



1961

black mountain coal (id. 1973)

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Maternal (In)Coherence

When Feminism Meets Fascism

The “maternal” is not an inherently stable concept. Narratives constructed upon the “maternal” as bedrock cannot truly describe a shared experience. The emotional/intellectual register of being a “maternal” and its function are a political issue shaped by material conditions of captivity, exploitation, and resistance. Specifically, in the history of U.S. democracy, racial

capitalism and its ill-gotten gains would not have existed without genocide and enslavement, and the figure of the “Captive Maternal” was and remains a fulcrum for predatory accumulations. My earlier work, “The Womb of Western Theory: Trauma, Time Theft, and the Captive Maternal” discusses how democracy merged with enslavement in order to shift burdens and feed rapacious desires through the consumption of enslaved caretakers:

“Captive Maternals” [are] those most vulnerable to violence, war, poverty, police, and captivity; those whose very existence enables the possessive empire that claims and dispossesses them. Global dominance in economics, military, and cultural commodities allows the United States’ imperial reach, despite the “blowback” of its devastating, unwinnable wars (alongside the genocidal violence the United States unleashed abroad, its interventionist warfare has resulted, in 2016, in twenty veteran suicides a day, trillions of dollars in military debt, and projected decades of warfare in the Middle East). However, the United States’ longest [legal] war is with its domestic target: enslaved or captive black women, a war that dates back to the Commonwealth of Virginia’s 1658 attempts to (re)enslave Elizabeth Key, one of the first Captive Maternals to have her battles enter public record.¹

Whether they are biological females, males, nonbinary—all those feminized into caretaking and consumption, Captive Maternals point to the gaps in theory about the consumption of maternal lives and bodies. Blacks are largely Captive Maternals, although some are openly complicit in antiblack repression. Mired in the legacy of centuries of enslavement, rape, and denigration, Captive Maternals are disproportionately disciplined, denigrated, and consumed by the greater democracy. They are disproportionately exploited, impoverished, policed, imprisoned, and executed by state violence and vigilantism. Despite precarities shaped by intimidation, violence, domestic violence, rape/sexual assault, and contempt, policing in schools, jobs, and society, and torture in prisons, it is not victimization that marks them. Productivity and the consumption of their emotional, intellectual, cultural, and physical labor are their key signifiers. Through a series of stages Captive Maternals respond to abuse

1. The “Womb of Western Theory” argues that “in transitioning a colony through a republic into a representative democracy with imperial might, the emergent United States grew a womb, it took on the generative properties of the maternals it held captive. Western democracy, based in American Exceptionalism, merged Enlightenment ideologies with Western theories to birth a new nation (a nascent empire) that fed on black frames.” See also James Baldwin’s February 1965 Cambridge University debate with William Buckley.

some face disappearance. Under regimes of antiblackness and genocide, Captive Maternal's reproductive and productive labor was and continues to be stolen in order to augment and stabilize the wealth and culture of one of the most powerful imperial nations.

The maternal's being and function are defined by their relationship to power, captivity, and resistance to predatory violence and consumption, from the forced breeding of enslaved black women and girls in chattel slavery to the mass incarceration of imprisoned black women and girls today. In the United States this legacy was carried forth by the exception clause in the Thirteenth Amendment, ratified eight months after the North won the U.S. Civil War. The amendment states that if one has "been duly convicted" of a crime then they can be forced into "involuntary servitude." The Trojan horse of emancipation is that slavery was thus legalized and disproportionately forced upon those refashioned as "black."

This disparity within the concept of the "maternal" cannot be rectified by or with representational diversity, even when efforts at equity are added. Some argue that we should seek transdisciplinary—not interdisciplinary—studies, and move beyond synthesizing or integrating existing platforms. To push past current structures and analyses approved or promoted by academia, noncorporate donors, state, and corporations, requires transcending rather than integrating "stable" identities and categories of politics. I attempt to transcend or move beyond the boundaries of intersectional thinking by returning to lineage, transgenerational struggles, and the impact of filicide, femicide, genocide—from the Middle Passage through slavery and colonialism and past the first black POTUS and FLOTUS of the United States. Seeking more than a genealogy or cartography of captivity, I examine how the state has leveraged the Captive Maternal through violence and how Captive Maternal² have resisted and used leverage to pursue freedom from exploitation, consumption, and state violence.

