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Mom's the Word:
Constructions of Single Motherhood in 1970s and 1980s Popular Fiction

A Thesis in English and Women's and Gender Studies
by
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ABSTRACT

This project analyzes Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974), Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) to uncover their mapping of 1970s and 1980s debates around single motherhood. American culture of the 1970s and 1980s produced new, and often racialized, discourses about single motherhood that complicated the discursive ripples of the past. The fiction of King, Naylor, and Atwood synthesizes many of the feminist and anti-feminist debates, offering distinct narratives of single motherhood that affirmed, complicated, and resisted contemporary conditions of the maternal subject. This project tries to unpack these narratives using Kristeva's theory of horror and abjection, black feminist theory of exclusion, and Foucault's theory of power. While the single mother's destabilizing potential threatened the New Right's conservative values, second-wave feminism failed to name single motherhood as a salient site of emancipatory potential that would unpack structures of domination that subjugated all women. of these texts' relationship to single mother subjectivity can reveal spaces for redemptive self-definition and empowerment.

To my mother, plainly and lovingly.

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INTRODUCTION

"Another woman's feelings soften the bitter sting of our own isolation."
—Karol Hope, "The Single Mother Experience"

This project was a labor of love. While I employ language of birth, I do not aim to elevate the research, thinking, and writing of this thesis to any sort of motherhood. I do, however, hope to use maternal vocabularies to empower this paper and to emphasize that this project would not exist had it not been driven by single mother experiences situated both in fiction and reality. In the following chapters, I lay out a history of second-wave feminism in the United States, along with its subsequent backlash, to illuminate the variety of discourses circulating at the time. Although I aim to establish a history that is comprehensive of both the women's liberation and its criticism, I understand the limits of this project—it would be impossible to capture every discourse contemporary to 1970s and 1980s America, and I write from the outside perspective of a non-mother. Similarly, this project's boundaries are further set by the shifting nature of discourse, as well as the continual evolution and interweaving of woman-centered discussions—particularly of motherhood. To say this project stemmed purely from personal interest would be reductive: this idea stemmed from my own experience as the daughter of a single mother, but also out of the residual discursive ripples that aim to categorize, diminish, and strip women of agency and still persist, as well as the discourses that aimed to empower, unite, and give access to women that can still function similarly in our present moment.

Discourses spiral seemingly without end, yet this spiral maintains its shape, the contours dependent on past discursive foundations. In this project I will argue that the discourses present in 1970s and 1980s America—both second-wave feminism and its

criticism—converged at the site of the maternal body, regardless if the reproductive capacities were hypothetical or fully realized. I further assert that fictional representations of single mothers in Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974), Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) synthesize many of these discourses while resisting, redeeming, or complicating constructions of the maternal subject. I suggest that wrestling subjectivity from single mother stories emerging out of the feminist and anti-feminist discourses of this time would pave the way for liberation transcending gender, race, and class boundaries.

METHODOLOGY

Throughout this project, I employ a New Historicist approach to contextualizing, situating, and analyzing my three primary texts: *Carrie* (1974) by Stephen King, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) by Gloria Naylor, and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood. I hope to saturate my work with an attention to history while using Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt's methods, as explained in *Practicing New Historicism* (2000).

Gallagher and Greenblatt recognize a "cultural matrix" comprised of discourses simultaneously responding to one another—a network of cultural reactions, whether aware of their reactive nature or not. This outlook proves useful for my project as I turn to popular fiction as the point of analysis because literature, though sometimes less steeped in direct political rhetoric than other texts, is nonetheless a product of the author's political moment. They argue that art emanates not from "the skill of the

individual maker," but rather, emerges from "the inner resources of a people in a particular place and time" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 7). In their introduction, Gallagher and Greenblatt attribute their New Historicist approach to the emergence of women's studies and the feminism on which the literary theory's model is built. According to Gallagher and Greenblatt, "It [women's studies] has also served to politicize explicitly an academic discourse that had often attempted to avoid or conceal aesthetic hierarchies that had been manipulated, consciously or unconsciously, to limit the cultural significance of women" (10). Gallagher and Greenblatt's naming of the women's movement as integral to New Historicism's development offers a theoretical framework that is cognizant of dominant discourse's desire to oppress women's voices. While I primarily chose New Historicism as my theoretical spine because of its desire to historicize and collect circulating discourses, I also find this approach fitting because it concurrently came to conception alongside my primary texts.

I've chosen each text for several reasons: its cultural impact, the time during which the author wrote the text, and the inclusion of single mother characters. I have also structured my chapters chronologically in order to track the progression of single mother narratives in relation to shifting historical and cultural discourses. I argue that these single mother characters act beyond representation. As Gallagher and Greenblatt claim, "Indeed, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a clear, unambiguous boundary between what is representation and what is event. At the very least, the drawing or maintaining of that boundary is itself an event" (15). The assumption that fictional texts are limited only to representational capacities underestimates the power of discourse and

language in cultivating material realities. Rather, these single mother narratives are not merely representations of reality, but actively shape a broader political and cultural discourse about single motherhood.

While Stephen King's narrative invokes the masculinist backlash against the women's liberation movement, Gloria Naylor calls for the creation of a black female subjectivity—something often excluded from second-wave feminism. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* acknowledges the feminist discourse to which the two other texts respond, as she combines both the feminist agenda and the dangers of the backlash in her novel. All three texts have been adapted on screen: *Carrie* has been produced as three film in three different decades (1976, 2002, 2013) and was performed on Broadway as a musical in 1988; *The Women of Brewster Place* was made into a 1989 mini-series; and *The Handmaid's Tale* has been adapted as a 1990 film, a 2000 opera, and a 2017 television series for online streaming. The re-imagining of these texts in other mediums exhibits their cultural clout. While I understand that *The Women of Brewster Place*, a book written by a black woman, does not carry the popular recognition or reproducibility of the other two texts, I find this disparity important in asking whose art is deemed popular enough for reproduction, which can also reflect which bodies are deemed ideal for reproduction. These texts require, according to literary and Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson, "the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed, that everything is 'in the last analysis' political" (36). Popular culture cannot be filtered from the waves of politics, and history, likewise, flows with the discursive currents of popular culture.

Throughout this project, I employ various theoretical frameworks, building on the theoretical arguments in each subsequent chapter. I've chosen to engage with Julia Kristeva, various black feminist theorists, and Michel Foucault to elucidate my claims. While neither Kristeva nor Foucault are American philosophers, their works were influential in the United States. Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), prominent black feminist scholarship (the works I chose range from 1977-1990), and Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) all emerge in the timeframe on which I focus. Their historical alignment with the fictional works I interpret allows a juxtaposition of my theoretical texts and my primary texts—each corresponding and contributing to the same circulating discourses. Kristeva, Foucault, and black feminists all theorize exclusion in the texts I've selected: Kristeva takes a psychoanalytical approach in theorizing the expulsion of the maternal subject, Foucault explores structures of domination that exclude and isolate subjects, and black feminists use their own racial and gender exclusion from the male-dominant civil rights movement and the white-dominant women's liberation. These theories of exclusion advance my own argument that locating maternal subjectivity (or its obliteration) in fictional narratives can combat single mothers' exclusion from feminist and anti-feminist discourse.

Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* is essential to my project as her psychoanalytic theory of abjection posits that the maternal body innately threatens destabilization. Abjection refers to corporeality that elicits visceral horror—bodily fluids, according to Kristeva, generally trigger abjection. Kristeva ascribes "rituals of defilement," or our cultural methods of inscribing subjects with difference to the "feeling of

abjection…converging on the maternal," which results in "the subject's fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother" (Kristeva 1980: 64). Kristeva also concerns herself with religious rituals in particular which is useful in underscoring the religiously-infused New Right of 1980s America and the controlling Christianity found in both *Carrie* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. One of the most strident critiques of psychoanalysis emphasizes the ahistoricism often practiced in these theories. However, I attempt to position abjection within the context of the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, focusing on both the individual, bodily dissociation, but also the disruption of patriarchy generated by the women's liberation. I apply Kristeva's theory of abjection in all three of my chapters, tracking the shifting encounters with the abject between the three narratives.

While introducing race into my discussion of single motherhood, I found it necessary to rely on the work of multiple black feminist theorists. However, this inclusion of several theorists mirrors black feminism's critique of essentializing discourse that privileges a single voice over others. As theorists like bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Angela Davis argue for a collective movement of black sisterhood, they also highlight the individual subjectivity necessary in realizing black female empowerment. bell hooks and Angela Davis concern their work with wrestling black identity from the structures of power that sustain black women's oppression, including the racial domination within the women's liberation. In *Women, Culture, and Politics*, Angela Davis argues for progressive art that "function[s] as a sensitizer and a catalyst, propelling people toward involvement in organized movements seeking to effect radical social

change" (200). Here, Davis posits that literature can be an emancipatory site through which knowledge—found in lived experiences and the emotions that arise from those experiences—can produce subjectivity. According to Davis, and many black feminist theorists, black female experiences offer knowledge that, though situated outside the hierarchical structures of domination, can wield power to combat these systems. Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins criticizes the methods of validating only certain kinds of truth (and knowledge), posing self-definition, "the power to name one's own reality" (300), as a strategy for reclaiming white projections of black womanhood. These self-definitions are made evident in Naylor's work, while Atwood recognizes their erasure from the dominant discourse. However, these theorists' work also argues for "the exercise of power to end domination" (hooks 83) that elevates horizontal systems of power, rather than hierarchical systems of oppression. This horizontality can combat problematic representations of single mothers, while illuminating the redemptive potential of single mother narratives. Redemptive potential, I argue, exists when a text portrays agential single mother characters, or criticizes existing structures that subjugate maternal characters without leaving gaps through which subjectivity can emerge.

The last major theorist with whom I engage is the French philosopher Michel Foucault. I primarily employ his theories of power found in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), which foreground a Panoptic power system of social control. In this work, Foucault argues that modes of discipline have shifted from spectacle to hidden self-policing where "inspection functions ceaselessly" under the threat of constant surveillance (195). I use a Foucauldian approach to my third chapter to examine

Atwood's fictionalized account of a world reflecting America's reality in this moment. This analysis proves useful in exposing how discipline "arrests or regulates movements," as the reproductive debates regulated women's bodies; how the Gileadean structure of power "clears up confusion" as controlling images of women—particularly black women—aim to make their subjectivity legible and, thus, dominatable; how the New Right's antifeminist agenda "dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways," aiming to cease the dissemination of feminist ideology (Foucault 219). The counterculture of the 1960s sparked an invigorated desire to neutralize the social revolutions and Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* focuses on structures that desire to maintain hierarchical structures of power, whether visible to those subjugated by the Panoptic system of self-discipline or not. These hierarchies constitute the cultural, political, and material powers that marginalized single mothers.

While Kristeva, Davis, hooks, Collins, and Foucault comprise my theoretical framework for this project, I could not have collected the history of second-wave feminism and its backlash without the historical surveys offered by feminist scholars and historians. Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), Flora Davis's *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America Since 1960* (1991), Sheila Rowbotham's *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the United States in the Twentieth Century* (1997), and Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon's *Dear Sisters: Dispatches From The Women's Liberation Movement* (2001) offer maps that make the historical terrain of the women's movement and its backlash more navigable. Furthermore, Dorothy Roberts' *Killing the Black Body* (1997)

synthesizes many of the discourses specific to black womanhood present in the ‘70s and ‘80s and offers a comprehensive interpretation of racialized gender systems of power. These works have enriched my research by providing a historical backbone with which I support my major claims. Without their archival accounts of discourses—particularly news media, film, television, and politics—I could not have paved the historical account necessary to my project.

The first chapter of my project focuses on Stephen King’s *Carrie*, published in 1974. I argue that, despite King’s efforts to expose the consequences of masculine backlash against second-wave feminism, he becomes complicit in his critique, sustaining the fear that sparked anti-feminist political organization. He relies on the abject in sustaining anxieties about the women’s movement. I assert that his use of the abject and gendered tropes implicitly attributes the demise in “traditional” America (made manifest in violent death) to maligned single motherhood and indomitable female power.

My second chapter attempts to address the racialized single mother portrayed in Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982). Throughout her book, Naylor complicates Kristeva’s conception of abjection, generating new narratives of femaleness that incorporate racialized experiences of black women. Her characterization of both black female individuals and the community they constitute reflects the solidarity necessary—according to black feminists—in realizing the emancipatory potential of black feminist thought. I argue that Naylor’s story of black single mother experiences offers a way not only of foregrounding black female subjectivity, but also offers a way to generate subjectivity through narrativity.

My third chapter builds on the previous two by recognizing the women's liberation, its complication of black female subjectivity, and the New Right's backlash present in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). In this final chapter, I argue that Atwood makes visible the obscured structures of power and self-discipline that dominated Reagan's conservative era as the New Right sought to neutralize the progress of the two prior decades. I emphasize her use of the potential maternal body as a site of control and abjection; my analysis of Atwood's construction of the maternal body allows me to merge Foucault's theories of power with Kristeva's theories of abjection.

Throughout this project, I hope not only to position single motherhood as a useful point of discourse analysis, but also to offer a model of recollecting and arranging history to pose new ways of negotiating womanhood and all the multiplicities that accompany that social identity. The remainder of this introduction is largely concerned with laying a foundation on which to build my argument.

THE SEVENTIES AND EIGHTIES: FEMINISM AND ITS OPPOSITION

While I will elaborate the discourses specifically correlating to each primary text in my individual chapters, this section lays out the debates between feminists and anti-feminists in this period. The purpose of this section is also to rationalize my analysis of 1970s and 1980s as central to my argument.

