it can easily move on from their grief.

Dehumanizing Symbolism

The final theme, "dehumanizing symbolism," focuses on the ways in which Sybrina Fulton and Lesley McSpadden are constructed as the symbolic carriers of their children's legacies within the public sphere (Molina-Guzmán, 2010). Fulton and McSpadden must publicly speak for their children because Martin's and Brown, Jr.'s deaths preclude them from speaking for themselves. Yet, the controlling images of Black motherhood (Collins, 2008) act as an ideological lens in which to view both Fulton's and McSpadden's defense of their sons' characters and the social value of Black lives within the United States. Contemporary news media reinforced the prevailing discourses of cultural deviancy in Black families specifically and disdain for law enforcement in Black communities more generally by using Fulton and McSpadden as signifiers in their stories about Martin and Brown, Jr. (Bezusko, 2013; Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, 1965). Specifically, Fulton and McSpadden acted as representatives of the dominant racial order in news media by reinforcing the state's calls for calm while it worked out the details of the Martin and Brown, Jr. cases, or condemning' the protests which occurred in the wake of the state sanctioned violence that killed their children. Likewise, activists used Fulton and McSpadden's public grief as exemplars of the ubiquitous nature of the extrajudicial racialized violence affecting the lives of

Black people both historically and contemporarily (Al'Uqdah & Adomako, 2018; Stewart, 2017). News media and activists' demands for Fulton and McSpadden to carry their children's legacies within the public sphere forced them from the private acts of mothering and grieving their children to acting as a voice against the extrajudicial racialized violence affecting Black communities for the Black Lives Matter movement and for white mainstream audiences who are not necessarily amenable to their cause or relate to their pain. The tension between the discursive demands of mainstream news coverage and the public motherwork performed by Fulton and McSpadden reinforces the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood by providing little representational space for Black mothers as anything other than the ideological vessels for the misogynoir that renders Black women disposable (Bailey, 2021).

More importantly, the elevation of Martin and Brown, Jr. as symbols of the Black Lives Matter movement confines Fulton and McSpadden to the controlling image of the "superstrong Black mother" which, according to Patricia Hill Collins (2008) "praises Black women's resiliency in a society that routinely paints us as bad mothers. Yet, to remain on their pedestal, these same superstrong Black mothers must continue to place their needs behind those of everyone else, especially their sons" (p. 188). To align with the superstrong Black mother controlling image, Fulton and McSpadden are expected to dismiss their personal grief to support the needs of a larger social justice movement (Collins, 2008; Stewart, 2017). In the literature on Black women's motherwork, Black mothers who used their grief to publicly challenge the extrajudicial racialized violence that killed their children are celebrated for their displays of political agency (Al'Uqdah & Adomako, 2018; Celeste, 2018; Stewart, 2017). Yet, there is limited focus on examining nuanced representations of Black mothers which do not include the work their grief performs in Black communities. Instead, Black women and mothers were

supposed to construct a narrative of their dead children in a manner that emphasized both Black humanity and Black respectability in the public sphere. Black studies scholar Jane Rhodes (2016) argues Black mass media reinforced respectability politics by instructing Black women on their responsibility to challenge "the racist representations of and routine attacks on black female sexuality, character, and intellect" (p. 202) because they are the standard bearers for Black communities.

Mainstream news coverage of the Martin and Brown, Jr. cases also used respectability politics to demand Fulton and McSpadden represent the interests of mainstream white news audiences and state officials adjudicating their cases. During McSpadden's *Today Show* interview on April 19, 2014, Lauer juxtaposed McSpadden's desire to see justice served for her son with the state's need to quell the protests that occurred in the wake of Brown, Jr.'s death. In doing so, Lauer traded McSpadden's desire to mother her son in public for the work of representing a type of Blackness that would be deemed respectable to white mainstream audiences. Although the interview was conducted after the results of an independent autopsy on Brown, Jr. were released, Lauer began and ended the interview with McSpadden's response to the Ferguson protests.

> Matt Lauer: A 10th straight night of violence in Ferguson. The National Guard is there now and still the violence ended just hours ago. Ms. McSpadden, what will bring peace to the streets of Ferguson?
>
> Lesley McSpadden: Justice. Justice will bring peace, I believe.
>
> Matt Lauer: Only if that justice results in the arrest or charges being filed against Officer Wilson. Is that what it's going to take?
>
> Lesley McSpadden: Yes, him being arrested, charges being filed, and the prosecution. Him being held accountable for what he did (Today News, 2014, 0:14).