Fannie Lou Hamer, Mississippi Civil Rights organizer, became a lead organizer in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and a cofounder of the Mississippi

2. See also "The Womb of Western Theory: Trauma, Time Theft, and The Captive Maternal." *Carceral Notebooks*, Vol. 12, 2016, 253–296.

Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) at the height of the struggles for blacks whose “wins” in voting and civil rights would be diversified throughout the nation and other rights movements. A collaborator of Malcolm X (El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz), Hamer’s impoverishment and experience of exploitative labor, enabled by state violence, shaped her wisdom and instructions: “And I’ve been tired so long, now I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired.” Forced into being sterilized in Mississippi as a young woman, she nonetheless adopted black children whom she raised. In the United States, Captive Maternals—black women and girls, men and boys, nonbinary, chattel slavery ceased to produce legal biological property for enslavers through chattel slavery (the 13th amendment offered a continuance of the trade) but significant violence against blacks continued. Along with other racially-fashioned women and girls targeted by genocide, black women suffered structured vulnerabilities distinct from but similar to those inflicted upon indigenous women/girls; women/girls in Puerto Rico, a colonial possession of the United States; transwomen, poor, neuro-diverse or disabled women—all are disproportionately sexually assaulted, criminalized, imprisoned, sterilized, and at risk of having their children stolen. With the destruction of protections and privacy offered by *Roe v. Wade*, terminating a pregnancy or having a miscarriage can lead to a homicide charge in some states. State invasion into the biological womb is pervasive irrespective of demography, but black and indigenous women, targeted by various forms of eugenics, have lost thousands of children to state violence, captivity, and disappearance.

Incursions against the bodies and psyches of black women cannot be remedied by legalism. The mothers who have had children stolen or killed by state bureaucracies or police forces are not protected by law—they are assaulted by law. The case of Samaria Rice, whose twelve-year old son Tamir Rice was executed by a police officer, is one of hundreds of cases in the United States, and thousands throughout the world. Whereas a conventional or hegemonic intersectional analysis of individuals and communities points to similarities in and conflicts between such experiences, such an analysis does not address the wars waged against maternals and the rebellions that can follow warfare. Antagonists of the black maternal can

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wear the face of a black woman, for example Chicago mayor Lori Lightfoot, a black lesbian who protects the lethal Chicago Police Department despite its racist torture of civilians, or Condoleezza Rice, the first black female U.S. Secretary of State, who fostered disinformation campaigns to promote the U.S. invasion of Iraq that destabilized a region and led to hundreds of thousands of deaths.

To analyze the black maternal as the “Captive Maternal” requires a focus on function, not gender or identity markers. This “maternal” is not the biological or adoptive mother per se; it is the caretaker whose very capacity to tend to others is coopted by the state and corporation that steals generative or healing labor. The betrayer here is not the male or white per se, although structurally and historically white supremacy and (hetero)patriarchy are dominant purveyors of capitalist violence against vulnerable peoples and environments. The betrayer is the democracy itself.

I have met and worked with mothers in several countries whose children were murdered or disappeared by the state. I have met with imprisoned revolutionaries and those released

from captivity. Both groups are concerned for communities and freedom. The individual mothers are politicized by their personal loss: the murder of a child or their torture and captivity in prison or jail; or the theft and captivity of a child through foster care removal. The child's capture or reassignment to another family by the State through foster removal is another zone of dishonor and dispossession. It is different from having the child be killed by a family member, or die by accident, suicide, or disease. It is different from having a child disappear in human trafficking organized by civilians or die in civilian violence. If a police officer kills, it is an expression of the state power historically arrayed against black and indigenous people.