I chose this particular moment in United States history because the 1970s and 1980s proved pivotal decades for both women's rights and the rise of conservatism that hoped to rebuild America on the values of 1950s traditionalism. Second-wave feminism,

beginning in the 1960s, combatted the normative gender expectations of the 1950s—the unfulfilling life of middle-class women that Betty Friedan verbalizes in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Although some view the women's liberation movement as a radical off-shoot of second-wave feminism, I will use the terms interchangeably as both the second wave and the women's liberation were sustained by the same activism and the boundary between the two blurred over time. The second-wave aimed to continue much of what first-wave feminists began, including the political advocacy for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). In fact, lobbying for the ERA's passage kindled more widespread organizational support within the movement. After nearly fifty years of the ERA's inception, the amendment was reintroduced in 1971 by Martha Griffiths, a Democrat serving in the U.S. House of Representatives. Her reintroduction led to a debate on the floor of the House, and the ERA was approved by the Senate in 1972 (Flora Davis). As the ERA gained momentum, New Right leaders like Phyllis Schlafly argued against its ratification claiming the amendment would cause a female military draft and would disadvantage housewives. This counterstrike also mobilized conservative women in the New Right, bolstering opposition to the women's movement. In 1979, the ERA's ratification deadline expired, with thirty-five of the required thirty-eight states necessary in passing a constitutional amendment (Flora Davis 135). The rise in support, near passage, and expiration of the ERA reflects the discursive shifts in the United States over the course of two decades.

Second-wave feminism gave birth to large, liberal organizations like the National Organization for Women (established in 1966) and Women's Equity Action League

(1968), however the rise of consciousness-raising (CR) groups that connected women's personal experiences to broader gender institutions and structures bred specialized camps of feminism (Baxandall and Gordon 13). These distinctions were based on many ideological differences—liberal feminists sought equal access; radical feminism emphasized the fight against sexist oppression; Marxist feminists attributed sexism to a patriarchal system of capitalism; psychoanalytic feminism built upon Freud's theories to explain heteronormative domination; and women of color often banded in a collective effort to eradicate their oppression and erasure both within and outside of the feminist movement.

As the women's liberation movement fractured into specialized groups, the New Right—a term referring to the national rise of conservatism that first rallied in the 1960s and eventually dominated the Reagan years—used the political tactics and rhetoric established by the civil rights and feminist movements to bolster their own cause. By the mid-1970s, anti-feminists garnered support from right-wing corporate powers, religious fundamentalists, anti-communists, and the media (Baxandall and Gordon 17). While many women of the New Right engaged in more conservative politics than the women of the second wave, these New Right women often found that the women's liberation provided the tools necessary to empower them. Phyllis Schlafly and other female political activists like Beverly LaHaye and Connie Marshner, all reaped the benefits of stardom in the New Right as they represented the conservative women of the United States. These women headed organizations like the Heritage Foundation (established in 1973) and Concerned Women for America (1979) which pushed against the progress made by

second-wave feminism. However, their leadership within the New Right aligned with the feminist values they fought so hard to eschew (Faludi 256). As they propagated anti-abortion manifestos and worked against women's reproductive access to contraception—platforms conducive to middle-class traditional gender roles—these women also became career women, intent on keeping their newly realized power intact within the conservative realm. Despite their political campaigns against feminist progress, their own careers developed out of the discourses of the women's liberation movement. While I could have chosen to focus on the moments in which this counterculture rose to prominence, I wanted to look at the discourses that these movements produced over time as their arguments and methods of dissemination developed and interlocked. The strides made by the women's liberation quickly became central to Reagan and the New Right's attempts to dismantle progress.

This present America, of 2018—where polarized views dominate all forms of media, consciousness-raising tools are accessible online, and marching in streets has once again become a mainstreamed method for activists on both the Left and Right—mirrors the tensions present fifty years ago. I've collected this research and reviewed feminist texts, along with their subsequent anti-feminist counterparts, and have found an unsevered thread mapping the fight for women's rights in the family, workplace, reproductive autonomy, and education into this present moment when debates about these rights remain eerie echoes of the past. Similarly, I've found a thread mapping the anti-feminist, "pro-family" rhetoric that has unraveled continuously since the late 1960s into 2018. One aim of this project is to underscore the importance of revisiting past discourses

that have transcended the eras where they took precedence. Collecting a history in a way that not only juxtaposes polarized views within their contexts, but also tracks how those discourses resonate in our present moment—where we have a man accused of sexual assault in the presidency and millions of women willing to march against the ideologies he represents—will excavate the voices and experiences that have been appropriated or rendered invisible.

THE SINGLE MOTHER: BOTH MARGIN AND CENTER

I chose to pivot my project around single mothers because they occupy a location in American society that is simultaneously marginalized, while single mothers' shortcomings are centered in anti-feminist discussions. Some feminist writing during this time enlightened me to the isolated feelings of single mothers as these women noticed their own underrepresentation. Issues affecting single mothers were foregrounded in national discussion, yet this population lacked a means of collective empowerment— the women's movement attempted to offer this needed support. As anti-feminists attempted to pin the rise in single motherhood on the women's movement through the destruction of family and marriage, they neglected an entire population of single mothers who fell into their position inadvertently. In "The Single Mother Experience," (1972) Karol Hope calls for the union of single mothers in a collective effort to make the fight for their rights and visibility. In her call to action she writes, "SEVEN MILLION of us divorced, separated, widowed, never-been-married mothers in the United States with children under 18…" (229). Through her invitation to unite, Hope acknowledges the racial and economic

disparities among the single mother population. “We lack the resources. The tools. The recognition…we lack a community,” Hope writes, recognizing single mothers’ inability to navigate their social conditions due to their exclusion from dominant second-wave discourse and the simultaneous attack on their agency from conservative political spheres.

Furthermore, the woman’s body carries inscriptions of reproduction that situate her body in motherhood—whether that motherhood is hypothetical, fully realized, failed, or rejected by dominant discourses. The landmark case of *Roe v. Wade* (1973) deemed the denial of a woman’s right to an abortion unconstitutional, yet laws could still place restrictions on abortion procedures, oftentimes making access to safe abortions difficult. According to Baxandall and Gordon, the New Right’s recognition of anti-abortion campaigns as useful tools for building its conservative following also forced feminist organizations, once again, to center the reproduction rights debate. *Roe v. Wade* sparked national anti-abortion outrage and since the 1973 decriminalization of abortion, anti-choice activists have participated in the annual March for Life held on the anniversary of the decision.

Like a tennis match in which the players are caught in an endless volley, each swing receiving and reacting to the opposition’s thrust, the abortion debate triggered a continual chain reaction. As Christianity fueled many vociferous anti-abortion activists, there were Catholic women who supported the repeal of abortion criminalization. One 1974 press release from Catholics for a Free Choice spotlighted the hypocrisy evident in the veneration of the fetus “above the life, health, and the religious and civil rights of the

woman involved," as they acknowledged the patriarchal all-male hierarchy present within and outside of Catholic institutions. Their press release then claims, "women are no longer accepting in silence their shackles of religious and political socialization," recognizing the patriarchy that has "oppressed them for millennia" (Catholics for a Free Choice 147). Throughout their statement, the organization calls upon its own Catholic history to support its advocacy for choice. Despite efforts like these to exhibit the coexistence of faith and feminism, the New Right still depended on the religiosity of its conservative demographic. While both support and backlash against the women's movement precipitated in civilian protest, I examine the rhetoric of American politicians' speeches to archive a richer historical map.

While addressing a group of evangelicals in Orlando, Florida in 1983, Ronald Reagan acknowledged the "sincerely motivated" intentions of the women's liberation movement, or "an organization of citizens," to make safe and legal abortions accessible. His refusal to name the movement detracts from their unification on such matters, while also minimizing the effect that second-wave feminism had on the nation. He posed the fight for reproductive rights against "traditional values" and further claimed that the "fight against parental notification…abrogate[s] the original terms of American democracy." He positioned the feminist agenda as an "intrusion on the family by the government" and elevated the rights of "family" over "Washington-based bureaucrats and social engineers," alluding to major organizations like NOW. As he gave his speech, Reagan invoked the Religious Right asserting, "Freedom prospers when religion is vibrant and the rule of law under God is acknowledged" (Reagan, "Remarks at the

Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals"). Pro-family attacks on the feminist movement rose to prominence as the nation's most powerful public office holders rejected reproductive autonomy and families that fell outside the American ideal.

While issues that affected the single mother population were foregrounded, their social category proved largely absent from the national discussion, unless seen as implicitly opposing "traditional values" that elevated a heteronormative familial structure comprised of two parents. As feminists and anti-feminists centered discussions of reproductive rights in their platforms, they often erased the links between reproductive rights and single motherhood.

I am not trying to oppose the fight for reproductive rights nor diminish the work done by organizers, like the Jane Collective, who sought to support women in need or want of abortion prior to its decriminalization. I do, however, hope to highlight the ways in which certain aspects of reproduction were excluded from the main conversations. Absent from the spotlight were women of color, many of whom were made victims to contraceptive technologies—for example, the birth control pill was initially tested on Puerto Rican women with sometimes fatal results, and sterilization had been forced onto women of color in a concealed eugenic push for a "superior" society. Many of these women of color were also single mothers—another demographic excluded from the discussion in myriad ways. Advocacy for single mothers often came from their own organizing efforts or from other marginalized groups within second-wave feminism whose identities commonly intersected with single motherhood, like black women.

While constructing this project, single motherhood proved a salient focal point of my discourse analysis because the social category has been increasingly racialized. Nixon and Reagan's administrations in the 1970s and 1980s found effective ways to villainize the black single mother, piggybacking off the claims found in Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965). In this study, Moynihan posited that African American communities were failing due to the dissolution of the family—the men of the family were being overpowered by matriarch figures and, according to Moynihan, salvaging the health of these communities necessitated a black male reclamation of normative patriarchal positions. Although Moynihan addresses slavery as a root cause to the poverty of black families, he neglects the reproduction of slavery through Jim Crow (to be ignited again, during this time, in the system of mass-incarceration) in the hegemonic white values that piloted the political, social, and material trends of the country. According to a *New York Times* article, Nixon was recorded telling an aide after the 1973 court case that, although he mainly opposed abortion, he saw cases in which abortion was necessary—for him, these cases were those of rape and cases of interracial relations, or "when you have a black and a white" (Savage). Furthermore, Nixon's southern strategy, which he employed in the wake of the civil rights movement, sparked a war on drugs that affected communities of color at disproportionate rates (*Thirteenth*). As both anti-black and anti-drug (oftentimes, the two were conflated) rhetoric and policy syphoned black boys and men into prisons, this institutional and regulated racism produced a population of black single mothers.

These black single mothers, like their male counterparts, were also marked as dangerous and immoral. As the conservative era of Reagan ushered in reactionary, traditional American values, he proliferated the image of the welfare queen, further racializing the category of single mother. One 1976 *New York Times* article quotes Reagan's sensational account of Linda Taylor's exploitation of the welfare system in Chicago. Despite his claims that Taylor had used "80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards" while simultaneously "collecting veterans benefits on four nonexisting deceased husbands" ("Welfare Queen Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign"), these statistics were hyperbolic propaganda to construct the black single mother as a threat to the nation's health. The article challenges these claims, revealing that the alleged $150,000 in fraudulent abuses was, in reality, estimated to be $8000—and that Reagan exaggerated the extent of her false identities. However, the *New York Times* article does not erase the impact of Reagan's speech; he had already further kindled the American attack on the "welfare queen."

The trope of the "welfare queen" not only disseminated racist misconceptions of black mothers, but contributed to the dangerous hypersexualization of black femininity. Black women were attacked for their rates of reproduction and their alleged disproportionate use of welfare benefits (as seen in the 1967 article), but the material realities of their situations were often overlooked. Many black women had neither the access afforded middle-class white women (central to the women's liberation) nor their white privilege, and the reasons for their single status or their maternal conditions were generally attributed to race, rather than the history of racialized economy in the United

States. In her book, *Killing the Black Body*, which focuses on the reproductive abuses and exploitation of black women, Dorothy Roberts asserts that support for maternal welfare fell in the late 1960s and 1970s because the general public perceived welfare as primarily supporting black mothers (208). During this time, the New Right propagated demonizing representations of the black single mother and marshalled these representations towards making a case against welfare.

While the language surrounding black single motherhood proved critical, as Joan Scott claims, this controlling rhetoric did not remain purely representational—the dissemination of such rhetoric also resulted in material consequences. She argues that language proves a useful site for understanding the ways in which social relations are negotiated because "understanding how they are conceived means understanding how they work—how institutions are organized, how relations of production are experienced, and how collective identity is established" (Scott 447). These discourses soon transformed into policy that disproportionately disadvantaged single mothers. While Nixon eliminated the Office of Economic Opportunity in 1973 (Roberts 208), there was support for reproductive abuses of women of color via forced sterilization and welfare cap laws (Roberts 210). Legislative measures like welfare family caps denied further aid to women already receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). While many of these caps did not come into effect until the early '90s, the cultural dialogue that made their passage possible garnered power during Reagan's era.

Despite the contrast in the lived experiences of black single mothers and those of white, middle-class single mothers, conservative America constructed a dangerous

perception of all single motherhood. Single mothers, as a social identity and category, posed a threat to the patriarchal system that established a heterosexual, two-parent household. The anti-feminist sentiment that questioned the health of the American family punctuated this heteronormative familial standard. Even prior to Reagan-era reactionary politics, the push for childcare emphasized nuclear family-centered childrearing, rather than communal. This emphasis devalued the familial structures of many black communities which denies the single mother access to alternate means of supporting herself and her child(ren). Furthermore, the divorce rate increased exponentially during this time, driving 100,000 more women and children below the poverty line each year between 1969-1978 (Flora Davis 283). However, despite the political narrative dictating a causal relationship between feminism and divorce rates, this increase began prior to the second wave and resulted from myriad cultural shifts and changes in marriage. Nevertheless, the perceived precarity of the traditional family caused many anti-feminists to reject familial structures incongruent with the nuclear model.

Along with the push for reproductive rights and equality in economic opportunity during the 1960s and 1970s, feminists fought for women's economic independence from men. The single mother stands as an identity reliant on a woman's ability to sustain a family economically. Just as the feminist movement faced opposition from the New Right, this anti-feminist backlash did not go unnoticed in feminist circles, nor in major news media. In 1981, *New York Times* released an article that highlighted major cuts proposed by the Reagan administration that disadvantaged women. The article highlighted how poverty during this time (and during our present moment, as well) was a

women's issue, however its statistics also revealed the negative effect Reagan's budget cuts would have on single mothers. The researchers found that 86 percent of the three million people receiving the monthly benefit that Reagan threatened to eliminate were women. These cuts would disproportionately affect single mothers as AFDC—which nearly benefitted mostly households headed by women—would face both cuts (upwards 400,000) and reductions (285,000 families would receive reduced benefits) (Schafran A00023). These cuts would further push single mothers to the margins, creating a larger gap in their ability to achieve and maintain economic independence.