Lauer began his interview with McSpadden by positioning her as the spokesperson for the Black communities upset about the extrajudicial racialized violence that killed her son. McSpadden's belief that "justice will bring peace" centralizes a legitimate concern of the Black Lives Matter movement—the state sanctioned violence experienced by Black people prevents us from living in peace. Yet, Lauer suggests that the justice McSpadden and Black Lives Matter protesters seek is unreasonable by providing a narrow framework for the acquisition of justice for Michael Brown, Jr. At the end of the interview, Lauer returned to the subject of the protests to ask McSpadden if the reported violence is helping or hurting her chance to get the justice she seeks for her son. McSpadden is required to trade her maternal interest of having the state take responsibility for the extrajudicial racialized violence that killed her son, to represent the dominant racial order and the larger Black Lives Matter movement.

> Matt Lauer: Ms. McSpadden and Mr. Brown, you say you are, you're looking for justice for your son. I wonder, I ask you, do you think this continuing violence in the streets of Ferguson, night after night, runs the risk of odor overshadowing that search for justice in some ways? Does it detract from justice for your son?
>
> Lesley McSpadden: I think that it does somewhat because it is a distraction, but we won't let it distract us to the point where we lose focus. We have to remain focused, and we have to remain strong, and the violence needs to stop. When justice is prevailed, then maybe they'll regain their trust in the locals. But right now, it's really out of control (Today News, 2014, 3:02).

For Lauer, McSpadden's desire to hold the state accountable for the death of her son and the containment of the Ferguson uprisings was a zero-sum game. McSpadden was charged with condemning the response of Black communities who have been victimized by systemic inequality present in the legal system or lose the support of her sympathetic white audience.

As a Civil Rights movement establishment leader, Al Sharpton had a motive to shape the discourse surrounding Michael Brown, Jr.'s death in a manner that supported an agenda

grounded in the politics of non-violence and respectability (Taylor, 2016). Sharpton interviewed Lesley McSpadden, her father Les McSpadden, and her attorney Benjamin Crump on his MSNBC show *PoliticsNation* on August 11, 2014. In that interview, Sharpton frames McSpadden as a carrier of the symbolic legacy of her son without concern for the grief she must publicly endure. Instead, Sharpton used McSpadden's grief to enforce a respectability politics that deems Black people as deserving of police violence if they act outside of behavior acceptable to the dominant social order.

> Al Sharpton: [A]fter some protestors turned violent last night, Michael Brown's family is calling for justice and peace and that is what we need right now. Her family's grieving and her heartbroken mother is searching for answers…You cannot be against alleged reckless violence and then use reckless violence yourself. Joining me now are Les McSpadden, Michael Brown's grandfather, Lesley McSpadden, his mother, and the family's attorney, Benjamin Crump. First of all, Lesley, you have our condolences and, and how are you doing? I know this is something that is a nightmare.
>
> Lesley McSpadden: My son's spirit is heart holding me up.
>
> Al Sharpton: Let me ask, what is it that she wants to say to the nation? I heard her say that her son was to go to college today. She wanted to see this as the day to begin the rest of his life. What is she…wanting the nation to hear from her? She's called for nonviolence in peace, but she's also called for justice as his mother. What do you wanna say to the nation?
>
> Lesley McSpadden: Well, I wanna say that our son was special. He was special. He was the first for many first of a child, a first grandchild, a first nephew. He was basically born a king, born,
>
> Al Sharpton: Born a king…
>
> Lesley McSpadden: We all should be celebrating my son's graduation and going on to college. But we planning in a funeral.
>
> Al Sharpton: What does she want people around the country and what is she calling on the community to do?
>
> Benjamin Crump: What are you calling on people to do around the country?
>
> Al Sharpton: And the community.

> Benjamin Crump: In light of what happened last night?
>
> Lesley McSpadden: That was total chaos. And we are not for that. The violence needs to stop. The support is all needed all needed, but not the violence. It doesn't help any (PoliticsNation with Al Sharpton, 2014, 1:14).