The "founding fathers" engineered a democracy based on racial slavery and rape. It was the Three-Fifths Clause of the U.S. Constitution that allowed Thomas Jefferson, an enslaver, to defeat John Adams, an "abolitionist," in the 1800 presidential election. Every child that Jefferson forced on the black enslaved teen maternal Sally Hemings increased his economic and political accumulations. The "maternal" remains a stable concept for "free" whites even

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when they are exploited. And while the descriptor "black" is not a synonym for "captive," the two are deeply entwined. Embracing the black and advocating for black liberation accelerates one's trajectory into imprisonment. Violence, disposability, and misopedia (the hatred of children) always render the maternals' kin vulnerable to abuse, disappearance and (sex/labor) trafficking of children. However, there are not-so-subtle differences in the ter-

rors: the violence against blacks/Africans and indigenous people is historically structured by the state and facilitated by law and police regimes. The disappearances and murders of black and indigenous children are not just tragedies; they are astounding displays of brutality meted out by colonizers and enslavers over centuries. These brutalities are legitimized by the state's conferral of immunity on the very same colonizers and enslavers. Apologies are not resurrections. Filicide, femicide, and genocide are racially fashioned. What does the Captive Maternal become within the structure of fascism? What is their/our function beyond labor and survival? What is reproduction under conditions of captivity, dishonor, and natal alienation?

The health disparities between black women and nonblack women are staggering. Regardless of education and wealth, black maternal morbidity is staggering: black women and girls are three times more likely to die from pregnancies than white women and girls. There are limits to intersectionality. Disposability and violence shape the life and death outcomes of maternals—for themselves as individuals, for their personal families, and for their communities. Captivity and death encircle reproductive people, especially if they are black or Afro-indigenous. Those accused of substance abuse are often destined to incarceration if a child is born and incarceration if a pregnancy is terminated and a child is not born. What stalks reproductive people is the state *in locos parentis* or *parens patriae*: when the state encroaches on or invades every aspect of family and bodily life; when it claims the wombs for itself just as it did centuries ago in the lives, deaths, and nightmares of black and indigenous girls and women. These maternals are subject to punishment for exercising control of their wombs, as when they are accused of using nonprescribed drugs or of having or aiding an abortion in a bounty-hunter state. Meanwhile, the state exercises such control freely. The “uterus collector” function of an ICE camp in Georgia is now recognized by some because a courageous black mother, Dawn Wooten, became a “whistle blower” on forced hysterectomies performed by the state and the theft of bodily integrity and children, which Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer suffered half a century ago in the Jim Crow South. Hamer paid a price for her

courage and resistance; so did Wooten, who was forced into hiding with her children due to threats and lack of official protections.

“Gender” is not a stable concept for racially fashioned captives. When attached to the maternal it cannot perform as a form of resistance. Only when the care offered to others and ourselves leads us to challenge the foundations of state or empire—and its legalism, officialdom, billionaires, white supremacist fomenters, and police forces—do we see growth and transcend disciplines and intersections. The “maternal” descriptor is unstable; it air-brushes the absence of natality in the lives/deaths of indigenous and black women. The patina of property and whiteness is not transformative. Blacks have not inherited “whiteness as property” and so do not accumulate the wealth that coheres “maternal” narratives. Despite the frustrations and exploitation and vulnerabilities of bourgeois and nonblack females, their maternal is not the “Captive Maternal.”

Within the framework of social death developed in Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death*, safe and autonomous reproduction of our children (physically, intellectually, emotionally, mentally, and psychically) and ourselves is prohibited. In that void—in the absence of maternal power or accumulation—what do we as captive maternals create? Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus* comes to mind. What do you make or create out of death to which you helped give birth? If that creation is a mutation that no one would want, it might still be all that you have, or else the only subject/substance to which you can give birth. The Captive Maternal moves from caretaking, to protest/movement-making, then to resistance and maroonage. Think of the Attica prison rebellion³ as an act by Captive Maternals who cared for each other, maintained the edifice of captivity and torture, desired to be recognized as part of humanity and so took over the prison demanding human/civil rights. The state considered those demands to be an act of “war” and sent in the National Guard

3. See also “We Remember the Attempts to Be Free,” *Millennials Are Killing Capitalism*, August 2021 <https://millennialsarekillingcapitalism.libsyn.com/we-remember-the-attempts-to-be-free-joy-james-on-black-august-and-the-captive-maternal>. Printed in Joy James, *In Pursuit of Revolutionary Love*, London: Divided Publishing, 2022.

with military surplus from Vietnam to kill, torture, and rape the defiant prisoners. This final stage of confrontation is a betrayal in which state violence and corporate donors undermine resistance through the stick or the carrot. There are many types of cages designed to prevent captives from seeking freedom in community and fighting for the end of extraction and exploitation.