The debates surrounding women's reproductive rights, their economic independence, and their destabilization of the family constitute the major feminist and anti-feminist discourses during this time, centering issues in which single motherhood is always entangled. These very issues comprise the threatening nature of single motherhood to anti-feminists, yet illuminate second-wave feminism's failure to center and explicitly name single motherhood as a point of liberation. This negligence emerges from the women's movement's failure to recognize the New Right's demonization of single mothers and, subsequently, many feminists' inability to combat this demonization with single mother-centered counternarratives. Nonetheless, media's depiction of single motherhood at the time reveals an attempt to comprehend the fear and power attached to their social identity made manifest in cinema, television, documentaries, self-help books, and popular fiction (Jenkins 133). While I acknowledge the gravity of realizing those fears or recognizing spaces for redemption in popular media, my project aims to situate popular fiction within the discursive thrust of 1970s and 1980s America. While I

emphasize the effects my primary texts have on American culture and discourse, I realize that these texts do not act alone in swaying the discourse responsible for situating single mothers in either a disadvantaged or agential position on the spectrum of power.

Film and television act as texts whose examination can unpack the cultural attitudes surrounding women, feminism, and their newly-found independence following the second wave. While single, career-driven women who defied the traditional molds of femininity found exposure on feature films and major networks in the 1970s, their time in the spotlight was retracted as the 1980s regressed into the revived social conservatism of the 1950s. In the 1970s and early 1980s, there was a surge in movies that focused on women who defied traditional gender roles and expectations. Susan Faludi tracks these changes in her book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women.* In *Private Benjamin* (1980), Goldie Hawn challenged her previous, typecast roles, as she plays a widow whose emotional support and strength is derived from other female relationships. Other films, like *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1970) and *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) illuminated the oppressive categories of womanhood pushed onto housewives. Furthermore, there seemed a common thread of social activism as films like *Julia* (1977), *Norma Rae* (1979), *9 to 5* (1980), and *The China Syndrome* (1979) all portrayed concerns with specific social ills, be them works' rights, equal pay, or nuclear safety (Faludi 124-5).

However, as the mid-late 1980s ushered in the rise of the New Right, cinematic representation of happy, independent women declined rapidly. While career women were still featured in many films, just as women's presence in the workforce rose (particularly

middle-class women whose households had never depended on women's labor before), their depictions changed from the 1970s, and early-1980s portrayals. As though reversing the reels, Faludi observes a trend of disenchanting audiences with the liberation achieved by feminists in the 1970s. One of the most popular television shows of the 1980s, *Cheers*, directly responded to the foregrounding of female independence by elevating chauvinistic masculinity through the character of Sam Malone. Its co-producer, Glenn Charles says that Sam "is a spokesman for a large group of people who thought that [the women's movement] was a bunch of bull and look with disdain upon people who don't think it was" (Faludi 144). While heteronormativity never disappeared from America's cultural DNA, there emerged a longing to reinforce these heteronormative gender roles—there was a revival of shows from previous decades like *The New Leave It to Beaver* and *The New Newlywed Game*. These revivals very literally drew on the 1950s nostalgia, rekindling the discourses that entered popular culture (and were proliferated by popular culture) of a time prior to the women's liberation and the era of civil rights.

Literary texts reacting to this same discursive moment reinforced fears made manifest in the anti-feminist backlash, while other texts find the gaps in which to build single mother subjectivity and consequently, self-definition. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins argues that prominent activists in black women's history are not "victims," but rather "survivors" whose ideas and experiences "suggest that not only does a self-defined, group-derived Black women's standpoint exist, but that its presence has been essential to U.S. Black women's survival" (98). The notion of self-definition and subjectivity as forging methods of survival emphasizes the importance of agential

narratives of single motherhood—as well as the harmful effects of denying maternal subjectivity.

CHAPTER I: MASCULINIST BACKLASH AND M(OTHER)LY HORROR

"When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one sex to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the power of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of woman and mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation."

—Bread and Roses, "Declaration of Women's Independence"

"…the horror genre has often been able to find national phobic pressure points, and those books and films which have been the most successful almost always seem to play upon and express fears which exist across a wide spectrum of people. Such fears, which are often political, economic, and psychological rather than supernatural, give the best work of horror a pleasing allegorical feel…"

— Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* 2010

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the fervor of both second-wave feminism and its masculinist response in 1974, Stephen King debuted his first novel, *Carrie*, which sold over one million copies in its first year. This success helped to popularize the horror genre and catapulted King into literary fame. In this chapter I examine the narratives of femaleness and single motherhood present in *Carrie*, exposing King's reliance on maternal horror. I argue that, through his use of abject bodily horror, King constructs the maternal body as the center of instability, which inadvertently authorizes men's efforts to quell the feminist movement. I acknowledge that King did not intend to animate this male opposition, but rather critique the structures that expel the Other—an objective congruent with the women's movement. However, his narrative nonetheless is complicit in bolstering anti-feminist sentiment resulting in the denial of female subjectivity. I will lay historical groundwork that contextualizes the discourses that Stephen King synthesizes in *Carrie* in order to analyze the text using a feminist literary lens and apply psychoanalytic theories of motherhood to

my interpretation. Lastly, I will position his construction of single motherhood in relation to those discourses.

MEN FIGHT BACK AGAINST WOMEN FIGHTING BACK

One of the most vociferous oppositions to this new wave of feminism came from men who had, thus far, benefitted from the patriarchal privilege embedded in American structures of power and institutions. As their insecurity kindled a reaction against women's liberation, this men's countermovement proved neither united, nor unchallenged in the turn of the decade which carried with it the 1960s' potential promise to sustain the progress of more liberal social movements. Even within New Left political activism—oftentimes college students and young liberals—a distrust of female coalition developed. The threat of female empowerment was so destabilizing to men that, regardless of political polarization, feminism sparked significant male fear. In 1969, during an anti-war demonstration protesting Richard Nixon's election, Marilyn Webb, a Democrat and feminist activist, took stage only for her display of feminism to be met with a sea of male boos, shouts, whistles, and cat-calls—the audience even threatened to rape her (*She's Beautiful When She's Angry*). Despite the legal and social strides made in the 1960s, women still lacked a platform and an audience to listen.

However, outside of the New Left, the threat of cultural change continued to heighten male fear of feminism. These fears manifested in myriad ways, both explicitly and with subtlety, through various modes of media. Not only did media construct narratives through misleading portrayals of women in the movement, but fabricated data

to manipulate the public's perception of second-wave feminism's progress and objectives. According to feminist journalist and author, Susan Faludi, during the 1970s the Labor Department had reported a nonexistent narrowing of the wage gap, the Equal Employment Opportunity Committee (EEOC) claimed that there was a decline in workplace sexual harassment, while the Justice Department attested to declining rates of rape (Faludi 56). These reports made the causes for which feminists fought appear moot—feminists' jobs were complete, and they could return to the comfort of silent complacency now that their needs were met. Faludi further bridges the connection between masculinity and economic success as she exposes the two groups of men intent on disrupting the progress of the second wave of feminism: blue-collar workers whose value in America's capitalist system dropped as the economy shifted its focus from manufacturing to service, and baby boomers who were denied the wealth that their older counterparts reaped (67). It is the union of their fearful suspicion that electrified the reactionary backlash against gender equality.

However, this backlash expanded beyond skewed data that offered an air of objectivity and established a combative rhetoric with which to regard the women's movement. When *Newsday* writer Marilyn Goldstein was assigned a piece on the women's movement, her male editor requested she, "Get out there and find an authority who'll say this is all a crock of shit" (Faludi 76). This incident does not stand alone—women reporters across the nation experienced the male-controlled media's desire to squash the movement or simplify the feminist cause to mute the legitimacy of their fight. While criticism sprouted from various demographics and thought camps, one of the most

recognizable backlashes came from men explicitly challenging the second wave. In every historical moment of female resistance of male dominance, a "crisis of masculinity" (Faludi) has emerged in response to such progress.

One attack fell on the shoulders of single mothers as they threatened both the economic and familial structures set by a patriarchal expectation of the nuclear family. A faction of pro-family feminism emerged that seemed to stand contrary to the material necessities and desires of single mothers, isolating single mothers and erasing their experiences. There was a representational pattern that allocated single mothers into categories of shame. These anti-feminist sentiments also revealed themselves in cultural texts that reached millions of readers. Popular fiction reflected cultural values specific to this time period and circulated (even subtle or subliminal) ideas that reinforced or destabilized structures of power. While an analysis of the text and its author's own sociopolitical position illuminates how the text is positioned within the culture, the manner of consumption can also reinforce or challenge preconceptions—whether that book's reception proves congruent with the author's initial intent.

AMERICA MEETS THE WHITES

Stephen King, now a household name, had not found major success as a writer until he published *Carrie* in 1974. Born in 1947 and raised in a working-class household headed by a single mother, King, though benefitting from the privilege of his maleness and whiteness, experienced the oppressive structures of class hierarchy. Although most material conditions of *Carrie* do not align with King's reality, he locates his story in

small-town Maine (King has only ever lived in this state), and he includes a narrative of single motherhood. In a 2009 interview with Kerri Miller, King admits that *Carrie* touched markets unfamiliar to him. He explains the hypermasculine nature of his previous target audience saying, "At that time they [the magazines] had names like 'Cavalier' and 'Dude' and 'Gent' and 'Adam'…" (King 2009). Although writing *Carrie* offered repose from King's typical audience, he nonetheless cultivated an understanding of the male mindset concerned with preserving masculinity. Throughout his novel, King elicits horror by embodying fears, grounded in a shifting reality (social anxiety and isolation, fanaticism, dismantled social orders), in monstrous characters. Not only did *Carrie* enter the discourse of second-wave feminism and its reactive counter movements, the book sprang into the well of popular American fiction, selling more than 1 million copies in its first year of publication and its re-adaptations exhibit the vast social impact of King's seminal work, as well as the breadth of his reach.

Carrie is a novel that takes place in 1979—which was near-future at the time of its initial publication—set in Chamberlain, Maine. Carietta "Carrie" White is the only child of religious fanatic and widowed single mother Margaret White. As Margaret's physical and psychological abuse of Carrie isolates her from "normal" socialization, Carrie's classmates ostracize the sixteen-year-old. Carrie's inability to negotiate her unexpected leap into womanhood uncovers telekinetic powers that she eventually wields to revenge a prom night spectacle orchestrated by her bullies. The telekinesis allows Carrie not only manipulates objects without physically touching them, her psyche also penetrates the thoughts of multiple characters. Beside the unusual nature of *Carrie*'s plot,

King also uses unconventional techniques to construct his narrative. He offers what Verena Lovett terms "specialist discourses" like news reporting, scholarship, and historic accounts of Carrie's undoing. While this narrative strategy functions to reinforce the realness of Carrie's world, these excerpts also flank the main narrative as King recognizes discourse's contribution to constructions of self and Other.

While this chapter is concerned with broader gender implications I want to call particular attention to how King constructs Margaret White—the single mother. He uses this technique of specialist discourses in employing tropes of mother-blaming. In fact, the first outside "text" he offers readers, in the opening page, is a news clipping reporting unusual happenings at the White residence. From the very beginning, he writes, "Mrs. White could not be reached for comment" (King 3), marking Margaret with immediate unavailability—she is not legible to the public and, thus, inhabits the dangers of the unknown Other. Before we meet Margaret in the main narrative, King primes readers with external conceptions of this single mother character to situate Margaret outside these contours of social propriety. In several sections, Carrie reflects on her mother's severe faith and the imposing rituals that accompany Margaret's Christianity.

One of the specialist discourses—another moment where King offers readers external accounts before rooting Margaret in the main narrative—paints a scene of a young Carrie unable to recognize the anatomy of her female neighbor. When her sunbathing neighbor suggests that Carrie, too, would develop similarly, Carrie replies, "No I won't…Momma says good girls don't" (King 35). King's narrator later reveals that Carrie referred to breasts as "dirty pillows," following her mother's example. Margaret

fails to give Carrie access to concepts and vocabularies that offer ways of negotiating femaleness, and Carrie's inability to identify inscriptions of femaleness on her own body immediately marks her body with the unfamiliar, the other, with shame.

However, this shame manifests not only in Carrie's estrangement from her own body, but also from Margaret's abuse and punishment. Margaret relies on Christian fanaticism as a means of negotiating womanhood, living a life of isolation in attempt to purify her sin and female sexual desire. Julia Kristeva suggests, in her 1977 essay "Stabat Mater," that women no longer have a point of identification beyond the cult of the Virgin Mary, or the cult of virginity. Margaret White seems intent on maintaining this identification through her Christian fanaticism and the rejection of her own reproductive capacities. Margaret denies her own participation in intercourse, claiming that Carrie's conception was immaculate. In *Carrie,* Stephen King generates the contents of a letter written by Margaret—another example of a cultivated specialist discourse. In the letter, she writes that she and her late husband Ralph were living "without the 'Curse of Intercourse" in order to "close their 'abode of wickedness.'" (King 71). She then calls abstinence "the oney [*sic*] way you & That Man can avoid the Rain of Blood yet to come" claiming that she and Carrie's father "like Mary & Joseph, will neither know or polute [*sic*] each other's flesh" (King 71). She cannot negotiate her female sexual desire, this desire enmeshed in the Lacanian *jouissance*—a term Kristeva borrows—and Margaret disappears the impurities from her account of Carrie's conception.