Sharpton's use of McSpadden's grief to condemn violent protestors allowed him to demarcate the type of Black person worthy of public support. By framing McSpadden as a grieving mother, Sharpton was able to create an argument that she is a respectable figure worthy of receiving justice from the state. Conversely, Sharpton is also able to use McSpadden's grief to construct a narrative about the Black people who are unworthy of respect by law enforcement and the judicial system. Although the interview is framed as a way for McSpadden to address the nation about her son's life and legacy, it became a platform for Sharpton to disregard McSpadden's grief and reinforce a narrative of respectability to audiences who believe Black people's anger at the system is without merit. As such, McSpadden no longer had space to publicly uplift her son's legacy because she was transformed into a symbol of the tension between Sharpton's desire to maintain his status as a Black Civil Rights leader and the vanguard of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Sybrina Fulton and Lesley McSpadden Matter

As the catalysts for the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, the BLMGNF, and the larger Black Lives Matter movement, Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, Jr. served as exemplars of the systemic racism experienced by Black people in the United States and/or the perceived criminality of Black men and boys (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). Sociologist CalvinJohn Smiley and public health scholar David Fakunle (2016) contend the lynching and overkilling of Black male bodies were justified by the racist ideology of "Black savagery which was situated in this

idea of Black brutality and criminality that had no other recourse but death" (p. 353). In other words, Black men and boys needed to die because the ideology of white supremacy dictated that Blackness was culturally deficient, morally criminal, and irredeemable. The focus news stories placed on the perceived criminal activity and violent nature of Martin and Brown, Jr. played on the stereotypes of Black men and boys as violent "brutes" and "thugs" who needed extrajudicial racialized violence to regulate their behavior.

In *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order,* Stuart Hall and his colleagues (1978) argue news media used the term "mugging" to circulate a moral panic around Blackness, criminality, and the cultural and political directions of the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. According to Hall et al. (1978), "mugging" became

> "a central symbol for the many tensions and problems besetting American social and political life in general…because of its ability to connote a whole complex of social themes in which the 'crisis of American society' was reflected. These themes included: the involvement of blacks and drug addicts in crime: the expansion of the black ghettoes, coupled with the growth of black social and political militancy; the threatened crisis and collapse of the cities; the crime panic and the appeal to 'law and order'; the sharpening political tensions and protest movements…These topics and themes were not clearly separated as these headings imply. They tended, in public discussion, to come together into a general scenario of conflict and crisis. In an important sense the image of 'mugging' came ultimately to contain and express them all" (p. 20).

Similar to the discursive task performed by mugging, news media representations of Martin and Brown, Jr. as "brutes" and "thugs" circulated a moral panic about the destabilization of racial hierarchies in a United States invested in post-racial ideologies after the election of the first Black president (Hall et al., 1978). The extrajudicial racialized murders of Martin and Brown, Jr., and the news stories which followed, sought to stabilize the dominant racial hierarchy by placing Black people in what sociologist Elijah Anderson (2022) refers to as the iconic ghetto—a symbolic point of reference which reinforces the inferior position Black people hold within the

racialized social imagination of the United States. More importantly, the news coverage of Martin's and Brown, Jr.'s deaths represent the material consequences of moving outside of the confines of the iconic ghetto by publicly reinforcing Black people's place in a separate and lower social caste and thus, "undermining their moral authority in the minds of their fellow citizens" (Anderson, 2022, p. 146).

Martin's and Brown, Jr's deaths prevented them from personally challenging the news coverage that represented them as violent criminals. Their deaths also precluded them from demanding systemic changes to racist policing strategies on behalf of their communities. Instead, their mothers, Fulton and McSpadden, were required to cope with the burden of Martin's and Brown, Jr.'s deaths and manage their legacies within the public sphere (Al'Uqdah & Adomako, 2018; Celeste, 2018; Molina-Guzmán, 2010). The public challenge Fulton and McSpadden made to the representations of their sons as harbingers of Black criminality was complicated by the controlling images of Black womanhood which did not provide discursive space for news media to validate Black maternal labor (Collins, 2008). Specifically, misogynoiristic representations of Fulton and McSpadden within mainstream news coverage about their sons' deaths highlight the ways in which Black women and mothers become signifiers of the perceived cultural dysfunction in Black communities even as we use our personal grief to speak to the larger concerns of Black people (Bailey, 2021).

News media used Fulton's and McSpadden's grief after the loss of their children to reinforce a discourse of Black cultural deviancy to mainstream white audiences in three distinct ways: (1) by positioning Black mothers as inappropriate maternal figures responsible for their children's perceived criminal behavior; (2) by highlighting the spectacle of Black death for white audiences who are unlikely to experience extrajudicial racialized violence; and (3) by requiring