If the zone of rebellion is the only life force that we have that is not generated by conquest and capture, what happens when that zone of rebellion succumbs to fear or the insidious offerings of the state, society, philanthropy, and celebrity. The early stages of the Captive Maternal are conflicted because the desire to provide care can lead to conformity and obedience—and even to disciplining others to perform or conform—despite continued exploitation, state violence, and the international devastations of femicide, filicide, and genocide. Black Panther and Black Liberation Army veteran Dhoruba bin Wahad has asserted that if “BLM” meant not “Black Lives Matter” but “Black Liberation Movement” both the demands would coexist in ways that our desire to struggle would become more ambitious, risk-taking, and inspired by love and rebellion. Despite our anguish, and conformity or obedience within family or factory, the material conditions trending towards ecocide and genocide have not abated. An alliance among maternals based on resistance to ecocide and genocide will continue to be powerful; however, so much of our suffering appears to be isolated into the individual or the singular family.

Do we not want a liberation movement? Are we so disciplined to belong to the state and capital and the family, so distracted by consumerism or the battle with impoverishment that we can only see to meet our immediate needs and those of hungry children and sick elders? A modicum of protection is needed for the mothers of Indiana’s Pendleton Two, John Cole and Christopher Trotter, serving a combined sentence of over a century for trying to stop KKK murders in prison. Their mothers/Captive Maternals need respite, a reprieve from grief, and collective resistance to keep guards and police from torturing and murdering captives created by the Thirteenth Amendment. Public tax dollars continue to pay for the

lethal actions of police and prison guards. Whiteness as propertied identity or intersectionality as a set of propertied identities can frame fascism without fighting it. We must remember that all life forms viewed as “black” and disposable are targeted for violence. To form a Black family requires that one also organize to protect Black family. Former North Carolina child-abuse investigator Amanda Wallace, a black woman, currently battles the state from removing children from low-income black and brown families. Organizers report that in response to her caretaking activism, the state seeks to prosecute her. Attempts by mothers/fathers/families or advocates to educate the public about child removals have led to punitive responses by the state offices that manage a profitable political economy in which children are harmed or disappeared in foster care.

Misopedia, femicide, genocide, filicide. What can the maternal who is considered a citizen or civic-minded do under these conditions? Something out of voluntary progressivism. What can a Captive Maternal do? Something out of necessity. Shelley's *Frankenstein* joined severed parts and remnants together. Perhaps our politics need to be more like stitching. Regardless of the novel's resonance, it was not written for the enslaved black. We have proximity to death and to life. Captive Maternals reckon with death at the hands of impoverishment, exploitation, state, corporations, mercenaries, police forces, and militaries. This co-exists with the private/personal deaths by disease, addiction, accident, and old age. The predations of police forces overlap those of domestic violence, community and family aggressions and predations. “Black Lives Matter” is not a synonym for “Black Liberation Movement.” Maternals seeking to “matter” by accumulating within predatory formations some modicum of influence/control are distinct from maternals demanding transformational movements. For example, “Operation Stop CPS,” founded by Amanda Wallace, demands that black and brown children be returned to their communities and critiques the state as a kidnapper and profiteer. Black and indigenous children are removed from their families and communities and placed in white homes which receive funding from the state. The state provides stipends for each child placed in a foster care individual or group home or agency. Wallace asserts that through disproportionately black children become key commodities

in a foster care system that has developed into a trillion-dollar industry. Wallace's petitions against black female judges and social workers who her region contribute to disproportionality in transferring black children from their families and communities to nonblack families and communities, has led to police and judicial harassment. *Conflicts* between and among Captive Maternals are shaped by politics and class. *Antagonism* between Captive Maternals and the state apparatus is shaped by filicide, femicide, and genocide. Within U.S. law, the concepts of *parens patriae* and government *in loco parentis* dictate that the womb and what is issued from it belong to the state/corporation. This structure descends directly from the primacy of property claims from chattel slavery centuries ago to contemporary "(non)corporate owners" who facilitate the carceral containment enforced by the state and funded with tax dollars.