However, Margaret's expulsion of her "sinfulness" extends to Carrie's upbringing as Margaret wields power in the form of abusive punishment—however, to Margaret, this

punishment functions reconciliatorily, or to atone for her regressions. In another scene (one of the first where Margaret appears in the main narrative), Margaret drags her daughter to repent at the altar in their home, telling Carrie to bow and pray. Yet, as Carrie protests, King writes, "Momma brought her hand down on the back of Carrie's neck…Carrie's eye-bulging face jerked forward and her forehead smacked the altar, leaving a mark and making the candles tremble" (64). Here, readers finally see the strangeness of Margaret's actions after being primed by the specialist discourses that precede this scene narration. Her mothering is violent, and Margaret's inability to accept her female body unfolds in her punishment of Carrie. As the scene escalates, Margaret orders Carrie to go to the closet designated for repentance. She continues to "beat Carrie's back, her neck, her head" until "Carrie was driven, reeling, into the close blue glare of the closet" (King 66). When Carrie finally resists, screaming back at Margaret, her mother throws her into the closet "headfirst and she [Carrie] struck the far wall," (King 67). Margaret's inability to negotiate her femaleness and motherhood results in the formation of a mother-monster. Furthermore, we are reminded of Margaret's motherhood by Carrie's voice. As King sustains Carrie's perspective throughout the third person narration, Margaret is known to us as "Momma." This name reflects Carrie's childlike attachment, but this attachment only emphasizes Margaret's abuse.

HORROR AND THE ABJECT MATERNAL BODY

Horror is a genre entrenched in gendered performance of female tropes—whether the female character embodies the victim or the monster. Psychoanalytic feminism offers

explanations that attempt to unpack the complex relationship between horror and gender—how are women's bodies represented? How are female characters granted subjectivity, if at all? What makes the maternal abject? Julia Kristeva, one of the pioneering theorists of the abject released *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* in 1980. Kristeva, though a Bulgarian-French philosopher, was popular in the United States, especially in the 1980s, and *Powers of Horror* was widely-read in feminist and philosophy circles.

While I draw upon Julia Kristeva's theories of abjection and the maternal body, I aim to situate her theory of the abject within the cultural and political frame of this particular moment in American history. Kristeva links abjection with the maternal body. I further argue that single motherhood proves particularly abject because single motherhood not only disrupts the corporeal dissociation of self, but also, as Imogen Tyler writes, "generates the borders of the individual *and* the social body" (79). Abjection obscures self and other by triggering a crisis where one is reidentified with the state of pre-being, preceding the separation of Self and Other. However this obscuring reflects both an internal, subjective disruption of identity, and an external, socio-political disruption of order. In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Taboo and Pollution* (1966), Mary Douglas argues against isolating bodily margins from external boundaries, claiming, "There is no reason to assume any primacy for the individual's attitude to his own bodily and emotional experience any more than for his cultural and social experience" (121).

To place these notions of purity and danger within the context of 1970s America, I wish to recall Margaret's letters in *Carrie* that I have previously explored. The language in these letters that deny Margaret's sexual relationship with Ralph recalls Mary Douglas's claims—for Margaret, the purifying rituals of Christianity liberate her from the dirt of her own *jouissance*. This mindset encapsulates the cult of virginity that Kristeva argues has lost potency. While I recognize Kristeva's assertion of a disappeared cult of virginity, I argue that the Religious Right created a similar crisis of womanhood in attempt to reanimate models of femininity entrenched in ritual and religion. In *Carrie*, King captures the opposing discourses of this historical moment, where the women's movement foregrounded reproductive rights as anti-choice activists sought to resurrect defunct notions of purity. He simultaneously aligns Margaret with the Religious Right, while employing the trope of a monster-mother that sustains a masculine fear of female power and independence.

Purity, I argue, also depends on maintaining bodily integrity. The single mother not only signifies the disruption of subjective self-identity, but also disentangles assumptions of gender roles that dictated female dependence and inferiority. She, as a subject inhabiting a specific cultural identity within the United States, threatens the integrity of the social body whose arthritic joints are infected by patriarchal backlash. Single mothers pose a further threat which Kristeva clarifies in her connection between the maternal body and the site of pre-being. Pre-being refers to the space where the subject is not yet subject, but one with the (m)other. If, Kristeva argues, the abject triggers crises of self-identification by recalling the state of pre-being, then the maternal

body is the site of subject disruption. I see a link between this psychoanalytic theory of abjection and the male notion of their power in the family, the workplace, the economy, and politics as being uprooted by the second wave. As the women's movement challenged the stability of male privilege, the male subject sought to expel that which threatens, rousing backlash against the women's movement. King recognized this fear and used the social tension to fuel his horror.

King's production of single motherhood does not simply function *within* the horror genre, but *creates* the horror. Julia Kristeva theorizes horror by connecting abjection to our encounters with corporeal decay and excretion, things that blur lines of self-identification and social boundaries. She writes, "…corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live…There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being" (Kristeva 1980: 3). In horror, Kristeva argues, the Symbolic Order—referring to normalized assumptions operative in our lives—is destabilized, and its subjects seek restoration. The Symbolic is the communicative and ideological conventions accepted within a society, and King builds his story on the subversion of these normative conventions using the supernatural and grotesque. Horror as a literary genre often builds narrative momentum through violence and gore, and King does rely on violence to sustain literary tension. But, King is also successful in eliciting abjection without physical violence.

Our first interaction in the novel with blood, an abject substance, comes not from violence, but from menstruation. Kristeva's abject theory works doubly with menstruation as the menstruation triggers the visceral dissociation inherent (according to

Kristeva) in any encounter with corporeal fluids, but period blood is central in marking the female body. Furthermore, periods often mark a body with the ability to reproduce, entrenching this object of abjection in female sexuality and potential maternity.

In the first narrative scene of the novel, King conveys Carrie's bodily shame, inherited from her mother. As the girls of Chamberlain High School gather in the locker room after a physical education class, Carrie menstruates for the first time. Carrie's menarche not only repulses her female classmates as their laughter, "disgusted, contemptuous, horrified" (King 9), but establishes a border between normal (an established benchmark denoting both age and knowledge) and abnormal (Carrie's late and unfamiliar puberty). As Carrie straddles this boundary—she is now marked by womanhood, but still estranged from her body—she begins "to howl and back away, flailing her arms and grunting and gobbling" (King 9). Just as the abject effects the collapse between a clear Self and Other, Carrie "slowly collapsed" (King 11) in the shower stall. In this opening scene, King offers abject repulsion while introducing Carrie as a sympathetic character.

MOTHER-BLAMING

Objectively, Carrie is the novel's monster. Her telekinetic powers are what kill over four-hundred residents. However, just as Carrie seems incapable of adhering to "normal" social behavior and reacts to her body as though it is foreign, she also cannot regulate her telekinesis. King generates a pariah whose vengeance is both literally and figuratively executed outside the bounds of her conscious and physical being. In the prom

scene, Carrie's first reaction is not active. King writes, "Her only thought was to run, to get out of the light, to let the darkness have her and hide her. But it was like trying to run through molasses. Her traitor mind had slowed time to a crawl…" (217). Here, King ensures that readers understand Carrie's aversion to predatory reactions—in a fight or flight situation, she initially chooses flight. He even illuminates how her mind betrays her perception of time and reality.

Carrie, from the beginning, is constructed as a character lacking complete control of the external factors of her life. One of the first descriptions King offers writes:

> She was a chunky girl with pimples on her neck and back and buttocks, her wet hair completely without color. It rested against her face with dispirited sogginess and she simply stood, head slightly bent, letting the water splat against her flesh and roll off. She looked the part of a sacrificial goat, the constant butt, believer in left-handed monkey wrenches, perpetual foul-up, and she was…They stared. They always *stared.* (King 4)

The first physical thing we learn about Carrie is that her pores cannot unclog themselves. As Kristeva posits that abjection, in attempt to re-identify the Self, causes us to exorcize that which blurs the border of Self and Other. Carrie's acne physically embodies the process of expelling unwanted bodily fluids. This pus trapped beneath skin symbolizes her inability to expel the source of her self-estrangement—her mother.

Even in writing Carrie's action, King writes passivity as she, "dispirited," stands as the water hits her body—she is not even active in her own bathing. Her inability to cleanse herself of impurities connects both to Douglas's and Kristeva's arguments. Even

King's physical construction of Carrie is passive: her hair cannot hold color and she is relegated to a position of the "sacrificial goat," whose life is contingent on outside forces. Carrie never claims true agency.

If she, the source of physical destruction, is not responsible, then who is? While Carrie's bullies certainly foment her internal turmoil until her crisis manifests externally, they evade blame—it is no accident that King generates a high school story. Nor is it incidental that he locates *Carrie* in a small town which emphasizes the destruction. Furthermore, Sue Snell's sympathy for Carrie invites our own sympathy for the student body. I'm not arguing that Stephen King advocates for Carrie's social ostracization, but the sympathetic painting of Chamberlain after the incident as "a town waiting to die," a town that "will simply never again be" (286) inscribes the novel with tragedy. If Chamberlain's general population is somewhat relinquished of the blame, and Carrie cannot control her reaction, on whom does the responsibility fall? I argue that Margaret White is central to Carrie's and thus, the town's, collapse.

Let's return to the locker room scene. We are given accounts of Carrie's menarche in King's main narrative, but also in one of the specialty discourses. In this excerpt, King writes, "It is nearly as incredible to believe that the girl's mother would permit her daughter to reach the age of nearly seventeen without consulting a gynecologist concerning the daughter's failure to menstruate" (11). While other scenes emphasizing Carrie's unfamiliarity with her body imply Margaret's failed motherhood, this passage is explicit in blaming the single mother. However, Margaret's inability to mother stems largely from her desire to resist womanhood.

The novel constructs Margaret White as the shame of womanhood, unable to recognize her own *jouissance* or primal desire for sex, and incapable of acknowledging her pregnancy. King offers an account of Carrie's birth in a fictionalized history of the Carrie White catastrophe—one of the specialist discourses. As neighbors hear Margaret's screams, police arrive to what they initially believe to be an assault. However, they find Margaret, on a bed "drenched with blood" as "a butcher knife lay on the floor" (King 16). Only after the shock of gore do the officers realize that she had given birth—from the moment she was born, gore eclipses Carrie's existence. King wedges the mention of Carrie, "still partially wrapped in the placental membrane," between the bloody scene and a reflection on Margaret's womanhood. King writes, "It staggers both imagination and belief to advance the hypothesis that Mrs. Margaret White did not know she was pregnant, or even understand what the word entails…She may simply have refused to believe that such a thing [pregnancy] could happen to her" (16). Margaret's rejection of her own maternity up until Carrie's birth questions her fitness as a mother, but also suggests that Carrie's failure to identify stems from Margaret's inability to negotiate femaleness.

King reintroduces the knife that severed the umbilical cord in the scene where Margaret's abuse comes to a head. "Momma" brandishes a knife against her daughter. As Carrie, in crisis following the prom scene, begs for help, King writes, "Momma leaned forward, and the knife came down in a shining arc," (250). As Margaret's knife physically cut Carrie from her body in childbirth, the knife attempts to sever her motherhood from Carrie's daughterly attachment. In this same scene, Carrie kills

Margaret by telekinetically crushing her heart. But, because Carrie's identity is so bound to her mother's, Carrie's death becomes inevitable.

As Carrie expires on the road, the parenthetical thoughts, to which we have been privy throughout the novel, clarify the very source of trauma. King writes, "(momma would be alive i killed my momma i want her o it hurts my chest hurts my shoulder o o o i want my momma)" followed by, "(o momma i'm scared momma *MOMMA*)," then ending Carrie's misery with one final outcry, "(Momma Momma Momma *ooooooooooooooo OOOOOOOOO*)" (275). Carrie's dissolution into childlike moans reinforces the innocence of her nature, but also underscores her identification with Margaret. In this last, dying moment she calls out in attempt to salvage the Self, but she cannot locate subjectivity. In this moment, King offers an image of death, but also of birth as Carrie reverts to an infant-like state. This scene draws a connection between death and birth, as death recalls the subject's expulsion from the maternal body. While these scenes that villainize Margaret emerge from King's writing, his intent seems to contradict his execution.

STEPHEN KING: AUTHORSHIP AND NARRATIVITY

While this section explores the tension between King's authorial position and his narrative position, I do not aim to brand King as particularly feminist or anti-feminist. I am, however, concerned with how *Carrie* digests its contemporary discourses and complicates them.

Michel Foucault defines authorship, writing, "…the 'author-function' is tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine, and articulate the realm of discourses….it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy" (1989: 134). His assertion that every author produces texts knotted by their discursive contexts rationalizes my exploration of how King's work is embedded in these "systems."

Stephen King, 26 years old at the time of *Carrie*'s publication, occupied (and still does) a space and body of privilege as a white man. I want to reiterate that, despite these privileges, King grew up in a poor, working-class, single mother household. While I'm not suggesting that King, himself, carried anti-feminist sentiments, it is worth noting that the masculinist backlash against women's liberation came from the demographic King occupies. These men, oppressed by the hierarchical structures of economy, saw gender as one of the few sites where they could dominate—the feminist movement threatened to dismantle that gender domination. In his nonfiction work, *Danse Macabre* (1981), King explores the influence of social anxieties and fears in the shaping of the horror genre, admitting the ways in which fear of female empowerment manifested itself in his first novel. King reveals, "I was fully aware of what Women's Liberation implied for me and others of my sex. The book is, in its more adult implications, an uneasy masculine shrinking from a future of female equality" (King 1981: 170). This admission of fear enlightened me to his own authorial position and rationalizes his choice to make Margaret a single mother.

Alongside King's construction of single motherhood, *Carrie* also suggests a danger in blind adherence to social norms, as well as the subsequent punishment of divergent behavior. While this comment, when extrapolated to fit the American context in the 1970s, may suggest that movements like the second wave should not be met with blind ridicule, he does not say so explicitly. In a cursory reading, Margaret's Christianity could criticize the Religious Right; however, a deeper examination illuminates her rejection of motherhood—seen in her abuse, in her denial of sexual intercourse, in the knife coming down on her daughter—fails to align with the conservative pro-family agenda. While I don't think *Carrie* is an anti-feminist book, the horror invoked can validate male fears of feminism. One way King escalates these fears is through his construction of a masculine narrator.