Fulton and McSpadden to publicly condemn the political response to their children's deaths at the hands of the state. Using these three themes, I argue the motherwork performed by Fulton and McSpadden required them to not only defend their children, but also defend themselves within a racist media landscape that devalues the lives of Black people. The first theme, "inappropriate maternal figures," considered how the news coverage of the extrajudicial racialized violence experienced by Martin and Brown, Jr. depended on the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood to frame Fulton and McSpadden as morally responsible for the deaths of their children. Interviewers delegitimized the maternal labor performed by Fulton and McSpadden and implied they were bad mothers who were unaware of their children's propensity for violent and criminal behavior. Likewise, news coverage of the Martin and Brown, Jr. cases sought to justify their deaths to Fulton and McSpadden by pointing out the reasons why the police or vigilantes might kill their children. Next, the theme "Black maternal grief as a spectacle," emphasized the erasure of the specificities of the extrajudicial racialized violence experienced by Martin and Brown, Jr. to universalize Fulton's and McSpadden's grief for mainstream white audiences. The detail in which Fulton and McSpadden described the experience of learning of their children's deaths allowed white audiences the ability to consume Black pain without the risk of losing their children to a similar fate. Finally, the third theme of "dehumanizing symbolism," highlights the ways in which Fulton and McSpadden are constructed as historical and contemporary symbols of racial justice movements like Black Lives Matter and a dominant racial order that sought to constrain meaningful discussion about extrajudicial racialized violence in the United States. As signifiers for the contemporary moment of racial struggle, Fulton and McSpadden were required, on one hand, to show the strength needed to demand justice for their children (Collins, 2008; Stewart, 2017); while on the other

hand, they could not move outside the confines of respectable motherhood if they wanted to garner sympathy from mainstream white audiences or Civil Rights establishment leaders (Bezusko, 2013; Taylor, 2016).

Conclusion

News media's dependence on the controlling images of Black womanhood to frame Fulton and McSpadden as bad Black mothers contributes to the discourses of Black motherhood by placing the responsibility of extrajudicial racialized violence on the victimized Black communities and not the systemic racialized exploitation of Black people that persists in a United States grounded in the neoliberal ideologies of post-racism and post-feminism. Since the Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, Jr. cases functioned to reignite a national conversation about police brutality, it is important to acknowledge the racialized discourses that prevent a nuanced examination of the inequalities that cause Black people to lose their lives. It is just as important, however, to acknowledge nuances of the motherwork performed by Fulton and McSpadden to challenge their representations as bad Black mothers. While Fulton and McSpadden used their public grief to call attention to issues that affect Black people in general, we cannot forget that they are also human beings experiencing a great loss. As such, we must question if the elevation of Fulton and McSpadden as symbols of a contemporary racial reckoning denies them the ability to care for themselves while they are supporting their communities.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd called out for his mother during the 9 minutes and 29 seconds Minneapolis police officer Derrick Chauvin kneeled on his neck. Floyd's mother could not respond to her son's cries because she died two years prior (O'Neal, 2020). Unlike many other police officers who were shown killing Black people on camera, Chauvin was charged with second-degree murder, third-degree murder, and third-degree manslaughter (Dewan, 2021). For three weeks the trial was livestreamed on multiple news and social media outlets, but I did not have the emotional capacity to watch any of the coverage. Plus, I did not have much faith that Chauvin would be convicted of anything of significance. When the jury returned a verdict on April 21, 2021, I held my breath hoping for once a police officer would be accountable for the death of a Black person. The relief I felt at hearing Chauvin was guilty on all counts was short lived because 30 minutes before the verdict was read 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant was shot and killed by police in Columbus, Ohio (Ferenchik et al., 2021). Ma'Khia's death was overshadowed by talking heads on cable news channels looking for the words to articulate the perceived relief felt by Black people who believed the guilty verdict in the Chauvin trial marked the "first step" toward racial justice because the legal system finally acknowledged that "Black lives mattered."

Before the Chauvin verdict, there were so many names I knew. Oscar Grant. Sandra Bland. Tamir Rice. Tanisha Brown. Eric Garner. Freddie Gray. Alton Sterling. Philando Castile. Botham Jean. Atatiana Jefferson. Breonna Taylor. Aiyana Jones. Sean Bell. Amadou Diallo. Michael Brown, Jr. Trayvon Martin.

There are also so many names I do not know, and so many names I will never know. At a certain point, the emotional toll of keeping up with all the names is overwhelming. It is hard not to fear for your life when simply existing as a Black person could result in your entire human

existence being reduced to a Twitter hashtag. The news of Ma'Khia's death was a lot for my spirit to hold as a Black woman and as a Black mother to a Black woman. After watching media analysts go to great pains to position Derrick Chauvin as an anomaly among police officers—all I could think about was my daughter[16] at 16-years-old. I mourned for Ma'Khia as a mother because it is painful to think about how she will never get to explore the type of person she wanted to be when she grew up—and I know the only thing that separated Ma'Khia's fate from my daughter's was chance. Even worse, should (God forbid), my child suffers the same fate as George Floyd or Ma'Khia Bryant or any of the other victims of extrajudicial racialized violence that come after, it is more likely she will be erased in a manner similar to a victimized Black girl than a martyred Black man.