Captive Maternals aligned with state and corporation reject organizing that seeks to destabilize capitalism, consumerism, and the exploitation and control of impoverished children and families. In the early stages of Captive Maternal agency shaped by compromise and the "comprador" who willingly support and stabilize the existing order by working as prison guards or climbing the ranks to become the NYPD police commissioner (Keechant Sewell), or Vice President of the United States (Kamala Harris—as San Francisco District attorney supported a bill that mandated fines or incarceration for largely low-income parents if their children missed too many school days). Even without "whiteness as property," Blacks or

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“BIPOC” can enable exploitation and theft through their alienation or cooptation of liberation movements that further the monetization of black suffering and the creation of “movement millionaires.” Antblackness and contempt for the impoverished are both external and internalized phenomena. The value of life itself is skewed through antblackness and captivity, hence Captive Maternalns are fragmented through conflict, compromise, and betrayal; they are not aligned despite a lineage of centuries of dishonor and abuse.

What might we stitch together under these conditions of violence, political paralysis, and precarity? Which myriad of (noncaptive) maternalns would care for and protect resisters? Which would betray rebel organizers? “Where do we go from here?” or, “What is to be done?”

Transcend the intersection. We have already met Elegua at the crossroads. We will have to determine which maternalns to trust. Figure out what and where is “home.” Determine how to strategize security. In a constant revolution of stages, Captive Maternalns can mutate into liberators. Fascisms turn the maternal into the conflicted/celebrity caretaker whose generative powers are influenced and exploited by the state/corporation. Weary with duplicity and self-disgust, the maternal sees the opportunity to effect change by becoming the protester/movement maker who challenges repression. Recognizing the limits of emotions without political strategies, guiding theory, and material security, some folks become marooned and seek freedom movements. Hunted by state violence, these marrons are turned into captives or war resisters. Captive Maternalns can be useful despite limitations, routinized academic debates, and unstable concepts of the maternal and political struggle if they (and we who belong to this cadre at the later stages seeking resistance from all forms of captivity) embrace the rebels so that they can stay on this planet longer than the state desires. We hold them to help keep at bay depression, poverty, legal and police persecution, and imprisonment under the Thirteenth Amendment. Most, even in the midst of a war, will likely refuse to acknowledge that war exists in an affluent, yet unstable, democracy, though that democracy was born in genocide and its white nationalist midwives are becoming increasingly em-

boldened. Distractions, work hustle, and shopping suggest that many will resist acknowledging the conditions of disposability suffered by Captive Maternals. To be allies with the dispossessed, the Captive Maternals born in this matrix of disposability,⁴ requires more than merely acknowledging their identity and existence. It requires *resistance* and deep concern for those who resist repression and oppression.

We need to recognize the vulnerability of the rebels. The political family and community are as real as the personal and individual family. Rebels depart or disappear too quickly. The broader community of maternals owes resisters support in doing the dangerous work we often refuse: acknowledging and confronting state violence. Not all maternals are allies. Every white supremacist who menaced or murdered a black or indigenous person had or has a mother. So too do anti-racist queered rebels have their maternals. The concept of “the maternal” is not a unifying identity marker; maternals function in different ways under capitalism, imperialism, white nationalism and their alternatives. There are privileged maternals and hunted maternals.

The Captive Maternal matrix encompasses many political prisoners. Revolutionaries seeking justice are literally held and tortured as captives for decades: the Pendleton Two, Cole and Trotter; Rev. Joy Powell; Stephen Wilson; Sundiata Acoli; Mutulu Shakur; Leonard Peltier; Mumia Abu-Jamal, Jamil Al-Amin, Kamau Sadiki, and many more.⁵ With diverse politics, stages of development and generations, Captive Maternals comprehend and confront the violence that destabilizes healthy bonds and life itself. They proffer protections required for well-being. Rebels and organizers persecuted for their attempts to build freedom movements require and need our attention, advocacy, and care, as well as our willingness to move from caretaker into protester, to maroonage and war resistor to improve their odds of surviving and possibly thriving as they refashion kinship, community and security. ♡

4. Discussed in “Afrealism and the Black Matrix” *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 43, No. 44, Winter 2013, the concept was developed within James’s manuscript “FULCRUM: The Captive Maternal Leverages Democracy.”

5. www.thejerichomovement.com