Throughout his novel, Stephen King employs figurative language, using images associated with maleness, yet situates these masculine points of reference in female spaces. In the first scene, as Erica Dymond reveals in her examination of King's gendered *Carrie*, King's narrator compares the sounds of the girl's locker room to the "snap and flicker of billiard balls after a hard break" (5). This metaphor establishes a male perspective by framing the female space with comparisons to a pool hall—a masculinely-coded space. However this passage doesn't simply frame female spaces on male terms, but employs language—"balls," "hard," the image of a pool cue—explicitly linked to phallic symbolism. The narrator penetrates the female realm. Why use such masculine language in a scene centered on femaleness and menstruation? According to Dymond, "this construction unintentionally genders the supposedly sexless, omniscient narrator—

rendering a somewhat voyeuristic portrait of a male spectator watching these half-nude, high school women" (95). However this language is so explicitly entrenched in maleness, I counter Dymond's claim that he uses such phallic, violative language out of male ignorance. Rather, I argue that King employs this language intentionally. Rather, King seems to recreate the ways in which male power penetrates realms that are often regarded as female. We, as readers, assume the peeping position of the voyeur, yet the discordance between his phallic imagery and the reality of the space should evoke an analysis of why the words may seem out of place. The "hard break" of the "balls" sounds so discordant in the girl's high school locker room that the narration invites readers to realize the ubiquitous nature of male violation.

If King's intention was to establish a male-coded, voyeuristic point of view, then he succeeded. Nonetheless, *Carrie* remains a novel built upon violation—just as King invites readers to be cognizant of the violation, he simultaneously invites readers to assume the male gaze. This gaze is sustained throughout the novel. At one point, Carrie exercises her telekinetic power by levitating her hairbrush. King generates a metaphor of weight-lifting as he writes, "It was heavy. It was like lifting a barbell with very weak arms. Oh. Grunt" (King 92). Once again he produces an intrusive male gaze staked in private female spaces.

King generates a narrative about women, or perhaps a narrative that pivots around women, however his male voice dominates throughout *Carrie.* Through this pervasive language, female agency is burdened by masculine framing. When King does allow access to female voices, he brackets them in parentheses. This technique may highlight

King's awareness of the secondary position of women's voices in both fiction and reality, but it is also the physical manifestation of male framing. This gaze is further reflected in the shape of King's narrative. The story, fragmented by specialist discourses, recounts a character with fragmented thoughts, whose uncontrollable power fragments a town—just as the female body is fragmented in horror films, the female subject is fragmented in *Carrie*. Dymond criticizes King's narration, writing, "The general effect of this insensitivity reads as a failure to commit to the narrative—as though King would not allow himself to enter a woman's world entirely" (95). However, King's "insensitive" rendering of a female-centered story may not exemplify a "failure to commit," but rather, conveys the fear he recognized in men who felt the women's movement would disrupt their social, familial, and economic privileges. This threat of instability would also account for King's construction of Margaret White as a single mother—the most destabilizing social identity threatening hierarchies of power.

CONCLUSION

Even if we read *Carrie* as a pro-feminist critique of male backlash against the women's movement, King would still prove complicit in this critique. Throughout *Carrie,* he sustains tropes of mother-blaming and aligns female power with destruction, gore, and dissociation. Kristeva's theory of abjection illuminates King's construction of Margaret—of the maternal body—as abject, constantly threatening instability in the dissociative blurring of Self and Other. This abjection paired with his narrative violation

and fragmentation of female stories within male frameworks denies any constructive negotiations of femaleness.

There are myriad reasons *Carrie* rose to popularity so quickly and why King's debut novel was adapted so frequently. As King admits, the fear driving *Carrie* evolved out of the fear of women's liberation, and the book's validation of this fear—*something destructive is afoot!*— may have sparked backlash. Perhaps others were drawn to the exaggerated supernatural elements that dampen the fears of everyday life. While I am interested in why people were so compelled by *Carrie* when it was first released, I am more concerned with how King, complicit in his own critique, confirmed the masculinist backlash. By the novel's close, neither Carrie nor Margaret—the central women whose power devastates Chamberlain, survive. Yet, their deaths offer catharsis as the Other meets retribution. Despite the destruction, *Carrie* relies on some semblance of restoration in its ending—Carrie triumphs over her tormentors, Carrie triumphs over Margaret, then Carrie dies. Through these deaths, King neutralizes the disruptive threats. While Margaret is the villainized single mother in *Carrie*, I choose to close my chapter by reflecting on Sue Snell, just as King ends his main narrative.

King's construction of Sue Snell confirms the danger (and necessary purification) of the single maternal body. As the climactic prom scene approaches, we learn that Sue's period is late—Sue who "had always been as regular as an almanac," Sue who "heard something within her turn over" (183). As the disaster draws nearer, King employs language of motherhood, reinforcing her potential maternity, writing, "some nameless sort of fear growing in her like an infant coming to dreadful term" (191). Sue's potential

single motherhood parallels Carrie's destruction, and, as Carrie's death eliminates the threat, Sue's fear is neutralized as well. Immediately following Carrie's death, Sue runs from Carrie's lifeless body "as she felt the slow course of dark menstrual blood down her thighs" (King 277). While I acknowledge that Sue's fear of pregnancy stemmed from her circumstantial characterization (the anxiety of teen pregnancy) this narrative can and should be extracted to reveal masculine fear of female independence and power made manifest by the second wave and embodied by single mothers. Regardless of King's politics or his intention while writing *Carrie*, the text implies that the single maternal body is an abject, destabilizing threat to American society, and foreclosing redemptive single motherhood—in fiction and reality—is a necessary means of survival.

CHAPTER II: WRITING BLACK SINGLE MOTHERHOOD INTO SUBJECTIVITY

"It was by destroying the Negro family under slavery that white America broke the will of the Negro people. Although that will has reasserted itself in our time, it is a resurgence doomed to frustration unless the viability of the Negro family is restored."
—Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Report*

"I want there to be a place in the world where people can engage in one another's differences in a way that is redemptive, full of hope and possibility. Not this 'In order to love you, I must make you something else.' That's what domination is all about, that in order to be close to you, I must possess you, remake and recast you."
-bell hooks, from *Reel to Real: Race, Class, and Sex at the Movies*

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I address the racialization of single motherhood that, while not new during this period, became central to 1970s and 1980s American culture, politics, and economy. This chapter centers black women's lived experience captured in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982). While the first-wave feminism during the turn of the 19th century made strides for gender equality, these suffragettes reinforced racial inequality by creating clear barriers of Self and Other that racially divided women. Black women, however, assumed a prominent role in feminism's second wave as these marginalized voices produced a deluge of black feminist scholarship, emphasizing the interlocking nature of different identities—according to many of these feminists, their experiences of femaleness could not be extricated from their blackness. During this time, black feminists developed myriad ways to combat the gender hierarchy within the civil rights and black power movements while resisting the whitewashed, middle-class shadow cast within some circles of the women's liberation, and they reclaimed subjectivity. I argue that, black female authors of this time—Gloria Naylor, in particular—developed

narrativity as a way of conjuring black maternal subjectivity. In this chapter, I will examine the anti-black, anti-feminist discourses of the time, as well as black feminist scholarship emanating from the same moment. I will then investigate Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* as a work that elevates maternal language and resists narrow categories of black single motherhood. Naylor's acknowledgement of the multiplicities inherent in black femaleness allows her narrative to open up subjectivity to black single mothers while offering a black feminist, community-based model of horizontal power relations that resist American systems of domination.

DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF BLACK FEMALENESS

In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who served under Lyndon B. Johnson as Assistant Secretary of Labor gained national attention when he released his report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which attempted to find the root cause of high rates of poverty in predominantly African American communities. Moynihan writes, "At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family" (5). This passage both establishes the pro-family attitude that the New Right sustained, but also situates blackness outside the contours of the traditional American ideal. In his research, Moynihan reported that 25% of African American households were headed by women—whether single mothers or two-parent homes where women provided a majority of financial support (Patterson). These findings led Moynihan, a man intent on adjusting the pervasive institutionalized racism that disadvantaged black citizens, to disregard the intersection of race and gender in

constructing an experience that cannot be clumped with either that of a black man nor a white woman.

The Negro Family: The Case for National Action forced a critical a discussion of black single mothers to enter the national stage, however their entry stripped the very objects of discussion of their agency, and their status as mothers was met with accusation and blame. Moynihan characterizes African American families as teetering always on the brink of dissolution, and criticizes what he observed to be a matriarchal family structure. Although Moynihan addresses slavery as a root cause to the poverty of black families, he neglects the reproduction of slavery through Jim Crow (to be reproduced again, during this time, in the system of mass-incarceration) in the hegemonic white values that piloted the political, social, and material trends of the country (*Thirteenth*). This report, along with the whitewashed feminism of the second wave that demanded liberation from the restricting trajectory of the traditional female life—girl, then wife, then mother—triggered a conservative backlash.

Reagan's subsequent rise to power in the 1980s set a national tone that looked at conservative traditionalism as an essential keystone in the maintenance of the nation. Throughout the mid-to-late '70s leading into the '80s, the New Right questioned the health of the American family. The Reagan era reflected a shift towards conservatism in American politics, and even prior to Reagan's conservative politics, the push for childcare was inhibited by emphasis on family-centered childrearing, rather than communal. This emphasis devalued the familial structures of many black communities, and the political agenda was one that bolstered the traditional nuclear family. Ultimately,

Reagan cut federal funding for daycare (Flora Davis 283). Along with the childcare debate, the divorce rate increased exponentially during this time, driving 100,000 more women and children below the poverty line each year between 1969-1978. Even though feminists began to theorize motherhood in the 1970s and 1980s, many of these explorations of relatively uncharted, or hushed experiences reflected white, middle-class perspectives, and thus, proved limited in unraveling the interlocking oppressive conditions that marginalized black mothers.

Reagan's coining of the "welfare queen" as a term to refer to the single mother (most closely associated with blackness) who exploits the welfare systems of the state further validated the criticism that met single mothers. As Reagan's "welfare queen" propagated notions of both black single mothers' alleged abuse of social welfare programs and black female hypersexuality (both assumptions stereotype and ignore larger material contexts), the small screen sought to construct a different kind of blackness congruent with white values. Beyond oppressive language, the politicized war on drugs of the late 1970s into the 1980s targeted communities of color disproportionately. Not only did the policies and rhetoric surrounding this war on drugs criminalize blackness, it also produced a generation of black single mothers, as men from predominantly black communities were syphoned into the system of mass incarceration.

THE EMERGENCE OF BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

Even within more liberal circles, black women felt the heavy hands of exclusion resting on their shoulders, pushing them to the margins of feminist discourse. Many

Democrats in the mid-1980s assumed values similar to their Republican counterparts, particularly as the decade progressed. According to Sheila Rowbotham, "This idyll of the family dissolved the needs of actual individuals in real families and marginalized women who were outside the bounds" (521), which disadvantaged women of color, single mothers and lesbians. However, this idealized family structure was met with sharp criticism and a deluge of black feminist theory, targeting the racism and sexism omnipresent in the lives of black women. Prominent activists theorized the social conditions in which black women lived and major voices like Angela Davis, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Audre Lorde emerged at the forefront of this movement. In 1981, the National Black Women's Health Project was created, as other specialized women's groups sprouted from the fragmentation of the second wave which seemed to abandon its idealized, Utopian vision of a unified society (Rowbotham 522).

On February 17, 1970, a group of pro-ERA activists, led by Wilma Scott Heide (who would become president of NOW the following year) disrupted a Senate meeting. Although disrupting a congressional hearing could have, by law, warranted their arrest, Heide and the twenty or so women who had joined her ranks were assured that hearings on the ERA would happen later that spring. Heide recalls, "Security guards started to move forward, but at a signal from one of the senators, did not do anything. At that moment I knew we could do almost anything and get away with it…they didn't want to make martyrs out of us" (Flora Davis 123). This account highlights the privilege embroidered onto whiteness and implicitly exposing the criminalization staining black women. Even though these white women posed a threat to the conservative political

agenda that they were protesting, they were allowed to enter into dialogue with their opponents without the threat of physical violence. America's history of violence against black bodies would only emphasize what black feminists already knew: they inherited a history of violence; they were born into dangerous lives. In *Women, Culture, and Politics* (1984), Angela Davis links the violence against women to the genocidal violence of slavery, imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism. She further ties this violence to reproductive injustices, asserting that poor women (a disproportionate amount of whom were and are women of color) are made prey to surgical and sterilization abuse (Angela Davis 37). Davis then argues, "These particular manifestations of violence against women are situated on a larger continuum of social inflicted violence, which includes concerted, systematic violations of women's economic and political rights" (37). Because of their social position and their lived experiences, black women saw the necessity of a black women's feminism and they theorized, they wrote, they acted.

While it is reductive to clump all black feminists into one branch of feminism—Angela Davis, for instance, draws on the tenets of Marxist socialism, while Patricia Hill Collins assumes a sociological perspective—there seems to be a common thread weaving through many of their writings. Collectivism and community-based action resides at the center of both black feminist activism and black feminist theory. Even white, anthropological analyses of black communities recognized the communal relationships and fluidity with which black communities functioned. In 1974, Carol Stack published a book *All Our Kin* which aimed to analyze a neighborhood in Chicago. However, her statistical surveys failed to recognize the range of "kin-based ties and economic and

social exchanges" (Rowbotham 455) that permeated black communities. These relationships external to the family offered support, especially to women.

Although Dorothy Roberts' *Killing the Black Body* (1997) emerged over a decade after many black feminist theorist's initial work, Roberts integrates much of the nation's historical relationship with black women. She argues that reproduction has always been a source of control over the black female subject and that these women have been subjugated by systems of slavery, controlling images, sterilization abuses, and maintained efforts to oppress the black female body. In her introduction, she writes, "A lurid mythology of Black mothers' unfitness, along with a science devoted to proving Black biological inferiority, cast Black childbearing as a dangerous activity" (Roberts 21). She further argues that these methods of control have "justified the regulation of every aspect of Black women's fertility" (21). While popular fiction often responds to many circulating discourses, I want to focus on the representation of black women written by black female authors in comparison to their representation throughout American history.