According to mainstream news and social media, Ma'Khia deserved to die because she was in the middle of an altercation and holding a knife (Cineas, 2021). The police officer dispatched to Ma'Khia's foster home did not consider whether she was defending herself from an attack and did not attempt to deescalate the situation (Ferenchik et al., 2021). He also did not consider the numerous white people wielding weapons who have been apprehended alive. For example, 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse transported AR-15 rifles from Antioch, Illinois to Kenosha, Wisconsin and killed two people at a protest in response to the police shooting of Jacob Blake in 2020 (Guarino et al., 2020). Rittenhouse was charged with one count first-degree reckless homicide, two counts of first-degree recklessly endangering safety, one count of first-degree intentional homicide, and one count attempted first-degree intentional homicide. The jury

[16] See Chapter 1: Introduction

acquitted Rittenhouse on all five counts on November 19, 2021 (Lyons, 2021). Ma'Khia Bryant did not receive the luxury of standing trial for any crime.

Both Black and white people who breathed a sigh of relief at the conviction of Derrick Chauvin engaged in the complicated mental gymnastics necessary to make the officer who killed Ma'Khia Bryant different from the one who killed George Floyd (Cineas, 2021). Even those who viewed Ma'Khia as a sympathetic victim questioned the roles Ma'Khia's biological and foster mothers played in her death (Bogel-Burroughs et al., 2021). Responses to Ma'Khia's death which sought to absolve the police of the ubiquitous extrajudicial racialized violence occurring in the United States highlighted how Black women, girls, and mothers are often erased from the Black Lives Matter conversation. Creators of the #SayHerName hashtag and campaign, the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) and the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies (CISPS) (2015) argue,

> The resurgent racial justice movement in the United States has developed a clear frame to understand the police killings of Black men and boys, theorizing the ways in which they are systematically criminalized and feared across disparate class backgrounds and irrespective of circumstance. Yet Black women who are profiled, beaten, sexually assaulted, and killed by law enforcement officials are conspicuously absent from this frame even when their experiences are identical. When their experiences with police violence are distinct—uniquely informed by race, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation—Black women remain invisible (p. 1)

Social justice movements typically treat the deaths of Black women and girls at the hands of the police as secondary to the loss of Black men and boys. Black women's and girls' experiences with extrajudicial racialized violence are instead used to supplement the calls for justice on behalf of Black men (Martin, 2021). The #SayHerName campaign and hashtag has complicated the focus of the Black Lives Matter movement by highlighting the Black women like Sandra Bland and Breonna Taylor who have lost their lives at the hands of the police; yet, when

compared to our brothers, Black women's experiences with extrajudicial racialized violence are still marginalized (Borda & Marshall, 2020; Martin, 2021).

Breonna Taylor was a 26-year-old EMT who was killed by police in a botched raid on her home in Louisville, Kentucky. On March 13, 2020, Taylor and her boyfriend Kenneth Walker were asleep in her apartment when three police officers executing a no-knock warrant broke down the door in search of two people (neither of whom were Taylor nor her boyfriend) accused of selling drugs. Walker believed he and Taylor were experiencing a robbery, so he fired one shot from a legally owned gun hitting one of the police officers. The officers returned over 20 shots into the apartment hitting Taylor at least eight times. Taylor received no medical attention for approximately 20 minutes and there were no drugs found in her apartment. She died at the scene. Walker was charged with attempted murder of a police officer and aggravated assault. The charges against Walker were dropped on May 22, 2020. On September 23, 2020, a Kentucky grand jury refused to indict any of the officers for Taylor's death. One of the officers, however, was indicted on three counts of first-degree wanton endangerment for the shots that landed into adjacent apartments (Grassroots Law Project, 2020; North & Cineas, 2020; Oppel Jr. et al., 2021).

Two months later, the limited calls for police accountability in the Taylor case was overshadowed by the global response to George Floyd's death. Unlike George Floyd, Breonna Taylor did not receive a sustained political action to challenge the extrajudicial racialized violence that killed her and numerous other Black women and girls. Breonna Taylor received viral internet fame. The "arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor" meme, among others, attempted to bring attention to the lack of state accountability for Taylor's death; yet these

memes relied on tropes of digital Blackface in ways unseen with the Black male victims of extrajudicial racialized violence (Retta, 2020).

> Perhaps the most disturbing element of the Taylor memes is that they're designed to be helpful and raise awareness. It's painful to think that a cute internet joke is needed to rile people up after the death of a Black woman, whereas righteous anger after the death of a Black man is a given (Retta, 2020, paragraph 14).

The memeification of Taylor's death emphasized how Black women's experiences with extrajudicial racialized violence are trivialized within popular culture and the political landscape. And as a Black woman and a mother—that is terrifying. If we do not dismantle the misogynoir that renders the lives of Black women and girls as less valuable than the lives of Black men and boys, then there is nothing—neither my education nor my profession, neither my income nor my family structure that will keep me or my daughter safe from the social institutions that want to harm us.

Yet, a scroll through my social media feeds would have me believe that I should not be worried about how Black women and girls are trivialized within popular culture. I have seen numerous Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram posts celebrating the Black people who add "diversity" to historically white organizations and institutions with their accomplishments. According to physical and cultural studies scholars Brandon Wallace and David L. Andrews (2021), the choice to focus on the positive characterizations of Black people is a form of representation activism which

> often presupposes that the positive representation of marginalized groups in mainstream media can lead to the collapse of racial hierarchies. Through this thinking, common media consumption of Black experiences can lead to the empowering of marginalized individuals and fostering of cross-racial solidarities (p. 827).

Social media posts declaring #RepresentationMatters elevated the accomplishments of Black people like the first Black woman vice president (Segers, 2020), the first Black woman selected

for a Supreme Court nomination (Tapper et al., 2022), the first Black girl to win the Scripps National Spelling Bee (Ross, 2021), and even the first Black woman to be cast as the titular *Bachelorette* in the ABC reality television series (Kelley, 2017) rarely consider that the reason Black women and girls have only recently earned these achievements has more to do with white supremacy than the talents and abilities of those vying for recognition.

There is a limit to the "if we can see it, we can be it" strategy of representation activism that uses individual representations of Black people's accomplishments to stand in for the entirety of all Black people's experiences (Wallace & Andrews, 2021; Hall, 1997). The specific focus on singular representations of Blackness to challenge racial inequality in media does not work because it conflates the sign of Blackness with the meaning we make about Black people. As Stuart Hall (1997) argues, "The main point [of representation] is that meaning does not inhere in things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is the result of a signifying practice—a practice that produces meaning, that makes things mean." (p. 24). In other words, representation is not the "thing," it is what we use to make meaning out of the "thing." Therefore, the focus representation activism places on the hard work and dedication needed to become the "first" Black anything divorces white supremacy's desire to deny Black people access to the tools needed to achieve that first and allows Black achievement to become another casualty to the neoliberal ideology of post-racism. In this dissertation, I examine the ways in which the representations of Black women and mothers in both fictional and non-fictional works distributed across mediums and platforms exist within an organizational framework used to make meaning of the racialized and gendered systems of power that influence our and our families lives Hall, 1997, #6208}. I began by examining the representation of the Black domestic as a nostalgic mammy figure for contemporary audiences in *The Help.* Next, I focused on Michelle

Obama's use of the mom-in-chief discourse to challenge and reinforce the representations of Black motherhood as morally, socially, and culturally deviant. Finally, I examined how Sybrina Fulton and Lesley McSpadden are represented in news stories about the deaths of their respective sons Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, Jr. to highlight how Black motherhood is constructed within a contemporary moment of racial reckoning characterized by the Black Lives Matter movement.

The historical controlling image of the mammy was used to justify the institution of slavery by representing Black people as happy with the subservient position they were required to maintain within the racial hierarchy (Collins, 2008). The ideology of white supremacy used the mammy figure to represent the ideal Black mother as more focused on the white family who enslaved her than her own biological family (Collins, 2008). While the mammy figure is situated within the period of the antebellum south (McElya, 2007), the mammy representation has emerged and reemerged throughout popular culture as the Black domestic (Bogle, 2003). The use of the Black domestic in white homes allowed white women to collapse the public and private sphere dichotomy by elevating white women to the managers of maternal and domestic labor (Wooten & Branch, 2012). A film such as *The Help* uses the Black domestic to provide a nostalgic representation of the mammy figure by harkening back to the discrete roles of Black and white women that characterized the pre-Civil Rights era (Mukherjee, 2006). Additionally, *The Help* misrepresents the historical marginalization of Black mothers in favor of a post-racial feel-good story about an "unlikely friendship" (DreamWorks Studios, 2011) to create a contemporary model of Black motherhood that is valid only if it serves the ideology of white supremacy.