CONTROLLING IMAGES AND THE BLACK MOTHER

This chapter aims to articulate Naylor's offering of self-defining black single mothers. I use Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) to highlight the importance of black women's self-definition. In her work, Collins notes impositions of white observations onto black families, writing, "Citing high rates of divorce, female-headed households, and out-of-wedlock births, prevailing scholarship claimed that African-American mothers wielded unnatural power in allegedly deteriorating family

structures (Zinn 1989; Dickerson 1995b)" (173). The portrayal of black female-headed households as dangerous lived beyond Moynihan's report, and this discourse of black motherhood was sustained throughout the 1980s. Much of Collins' work concerns itself with the notion of controlling images that seek to confine black women and limit their subjectivity and social mobility. In her analysis of these images, Collins writes:

> Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas about Black womanhood. They do so by exploiting already existing symbols, or creating new ones. Hazel Carby suggests that the objective of stereotypes is "not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations" (1987, 22). These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life (Collins 69).

Collins argues that the controlling images of the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the jezebel reinforce racism that justifies discriminatory and oppressive ideology. Challenging these images, according to Collins, must prove one cornerstone of black feminist thought (69). While these controlling images are proliferated in myriad ways—the matriarch is centered in Moynihan's narrative of black families, the welfare mother becomes crucial to Reagan's political platform—they all revolve around maternal propriety.

The mammy's origins are rooted in slavery. This image constructs the idyllic, sacrificial mother who privileges the slaveowner's white children (or in post-abolition

iterations, the children of her white employers) over her own family. This idealization stems from white justification of exploitative practices and established normative notions used to compare the behavior of all black women (Collins 72). This image, however, reemerges within black communities who elevate the mother's sacrificial servility. According to black feminist scholar, Barbara Christian, the image of the mammy reflects the fear of the woman. She writes, "Mammy, then, harmless in her position of slave, unable because of her all-giving nature to do harm, is needed as an image, a surrogate to contain all those fears of the physical female" (Christian 2). Just as Stephen King fashions Margaret White to embody the fear of the female, the image of the mammy functions similarly, buttressing an ideology intent on maintaining structures of domination.

The matriarch, too, is an image that centers motherhood in the black female experience. The image of the matriarch portrays black motherhood as a threat to normalized gender behavior—the hardened, unfeminine assumption of the head of household. Moynihan's report employs this image in attempt to uncover the failures of black mothers in imbuing their children with the white, middle-class values that determined propriety at the time. However, this image ignores the larger issues of interlocking components of race, class, and gender that materially and psychologically affect black communities, and thus, the conditions of poverty and criminalization. The matriarch stands as a warning to all women, regardless of race, to the failures of assertiveness as it attributes the matriarch's inappropriate independence to their inability to enter the heteronormative familial structure. (Collins 77) Furthermore, this image

overlooks the role the war on drugs had on emptying black communities of large male populations, forcing women into their single parent positions.

The welfare mother functions similarly through its ahistoric framing of single motherhood intent on vilifying women whose blackness, femaleness, and single status prevent them from reaping benefits afforded to others. While the New Right fought against the second wave to halt the fight for reproductive rights, they also combatted black women's reproduction. Collins writes, "Essentially an updated version of the breeder woman image created during slavery, this image provides an ideological justification for efforts to harness Black women's fertility to the needs of a changing political economy" (78). This portrayal of black women supported the notion of black laziness—pinning their dependence on social welfare programs on a lack of desire to work, rather than the shrinking manufacturing and agricultural industry. Where the matriarch is chided for her aggression, the welfare mother is rejected for her lack thereof, often interpreted as an inability to control her own children.

Lastly, the jezebel exploits the notion of uncontrollable black female sexuality. However, ironically, this image succeeds in controlling their sexuality, marking them with Otherness and shame. Not only does this image depict black women as sexually deviant, it also highlights their alleged manipulation of men—a common representation of the jezebel is that of the gold digger, hoping to entrap a man through procreation (Collins 82). While this image may seem to comment less on maternal experiences, it is an image that relies wholly on subverting sexual agency into a demonized hypersexuality.

In her chapter on motherhood, Collins examines the expectations of motherhood in black families and the sacrificial role impressed upon them that serves both to glorify their familial positions and reinforce male domination over women. In contrast to Moynihan's research that claims black women disintegrate family structures, black communities often elevated mothers to martyr-status. According to Collins, this image of motherhood gave a hollow image of positivity that stunted women's liberation and even activism devoted to Afrocentric liberation neglected the systems of domination present in the gender hierarchy (Collins 174). While many black feminist thinkers pre-date Collins, their scholarship addresses these controlling images in attempt both to empower black women and afford them the subjectivity stripped of them by the white hands of a suffocating history.

BIRTHING BREWSTER PLACE AND ITS SISTERHOOD

Gloria Naylor complicates these definitions of motherhood by presenting it as a process of rebirth—a process that the complex undergoes. Throughout *The Women of Brewster Place,* Naylor employs images of birth, describing the complex of Brewster Place as a "bastard child" that was "conceived" and subsequently "born" (1). She bombards us with images of birth, death, and rebirth, drawing explicit comparisons between each woman of Brewster place and "an ebony phoenix" intent only on rising up from ash. The physical act of reproduction ushers the single woman into a dangerous position, however Naylor's reclaims maternal identity in her fiction, offering a redemptive kind of black single motherhood. In attempt to avoid binary thinking, I

choose not to distinguish birth's corporeality as separate from the mental and emotional conditions of single motherhood both in the context of Naylor's work and the broader scope of womanhood. Rather, I propose motherhood as a social process through which subjectivity can be erased or rendered powerfully to afford women voice and agency.

While a large part of my claim relies on Naylor's characterization of the women who live at Brewster Place, I also want to call attention to her characterization of Brewster Place as embodying the maternal experience. Before we become acquainted with any of these black female characters, we encounter Brewster Place as an entity with its own story of birth. In contrast to King's masculinely-coded narration, Naylor maintains images of birth and reproduction to associate her narrative voice with motherhood. She begins her book with the story of Brewster Place's birth, allowing the setting to assume a self-sacrificing, motherly position (akin to the mammy) that several characters also come to inhabit. In the very first lines she writes, "Brewster Place was the bastard child…" (Naylor 1), and she sustains this reproductive language writing of the project's "consummation," following the narrative as "Brewster Place was conceived," and later "born" (1). The final lines of the book suggest this reproductive cycle as well, stating, "They ebb and flow, ebb and flow, but never disappear. So Brewster Place still waits to die" (Naylor 192). The language of the sea pulls our attention in more than one direction. The wave metaphor proposes images linked clearly to female reproduction, be it the amniotic fluid that nourishes the child, or menstruation that marks fertility. However, this figurative language may also draw links to Mother Nature—a source of both comfort and unmatched power. By the end of the prologue, "Dawn," Naylor ensures

that the women of Brewster Place have subjectivity before their introduction. She writes, "They came, they went, grew up, and grew old beyond their years. Like an ebony phoenix, each in her own time and with her own season had a story" (5), presenting their stories not as reductive or essentialized accounts of black femaleness and motherhood, but as redemptive—her women defy the confines of controlling images and become agents.

However, hidden in this maternal language, is another narrative or community re-organization as Naylor tells the story of the "bastard child" that is Brewster Place. The building's inception first serves a middle class, white community but, as time passes, social conditions shift and the occupants with political clout follow power elsewhere. A new population enters Brewster Place's domain, "people who were dark haired and mellow-skinned—Mediterraneans," whose heritage "offends" older residents. Thus, the community physically shifts the contours of its landscape, erecting the wall, allowing Brewster Place to "become a dead-end street" (Naylor 2), The black once again, reorganizes after an influx of black people inhabit the neighborhood, the "third generation of children, who drifted into the block and precipitated the exodus of the remaining Mediterraneans" (Naylor 4). This writing of Brewster Place invokes African American and immigrant communities' history of subordination and gentrification. However, Naylor's use of maternal language reinforces the power of mothers in redefining these communities on their own terms.

Just as Naylor's first lines invoke reproductive language, the final lines of her book suggest this reproductive cycle as well, stating, "They ebb and flow, ebb and flow,

but never disappear. So Brewster Place still waits to die" (Naylor 192). The language of the sea pulls our attention in more than one direction. The wave metaphor proposes images linked clearly to female reproduction, be it the amniotic fluid that nourishes the child, or menstruation that marks fertility. However, this figurative language also draws links to Mother Nature—a source of both comfort and unmatched power compacted into a motherly personification.

Naylor's narrativizing coincides with black women's liberation as they fought not only for equal legislative recognition, but also organized their politics around solidarity. "A Black Feminist Statement," written in 1977 by a black feminist organization, the Combahee River Collective (founded in 1973) issued a statement mapping the methodology of their feminism. In the statement, they write, "The psychological toll of being a Black woman and the difficulties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing political work can never be underestimated," (Combahee River Collective 314) exposing the mental challenges posed simply by black female existence. Naylor's characters—Mattie, Lucielia, Cora—are constantly evicted from both physical spaces and realms of agency, and Mattie, like the women behind black feminism, embodies support and solidarity. Although the women of Brewster Place all experience social isolation, they unite as a community to ease the sting of marginalization, mirroring the black feminist movement.

Naylor constructed her novel so that each chapter focuses on the specific stories of different women, who, though all share blackness in their experience, occupy different categories of class, age, and sexuality. This structure embodies the tenets of black

feminist thought that argues for a feminism that allows both collective solidarity—something bell hooks refers to as "sisterhood"—while acknowledging that black women's subjectivity is not something found in the bourgeois feminism of exclusionary white women. In her book on feminist theory, *From Margin to Center*, bell hooks argues that the push for women's liberation is enriched through female bonding, however, she claims, "we cannot develop sustaining ties of political solidarity" (45) if that structure of feminism is built upon a bourgeois foundation. She continues, "According to their analysis, the basis for bonding was shared victimization, hence the emphasis on common oppression. This concept of bonding directly reflects male supremacist thinking. Sexist ideology teaches women that to be female is to be a victim" (hooks 45). Here, hooks argues that the white model of feminism works within a binary mode of thinking, installed by a patriarchal social system, and that this binary also essentializes women's experience. She writes, "Women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices. Sustained woman bonding can occur only when these divisions are confronted and the necessary steps are taken to eliminate them" (44). While many black feminists call for collectivism, they urge women to create reflective communities, capable of dismantling the divisions driven by prejudice and discrimination.

While the term "intersectionality" was not used by bell hooks—it was introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989—many black feminist thinkers adopted intersectional approaches to their activism. That is, they saw not one singular identity as attributing most dominantly to their oppression, but rather, understood the ways in which various

identities (gender, race, sexuality, religion, etc.) embroidered their own lived experiences. Naylor adopts an intersectional approach to her storytelling as she affords her women subjectivity and fleshes out the dynamic circumstances of each individual. The remainder of this chapter will emphasize how Naylor's characterization of the women of Brewster Place respond to the discursive attempts to define black motherhood in controlling ways, and, in return, offer redemptive subjectivity.

MATTIE MICHAEL

Mattie Michael, a black single mother who migrates from the South after an unplanned pregnancy, is the first character Naylor introduces to readers. Her story spans the longest amount of time as Naylor infuses each chapter with Mattie's character. The first scene Naylor paints for readers is that of a woman being displaced, uprooted from one home and finding another. This theme dominates a large part of Mattie's section as her mobility arises not from social privilege, but from the material consequences that force her to navigate a difficult landscape of black femaleness. In Mattie's chapter, Naylor juggles the material and psychological realities that her character faces because of her blackness and femaleness, however, subverts the confines of controlling images by affording Mattie agency throughout both her chapter and the subsequent sections. However, Mattie doesn't begin as a character who defies the racialized and gendered roles into which she falls. In fact, much of her chapter revolves around her desire to satisfy the men in her life—beginning with her father, then Butch Fuller, and finally, her son Basil.

While we are never given an account of Mattie's sexual interactions with Butch, Naylor imagines Mattie's sexual awakening with language that embodies the complexity of black sexuality, stretching beyond stereotyped misconceptions. She combines images of bodily violence—"suck up tiny bits of flesh" and "burst open her skin and lay in a million pieces"—with language that also embraces the moment of black female beauty—"the soft mound of her belly whispered to him," as it was "supple and waiting," and "get lost in the eternity of softness" (Naylor 17). The combination of violent language with descriptions of gentleness serve to expose the black female body's history as a site of violence and exploitation, but also suggests an alternative mode of seeing the black body: as one deserving of beauty—in fact, one that can experience both violence and tenderness. However, this moment also foreshadows Mattie's maternal characterization, mapping the moment of Basil's conception with motherly language. Naylor writes of Mattie's body, "as smooth as the skin on the top of her full round breasts that held nipples that were high, tilted, and unbelievable even darker than the breasts, so that when they touched the tongue there was the sensation of drinking rich, double cocoa" (17). This passage relies on the image of a child suckling the breast milk from a mother. Naylor sustains this maternal imagery throughout, describing Mattie's hypothetical climax as an expansion, "getting fuller and fuller," pleading for release "before she burst open her skin and lay in a million pieces among the roots of the trees and the leaves of the tiny basil" (17). Even before Mattie gives birth and assumes motherhood, she is indoctrinated into this conception of black womanhood—one that Naylor acknowledges as synonymous with motherhood. The final line, about her return to the roots and the "leaves of tiny

basil" not only foreshadow the birth of her son, aptly named Basil, but also situates Mattie in a timeline steeped in the tradition of motherhood, tying her to something assumed to be the natural order of things.

Mattie's unplanned pregnancy is never written through the language of abandonment—in fact, she mobilizes and migrates elsewhere after her father's poor reaction. When Butch is discussed following their encounter, he is never heralded as a father figure, or even a potential father figure lost in the past. Naylor writes, "She didn't care about Butch Fuller, and they had hardly spoken since that day, but this baby didn't really belong to him. It belonged to something out there in the heat of an August day and the smell of sugar cane and mossy herbs" (22). This language of nature suggests that black motherhood, while certainly shaped by the social construction of gender, race, and sexuality, is also an experience that transcends these material bounds. She enters a continuum of womanhood, of motherhood that positions women on a timeline independent of those constructed for them as Naylor writes, "The child would tie her to that past and future as inextricably as it was now tied to her every heartbeat" (25). Here, Mattie enters into this realm of mothering that seems to offer reclamation of a history—here, Naylor illuminates the ways in which black femaleness was historically linked to motherhood, and will never be separate from that history.