On the surface, the release of a nostalgic film about Black domestics should seem like an unremarkable occurrence. Yet, the release of *The Help,* a movie featuring a docile, subservient Black domestic figure during Michelle Obama's tenure as the first Black FLOTUS functions to challenge the increased access Black women have to political power (Collins, 2008). As FLOTUS, Obama was subjected to news coverage that depended on the controlling images of Black womanhood and the gendered expectations of the FLOTUS role to represent her as unfit to occupy the White House and represent traditional white normative motherhood (Collins, 2008; Hayden, 2017; Handau & Simian, 2019). The rebranding of Obama as the mom-in-chief allowed her to align herself with the white mainstream middle-class families that supported her husband's presidential campaigns and administrations while allowing her to wink to Black women and mothers who admired Obama's challenge of the racialized and gendered stereotypes faced by all Black women (Joseph, 2018).

Furthermore, Obama's deployment of her mom-in-chief discourse as she assumed the FLOTUS role emphasized her similarity to her white constituents by distancing her family from Blackness, the importance of taking personal responsibility for changing your material circumstances instead of depending on the government for assistance, and the need to obtain an education so one can obtain material success in the United States. The mom-in-chief discourse allows Obama to distance her and her family from the stereotypical dysfunctional Black mother who heads a single-parent household and desires government handouts by normalizing a Black motherhood that does not depend on discourses of Black women as culturally deviant and Black children as thugs with little to no social value. Yet, the work Obama did to distance herself from the prevailing discourses of Black motherhood reinforced those same discourses by emphasizing

the stereotypical representations of Black people only to show how she has transcended the perceived cultural dysfunction present in Black communities.

Throughout her tenure as FLOTUS, Michelle Obama was able to use her mom-in-chief discourse to maintain a celebrity mom status that did not change the representations of Black motherhood in any a meaningful way. The deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, Jr. by extrajudicial racialized violence during the Obama administration highlighted the ways in which Black mothers like Sybrina Fulton and Lesley McSpadden were still constructed as morally, culturally, and sexually deviant in mainstream news coverage. Fulton and McSpadden were charged with using their grief to publicly defend their children's characters while demanding the state be held accountable for their deaths. Yet, the news coverage of Fulton and McSpadden after their sons' deaths suggested they were inappropriate maternal figures by demanding they account for their children's behavior in incidents that occurred before their deaths, created a spectacle out of their grief by requiring they recount in detail how they learned their children were dead, and elevated them to symbols of the Black Lives Matter movement and of cultural dysfunction and distrust of the police that they perceived as prevalent in Black communities.

My purpose for examining the discourses of Black motherhood in media was to highlight the representations that control the conversations about Black women and girls in the United States. It is important to consider the agency Black mothers have in determining how they resist the misogynoir that affects our everyday lives. Yet, it is equally important to not over-celebrate the resilience of Black women and mothers because doing so denies our humanity in the face of institutions seeking to erase our lived experiences with injustice even as we lead movements against racial and gender inequalities.

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APPENDIX A

FLOTUS Initiatives Lead by Michelle Obama

During Michelle Obama's tenure in the White House (2009-2017), she launched four official First Lady initiatives. In this project, I only examine Obama's mom-in-chief discourse in *Let's Move, Reach Higher,* and *Joining Forces*, however, I wanted to reference all four initiatives in this appendix.

Let's Move! **(2010)**

Michelle Obama's first initiative as First Lady was the *Let's Move!* program launched in 2010. In the kickoff speech for the program, Obama announced the goal of *Let's Move!* was to "solve the problem of childhood obesity within a generation, so that children born today will reach adulthood at a healthy weight" (The Obama White House, 2010, 9:32). *Let's Move!* was promoted as a public/private partnership designed to support President Obama's government-wide Task Force on Childhood Obesity, a government-wide, inter-agency task force charged with coordinating a federal response to the epidemic of childhood obesity (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2010). Key components of *Let's Move!* included wellness activities for children, the reimagining of the food pyramid, and the redesign of nutritional labels of food packaging. Obama focused on making a "human appeal as opposed to a regulatory one" (Obama, 2018, p. 337) to the corporations packing and supplying soda and lunches to school children to sidestep any appearance of political interference. Yet, the discursive centerpiece of the *Let's Move!* was the White House Kitchen Garden used to promote increasing the availability of healthier lunch options to public school students (Natalle & Simon, 2015). Planted on the South Lawn of the White in 2009, Obama used the garden to provide locally grown food for the First Family and their guests while modeling how families in the United States can grow food at

home. The White House Kitchen Garden builds on the history of gardens and farms on the White House grounds, specifically the Victory Garden planted by Eleanor Roosevelt in 1943. Specifically, *Let's Move* became Obama's signature initiative and it allowed her to situate herself within the gendered traditions of First Ladies by using the White House Kitchen lawn as a centerpiece of her first official FLOTUS initiative.