Mattie is continuously presented as a woman committed to her role as a mother, feeling responsible for the welfare of her child, but also investing her time and energy into her maternal role in the community of women. The controlling images of the matriarch—whose cold distance detaches the mother from her child—and the welfare

mother—whose laziness fails to instill proper values in her children while "leeching" off the government—are abandoned by Naylor. Between shifts in her workday, Mattie "pick[s] him up and press[es] his soft body to her bosom, molding him into her heart as he went to sleep" after telling him "All you see is your mama, right? And you know Mama loves you and accepts you—no matter how you got here" (Naylor 27). Eventually, after experiencing housing discrimination for her status as a black single mother, Mattie falls into the acquaintance of Miss Eva, who assumes a maternal role in Mattie's life. Angela Davis analyzes the ways in which black families deviate from the traditional norms established by white middle-class values:

> First of all, original African cultural traditions had a much broader definition of the family than that which prevails in this society; it was not limited merely to biological parents and their progeny…Second, the brutal economic and political pressures connected with slavery and continuing throughout subsequent historical eras have consistently prevented African-American family patterns from conforming to the dominant family models. Finally, Black people, both during and after the slave era, have been compelled to build, creatively and often improvisationally, a family life consistent with the dictates of survival. (75)

This passage seems to address Moynihan's *The Negro Family*, as Davis argues against the notion of black familial incompetency—the claim that the failures of the black community rest on their inability to replicate familial structures from which they had historically been excluded and oppressed. Naylor resists this imposition of heteronormative familial structures by highlighting communal female support. On her

journey, Mattie relies on Miss Eva in providing material and emotional support as she raises Basil. Mattie and Miss Eva jointly raise both Basil and Miss Eva's granddaughter, Ciel (whom we meet again in a later chapter), and the two mothers' cohabitation makes possible their success as single parents, even though they fall outside the bounds of normalized motherhood.

Naylor's characters defy these standards of familial propriety, but also highlight the external factors that may lead to perceived maternal failure—even when her characters adhere to white, middle class notions of motherhood. In the latter half of Mattie's chapter—after Miss Eva's support throughout thirty years—Basil is arrested. Naylor is acutely aware of the shifting relationships within black communities because of rates of incarceration, and while Basil's experience proves a microcosm of a larger, more complex issue than time in jail, Naylor portrays the tensions that arise from an anti-black legal system. However, after Basil's initial release, there is a shift in his character. Naylor uses language of liberation—"It's [the snow] out here and free, like I am, I love it!" and "She took in the sweetness of his freedom and let it roll around her tongue…" (50-51)—linking jail liberation to that of abolition in the century prior. However, Naylor is aware of the ways in which such marginalization makes it difficult for African Americans to navigate their own subjectivity. She writes, "Whatever was lacking within him that made it impossible to confront the difficulties of life could not be supplied with words…There was a void in his being that had been padded and cushioned over the years, and now that covering had grown impregnable" (Naylor 52). Their history of subjugation has made the negotiation of their racialized and gendered subjectivities nearly impossible. At the close

of this chapter, Mattie performs motherhood according to the gendered social codes that governed proper performance of femaleness: she makes dinner, sets the table, and waits for the man in her life to return. However, even these normative actions prove sufficient in rewarding Mattie for her performance of female housework. While Basil never returns, Mattie continues to assume the position of motherhood for which American culture had conditioned her. Naylor's act of writing their experiences into *The Women of Brewster Place* offers one solution: narrativizing the struggles of black women offers not only representation, but a means of reclaiming their stories.

LUCIELIA LOUISE TURNER AND REVERSED ABJECTION

Mattie remains present in the following chapters, particularly that of Lucielia Louise Turner, whom Naylor introduced as Miss Eva's daughter in Mattie's chapter. Lucielia is a young mother whose husband, Eugene, sporadically enters and exits her life. Although, circumstantially, Mattie's and Lucielia's experiences with single motherhood are similar—they are the main providers for their children and they both experience maternal loss—Naylor constructs Lucielia very differently, offering each woman subjectivity. While Eugene, the father of Lucielia's daughter, appears sporadically throughout this chapter (and throughout Lucielia's life), she occupies a single mother position, experiencing "the frustration of being left alone, sick, with a month-old baby; her humiliation reflected in the caseworker's blue eyes for the unanswerable 'you can find him to have it, but can't find him to take care of it' smile" (Naylor 91). In contrast to Mattie's ability to abandon her life in the South, Lucielia portrays a black woman who

desires the more traditional two-parent household—"…and you pray silently—very silently—behind veiled eyes that the man will stay" (Naylor 92). Lucielia's desire to co-parent with Eugene, reflects bell hooks' theorizing of black families. In *From Margin to Center*, hooks argues for consciousness-raising in men and women regarding shared responsibilities for childrearing, particularly in black communities. In her chapter on "revolutionary parenting," hooks writes, "They [both men and women] must be willing to accept that parenting in isolation (irrespective of the sex of the parent) is not the most effective way to raise children or be happy as parents" (146). Here, hooks strives not to stigmatize single parenting, but rather, to illuminate how collective parenting (which is particularly prominent in black communities) can offer a beneficial model of parenting that sits outside traditionalist conceptions of proper parenthood.

While Mattie certainly experiences loss in her chapter, Naylor centers this experience in Lucielia's chapter—her story pivots around the black women's experiences of loss. While Serena's death—she is electrocuted while sticking a stray fork into an electric socket (Naylor 99)— triggers Lucielia's process of grief, Naylor creates a life that embodies loss, even prior to experiencing literal death—loss is inscribed onto the black female experience. Following Serena's death, other characters mistake Lucielia's refusal to eat or bathe, and her inability to cry for shock, however Naylor writes, "But Ciel was not grieving for Serena. She was simply tired of hurting. And she was forced to slowly give up the life that God had refused to take from her" (101). Just as single motherhood proves a useful flashpoint in both feminist and non-feminist discourse in

examining the circumstances of female experiences, Lucielia's single motherhood serves as the point where the loss of agency, subjectivity, and rights converge.

Although *Carrie* and *The Women of Brewster Place* vary in characterization, plot, and genre, both King and Naylor rely on the abject. While King's use of the abject generates maternal horror, Naylor's reliance on the abject captures the black maternal experience. However, the moments where Naylor centers abjection subverts Julia Kristeva's theory. For Naylor, maternal loss results in abject bodily decay.

In Lucielia's chapter, the death of her daughter Serena is not the abject, but rather, it is Lucielia's inability to process grief that causes her physical deterioration. Mattie Michael, a woman whose single motherhood strays from Lucielia's maternal path, rocks Lucielia back into infancy, into a sort of unbeing that Kristeva claims eliminates distinction between Self and Other. Mattie rocks Lucielia into an existence transcending time and space to witness various moments of mother-child separation spanning stories of slave ships to the Holocaust. She is rendered Self-less and ageless through both maternal grief and childish comfort as Naylor writes:

> Ciel moaned. Mattie rocked. Propelled by the sound, Mattie rocked her out of that bed, out of that room, into a blue vastness just underneath the sun and above time. She rocked her over Aegean seas so clean they shone like crystal, so clear the fresh blood of sacrificed babies torn from their mother's arms and given to Neptune could be seen like pink froth on the water. She rocked her on and on, past Dachau, where soul-gutted Jewish mothers swept their children's entrails off laboratory floors. They flew past the spilled brains of Senegalese infants whose

> mothers had dashed them on the wooden sides of slave ships. And she rocked on. (103)

Naylor continues onto the next paragraph:

> She rocked her into her childhood and let her see murdered dreams. And she rocked her back, back into the womb, to the nadir of her hurt, and they found it—a slight silver splinter, embedded just below the surface of the skin. And Mattie rocked and pulled—and the splinter gave way, but its roots were deep, gigantic and ragged, and they tore up flesh with bits of fat and muscle tissue clinging to them. They left a huge hole, which was already starting to pus over, but Mattie was satisfied. It would heal. (103-4)

Naylor reverses Kristeva's theorized abjection by beginning the scene with a dissociated Self, leading, then, into Lucielia's reversion to infancy and re-entry into the symbolic womb, resulting in, rather than being triggered by, abject body horror. The first paragraph also ties Mattie's and Lucielia's stories to an unending stream of maternal experiences, transcending the bounds of time and space. Unlike the "bourgeois aesthetic" that Davis criticizes, Naylor contextualizes theses experiences—each moment of maternal grief arising from the tragedy of an oppressive regime, be it the slave trade, Nazi Germany, or Grecian infanticide. This construction of single motherhood cannot be extricated from blackness, as this scene culminates in the abject.

The abject as the result, rather than the trigger, indicates the exceptional position of black single motherhood as always occupying Self and Other, simultaneously—black women's "selves" is enmeshed in the system of support found in black female

communities. Naylor presents a conception of black single motherhood cycling through birth, motherhood, loss, and abjection only to orbit once again—at times bestowing maternal love, and other times yearning to be "rocked into childhood," illuminating the constantly shifting positions of black motherhood. Naylor seems to imply that the wound is necessary for Lucielia to re-identify herself, however, this process that happens between Mattie and Lucielia is one of collective grief. Later, in Cora Lee's chapter, Mattie and Cora talk about Cora's mothering and the responsibility of having multiple children, especially without the support of a partner. Cora tells Mattie that she doesn't know how to stop, and Mattie replies, "Same way you started, child—only in reverse" (123). Motherhood, according to Naylor, swings like a pendulum, always moving, and this cycle is written into Lucielia's chapter. Mattie, who has experienced a similar loss of child, once again, assumes her role as mother, and Lucielia, too, will revitalize her maternal experience, offering a redemptive story for black mothers reliant on community.

CORA LEE AND THE WELFARE QUEEN

A major concern of many black feminist theorists is the renegotiation of black female identity and relationships, a concern which Gloria Naylor also aims to navigate. In *Black Feminist Thought,* Patricia Hill Collins examines the complexity of black motherhood arguing that some black women "see motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization" (176). Collins' assertion seems to align with Naylor's portrayal of a woman-centered network in her book as the characters and storylines in *The Women of Brewster Place* rely on the various ways in which Naylor's women assume positions of

motherhood. While Naylor offers narrativity as a mode of negotiating blackness and femaleness, she avoids offering a specific mode of being that brings about subjectivity. It is her acknowledgement of diversity in experience that offers subjective narratives of black motherhood. However, one character who continuously struggles with her negotiation of black femaleness is Cora Lee—a single mother who continues to reproduce. Cora Lee's story does not begin at Brewster Place, but in her childhood as Naylor charts Cora's obsession with baby dolls. While this, at first, appears to translate as an obsession with motherhood, Naylor ensures readers that Cora's collection of dolls does not stem from an innate desire to mother, but rather, is her attempt to negotiate her own categories of identity.

Cora Lee's chapter, while responding to the controlling image of the welfare mother whose reproduction is often wielded as a weapon against her rights, concerns itself with the aesthetics of motherhood. Throughout the first parts of Cora's section, her womanhood is mapped onto her body, and Naylor highlights the physicality of Cora Lee's womanhood through Cora's interactions with her doll. Cora "trailed her fingertips along the smooth brown forehead and down into the bottom curve of the upturned nose. She gently lifted the dimpled arms and legs and hen reverently placed them back" (107). However, as the chapter progresses, we are given descriptions of Cora's own body as though a doll undergoing puberty-driven transformations. As she ages, Cora's body grows "rounded and curved," and her obsession with dolls makes her father uncomfortable as he thinks about "the dead brown plastic resting on his daughter's protruding breasts" (108). These physical changes denote the biological markers that

determine when "her body could now make babies" (109), however, Cora Lee's childhood collection underscores the ways in which black women are primed for motherhood, before their bodies can physically reproduce.

While the controlling image of the welfare mother, or welfare queen, served to other single black mothers, Naylor offers material explanations for their inability to adhere to normalized conceptions of motherhood. In one example, Cora's children's teachers suggest that she take them to the library, however Naylor writes, "But the younger ones had torn and marked in her library books, and they made you pay for that. She couldn't afford to be paying for books all the time" (109). This serves as a microcosm example representative of a much larger history of institutionalized exclusion—in fact, Naylor attributes the integration of Brewster Place (and the eventual creation of an African American community) to the passing of *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* as the moment of cultural realignment. Naylor recognizes the support racism and segregation received in policy-making, and how, even when those legal systems shift, there remain racist cultural practices of the past.

Naylor more explicitly responds to the constructions of the welfare queen, characterizing Cora Lee through Cora's attitude towards welfare. She makes clear Cora's desire for children to remain babies, "when they could be fed from her body…when she alone could be their substance and their world" (111-12) before external factors like "welfare offices to sit in all day or food stamp lines to stand on" (112) could restrict her ability to provide for her family. However, as Naylor amplifies these prejudices

surrounding single black mothers, she also offers the arts, the ability to express through storytelling as one solution.

Cora, constantly expressing feelings of doubt or an inability to "understand" her children, feels caught in the cycle of reproduction without any maternal fulfillment. But her conditions change after she brings her children to view a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the park. Cora and her family are revitalized by the play, and she finds sudden inspiration to invest more energy in her children's education—"She would get up and walk them there personally if she had to—and summer school…and she would check homework—every night" (126). Cora continues to fantasize about her children's future, "Junior high; high school; college—none of them stayed little forever. And then on to good jobs in insurance companies and the post office, even doctors or lawyers. Yes, that's what would happen to her babies" (126). Through exposure to the arts, Cora no longer repents, "But babies grow up," as she had numerous times throughout the chapter, and when her son Sammy asks if Shakespeare was black, she answers, "Not yet," imagining a future forged by the hands of her own family.