Obama highlighted both her Chicago upbringing and her maternal concern for her children to garner support for the *Let's Move!* initiative which targeted children around the nation. Conservative critics claimed the anti-obesity program was a symbol of government overreach (Parnes, 2011; Stier & Simon, 2011; Theel, 2010), while more liberal critics argued the program did not go far enough to combat the marketing of junk food to children (Stier & Simon, 2011). Further still, republican critics of *Let's Move!* hyper-focused on Obama's eating habits to claim the program was hypocritical because she was seen eating unhealthy foods (Parnes, 2011). As a result of the work Michelle Obama did on the *Let's Move!* program, Barack Obama was able to push for and pass a child nutrition bill through Congress (Obama, 2018). *Five* years after the introduction of *Let's Move!* and one year before Obama ended her tenure as First Lady, critics of the program claimed the trend of childhood obesity did not drop in any significant way because the initiative and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) cherry picked data to support the success of *Let's Move!* (Liptak, 2015).

***Joining Forces* (2011)**

In 2011, during Michelle Obama's second year as FLOTUS, she announced the launch of the *Joining Forces* initiative on Twitter with her first official tweet as First Lady (Obama, 2018). The program was a joint effort with then-Second Lady Dr. Jill Biden and focused on mobilizing both public and private resources to support active military, veterans, and their spouses and

families with employment, educational, and wellness opportunities (Joining Forces, n.d.). Furthermore, *Joining Forces* provided Obama with an opportunity to align the project with President Obama's military responsibilities as commander-in-chief (Obama, 2018) and to reinforce the commitment she made to military families in her 2008 Democratic National Convention speech. In 2016, *Joining Forces* contributed to the reduction of the unemployment rate of the "9/11 generation of veterans" (The Obama White House, n.d, paragraph 3) by 12 percent and created a network that led to the increase of employment of military spouses. Once Dr. Jill Biden assumed the role of First Lady, she announced the second phase of *Joining Forces* as her official FLOTUS initiative (The White House, n.d.).

***Reach Higher* (2014)**

Reach Higher was the initiative launched by Michelle Obama in 2014 at the University of Texas San Antonio. The purpose of *Reach Higher* was to inspire high school students to apply for and graduate from college. The signature piece of the program, "College Signing Day," asks all high school seniors to declare their intent to attend college by sharing pictures of themselves wearing their soon-to-be college colors and gear on social media platforms (NOWCastSA, 2014). *Reach Higher* supported President Obama's North Star goal of having the United States lead the world in college graduates by 2020 (Duncan, 2010). In the kickoff speech examined in Chapter 3, Michelle Obama identified the four objectives of *Reach Higher*: financial aid, summer learning opportunities for students, exposure to college campuses, and support for high school counselors looking to get students in college (NOWCastSA, 2014). Obama did not discuss the details of how *Reach Higher* would meet the objectives outlined in her presentation, instead she chose to highlight the importance of individual student effort and planning as the most important tools for success at the collegiate level.

Let Girls Learn (2015)

In 2015, President and First Lady Barack and Michelle Obama launched *Let Girls Learn* with a joint appearance in the East Room in the White House. *Let Girls Learn* was designed as a public/private partnership designed to increase the educational opportunities for girls globally (The Obama White House, 2015). Specifically, *Let Girls Learn* worked with the Peace Corps to provide community-based solutions to address educational disparities such as health and nutrition, leadership, gender-based violence, and child and forced marriage (The Obama White House, n.d.). At the *Let Girls Learn* kickoff, President Obama introduced Michelle Obama and positioned her as the leader of the initiative. In his introduction of Michelle Obama, however, he argued the merits of *Let Girls Learn* from a policy perspective while the First Lady used her position as a mother to two girls to underscore the importance of providing girls with an education and garner support for the program. Moreover, Obama connected *Let Girls Learn* back governmental interests by highlighting her marital relationship to the president.

APPENDIX B

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March 16, 2012

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APPENDIX C

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