CONCLUSION

Through her characterization of Mattie Michael, Lucielia Louise Turner, and Cora Lee of *The Women of Brewster Place*, Gloria Naylor exposes the pivotal role of single motherhood in defining black femaleness. However, she re-narrativizes the controlling images that had been used to dominate black women, offering both subjectivity and a more historically situated landscape of African American communities. Reflective of

tenets of black feminist thought, Naylor embraces the reorganization of community. In Mattie's final dream sequence, the women of Brewster Place dismantle the wall that had deemed their block a "dead end," introducing potential mobility and growth in the black women's experience. However, Naylor reinforces that these experiences carry potential, reinvigorating feminism with the urgency of a community whose dissolution hangs in the tension of 1980s' political moment. In her epilogue, "Dusk," Naylor offers a future of material consequences, of eviction notices and court orders. She writes, "So it [Brewster] had to watch, dying but not dead, as they packed up the remnants of their dreams and left—some to the arms of a world they would have to pry open to take them, most to inherit another aging street and the privilege of clinging to its decay" (191). Yet, as Naylor contemplates a future unchanged if action is not taken, she places faith in black female agency. Even as the street dies, she clings to the images of her "'Afric' children's" dreams. For the women of Brewster place remain subjects, "spread over the canvas of time, still wak[ing] up their dreams misted on the edge of a yawn" (192). Through her imagery, Naylor makes tangible the dreams of black mothers, urging action to make manifest these desires so that black feminists may pave their own streets, not on the backs of slaves, as much of the country was built, but with the hands of the sisterhood.

Controlling images of black motherhood obscure the reality of single motherhood, passing unrealistic and villainized maternal models into the discursive traffic that produces meaning and power. Mattie Michael, Luceilia, and Cora Lee resist these categories as Naylor writes each maternal success and failure, not as fixed conditions, but

as phases cresting and falling (only to crest and fall again!) with their navigation of single motherhood. Naylor gives her characters what black feminists hoped for their own fates: community and room for redemptive recovery. Black single mothers' self-actualization will empower their lived experiences and offer modes of power incongruent with domination.

CHAPTER III: CONTROLLED REPRODUCTION AND THE ABJECT MATERNAL BODY

"Of all the classes of people who ever lived, the American woman is the most privileged. We have the most rights and rewards, and the fewest duties. Our unique status is the result of a fortunate combination of circumstances."
—Phyllis Schlafly, "What's Wrong with Equal Rights for Women?"

"These women could be undone; or not. They seemed to be able to choose. We seemed to be able to choose, then. We were a society dying, said Aunt Lydia, of too much choice"
—Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

INTRODUCTION

When Margaret Atwood first published *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985, she received critical acclaim for her weaving of multiple discourses into a single book. Atwood foregrounds issues of gender, objectification, race, class, and environmentalism throughout her novel; however, I claim that her construction of Gilead consolidates these debates in the single mother—or rather, the erasure of the single mother. Atwood projects the Religious Right's idyllic visions of conservative leaders and televangelists onto the white supremacist, religious oligarchy of the Republic of Gilead. A Foucauldian analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale* reveals how Gileadean control of women employs methods of isolation and surveillance to create a gendered panopticism. Atwood constructs these methods of control as rising out of privileged complicity realized too late. The white supremacist state of Gilead ejects black bodies from its bounds, denying any potential restructuring of power proposed by subjugated people—denying horizontal systems of power theorized by black feminists. While Gilead rejects the emancipatory potential of black feminist theory by exiling blackbodies, the culture forecloses the emancipatory potential of single motherhood. Gileadean refusal to identify the Handmaids' as single

mothers generates abject maternal subjectivities as their multiplicities are denied by the cultural and social organization.

THE RISE OF THE NEW RIGHT

Just as the women's liberation strengthened around organizing principles and collective activism, the backlash against the movement also garnered potency in its ability to gather into a somewhat cohesive New Right. While the election of Ronald Reagan into the presidency in 1980 seemed to mark a pivotal shift in the nation's political trajectory, the New Right's agenda had seeped into national politics long before Reagan's inauguration. In fact, the New Right stood not simply as a countermovement against the second wave of feminism (though they devised ways to fight feminism's progress), but as the residues of a threatened traditionalism, as the reactionary glance back at the racist, patriarchal systems upheld since the United States' inception. In the wake of Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign for presidency, the New Right—which was previously galvanized through grassroots organizing, united into a more populist national political sphere. According to Flora Davis, The New Right united four major conservative groups: anti-Communists, economic conservatives, Catholic anti-abortionists, and Protestant fundamentalists/evangelicals (434). Many of these New Righters came to the forefront as they felt the winds of social progress and liberalism threaten their white picket fences of the increasingly outdated American Dream.

Women who had freshly taken up the feminist cause in the 1960s and 1970s were met with scathing criticism, as the countermovement intent on unravelling the political and social successes of feminism consolidated its efforts into the rise of the New Right.

This new countermovement targeted legislation like *Roe v. Wade* (1973), squashed the Equal Rights Amendment (after years of Congressional attempts to pass it) and forged a political desert in which female representatives and office-holders proved scarce. In 1980, prior to Reagan's administrative takeover, the White House staff had appointed 123 women. However, this number was nearly cut in half as the number of women employed as White House staff members dropped to 62 by the following year (Faludi 257). Reagan's administration even made efforts to inflate this number as they included lower-ranking jobs (not previously considered political appointments) in their data—perhaps indicative of their awareness of the underrepresentation. According to Faludi, Reagan, in a similar fashion, continued this trend of under-employing women by slyly disbanding organizations like the Federal Women's Program (established in 1967), which recruited women into federal agencies. The few political appointments given to women were often accompanied by the administration's most antifeminist policies (Faludi 258).

The efforts of the New Right, while represented throughout myriad organization, were often spearheaded by powerful conservative conglomerations and think tanks. Although the Heritage Foundation, a massive conservative think tank, established its collective platforms in 1973 to combat legislation like *Roe v. Wade,* the organization continued to target the feminist movement throughout Reagan's presidency. In 1981, the Heritage Foundation published *Mandate for Leadership,* outlining over 2000 strategic moves to shift the contours of American politics into a conservative arena. However, Reagan's cabinet and administrative staff were only a small portion of its readership as Washington Post listed *Mandate for Leadership* on its bestseller list. Just as feminist texts

and pamphlets helped attract the support of women across the nation, the growing conservatives also brandished its weapon, specifically, via text. This literature soon ushered in new policies, many in accordance with the Heritage Foundation's ideals.

Reagan's administration also prided itself on diminishing the welfare state in an effort to reduce federal spending. Although the welfare programs that served mostly women comprised only 10 percent of the national budget, these programs also comprised one-third of the budget cuts during Reagan's presidency (Neuman 860). Not only did the rise of the New Right reinforce the already circulating discourses that slandered the women's liberation (and women in general), the newly energized conservative agenda put women at an even greater economic disadvantage. As Reagan propagates the image of the "welfare queen," he simultaneously ensures the material damming of the resources he claims black women exploited. This defunding exhibits the ways that circulating discourses converge with material consequences that, during this reactionary time in American politics, reinforced the socioeconomic, racial, and gendered hierarchies privileging whiteness and maleness. Circularly, the legislative actions affected the discourses surrounding the women and people of color who were made most vulnerable during the Reagan era. His administration turned its face away from women experiencing domestic abuse. In early 1980s, the federal government refused to pass legislation that would have funded shelters for women escaping domestic abuse as it simultaneously closed the Office of Domestic Violence, which had only been established two years prior in 1979.

The New Right also attacked the women's liberation explicitly, contesting the cause directly. Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) championed the conservative principles combatting the "open-mindedness" associated with progressive liberalism, including feminism—a movement which he equates with "the Terror" (101). When analyzing the transformation of gender dynamics, Bloom laments the loss of modesty, a cornerstone of female identity according to him, correlating female modesty to "providing a gratification in harmony with the procreation and rearing of children" (101). He then places the responsibility and risk of parenting (he makes no distinction between the processes of birth and childrearing) on women—"that is, biologically," he writes, further implying an innate, preternatural order of families. Bloom's examination of the growing presence of progress and feminism in American institutions of education and academia proved wildly popular, becoming a national bestseller. However, Bloom did not stand alone in his published disapproval of the feminist movement and he, along with those whose politics aligned with his reactionary views, relied not on fact, but on masculinist fear. As Bloom preached about the infiltration of college and university campuses, he claimed that the hiring of female scholars marginalized those who disagreed with the women's liberation. As he asserts, "And the simple fact is you get a majority with a certain interpretive opinion and they think everybody is incompetent and they hire their own" (Faludi 292), he seems unaware of the irony in his language—taken out of the context of their initial purpose, his words could be wielded against him to reveal a history of male dominance and female subjugation. Bloom fails to realize that it was white men who had established the margins that feminists aimed to erase. Paul

Weyrich, one of the founding members of the Heritage Foundation, viewed his liberal opponents as already successful, claiming, “We are not in power. They are,” (Faludi 231) using his prominent platform within the New Right to arouse panic in conservative Americans, kindling the reactionary movement that hoped to dismantle some of the progress of the previous two decades.

To many in the New Right, minor splashes in the cultural and economic spheres felt like tsunamis, as Bloom’s exaggeration of women’s presence in academic institutions exhibits. In fact, women comprised only 10 percent of tenured faculty—regardless of their liberal or conservative politics—as scholarship within the sphere of academic publications rarely focused on women or women’s issues (only 7.4 percent of published works centered women). Furthermore, institutions often rearranged their budgets to allocate funds formerly in the liberal arts to growth industries deemed more profitable: medical and business schools (Faludi 293). These two fields have historically been dominated by males, and remained heavily masculinized despite the second wave’s efforts to achieve employment equality in both representation and wage. The 1980s stood as a decade rife with this ignorance that exaggerated cultural progress despite feminism’s efforts, as the backlash against women proved one fueled by fear. This is the same fear that Stephen King seemed both aware of and complicit in when writing *Carrie*. Similarly, this fear also contributed to the discourses maintaining the oppressive conditions imposed on black women—particularly black single mothers—around whom Naylor constructs her novel.

REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES AND SENSATIONALIZED MOTHERHOOD

Furthering the contest for reproductive rights and attempts from both the political left and right to define motherhood was the advancements in conceptive technologies. In her 1990 essay, "Birth Pangs: Conceptive Technologies and the Threat to Motherhood," Michelle Stanworth maps the debates that unfolded during the 1980s regarding the dawning of reproductive technology such as IVF and surrogacy. In her essay, she observes the rising coherence in feminist opposition to these technologies, however, Stanworth problematizes some of the more strident feminist disapprovals. During this time, feminists viewed new technologies as methods of further medicalizing childbirth, allowing men "to wrest 'not only control of reproduction, but reproduction itself' from women" (Stanworth 290). In this conception of motherhood and the opposition to technologies, feminists posit that the medicalization of birth and reproduction is the male attempt at procreative power and control. However, Stanworth argues that the case against medicalization of birth ignores the ways in which contraceptive technology (women's ability to access contraception is central to the feminist agenda) also relies on a heavily medicalized vision of reproductive rights. Furthermore, Stanworth calls for a historicizing and contextualizing of these technologies—just as contraception would not have been accessible to middle class women without the exploitation of Puerto Rican women's bodies—Stanworth warns of minimizing the disparity in how or to what poorer women and women of color have access.

Stanworth also argues against the binary thinking that accompanies reproductive technologies as they construct even more defined categories of "fertile" and "infertile"

women. This categorization expands further to define "good" mothers in contrast to women "unfit" to mother. Stanworth writes, "According to ideologies of motherhood, all women want children; but single women and teenagers, women from ethnic minorities and those on state support, lesbian women and women with disabilities are often urged to forgo mothering" (292-3) in order to privilege the interests of the hypothetical child over the woman's. This discrimination proves applicable in instances of both conceptive technologies and adoption—and each nontraditional approach to motherhood is heavily regulated and surveilled. Surrogacy, while not fitting within the right's confines of traditional motherhood, was also criticized by many feminists as "unsisterly" and exploiting the birthmother's bodies. However, Stanworth's assessment of the conceptive technologies and the proper ways to negotiate the new kind of motherhood rest in the regulations (or lack thereof), women's agency hinging on the conditions and practices that unravel with new technologies. She writes, "Attempts to understand and to influence the nature of motherhood must, it seems to me, come to terms with the range of conditions—social, legal, political, and economic, as well as medical—that sustain these differences" (Stanworth 300). This intersectional understanding of technology's larger implications for women is the only sufficient way of navigating, at the time, such a new era in reproduction.

Although women's capacity to mother proves the locus of many debates about women—whether explicitly tied to reproduction or not—tensions around motherhood were foregrounded by the case of Baby M, which called for cultural and legislative shifts in how motherhood is conceptualized and, thus, regulated. The Baby M case was

sensationalized in media as the battle for custody between the child's birth mother (Mary Beth Whitehead) and the child's adoptive parents (William and Elizabeth Stern) unfolded in the public arena. Following the sensationalizing of the Baby M case, a series of legislative debates developed that inscribed surrogacy and surrogate mothers' bodies with difference and commodification. The dramatization of the 1986-1988 court cases that followed the custody dispute, and the media's day-to-day coverage of this surrogacy debate foregrounded the legal, ethical, philosophic discomfort accompanying the shifting contours of motherhood (McDonald 35). Ultimately, after a brief time in which Whitehead was awarded custody, the Sterns were made the child's legal guardians. The aftermath of the case brought an onslaught of state and federal legislation—states introduced 70 bills regarding surrogacy, and Congressed reviewed 3 federal bills (McDonald 35). Like many controversies regarding women's bodies and their rights to reproduction, that which was previously unfamiliar birthed a plethora of regulatory practices. Throughout her essay documenting the case of Baby M and synthesizing the political and philosophical attempts to negotiate surrogate identities (of both child and surrogate mother), Christine McDonald recalls Donna Harraway's call for a cyborg womanhood that wields technology as a tool of empowerment for women. McDonald argues that 1980s America had no ways to reconcile the newly-discovered powers of non-traditional parenting (at least, white middle-class Americans) writing, "For it is not so much that we have become determined by technology…as that we have been unable to invent new kinds of analyses to match the new kinds of power implicit in technology" (44).

Perhaps feminists, at this time of reproductive debates (though, women's procreative capacities seem always a point of contention) would have benefitted from a push to wrest the regulation of contraceptive technologies from the hands of the patriarchal fields of medicine and politics. Rather, the debates seemed heavily focused on whether these technologies adhered to a feminist practice or relegated women to making themselves commodified "wombs for rent" or relapsing into traditional maternal roles. In the introduction to his book *Trans**, Jack Halberstam writes, "We are…trying to fight power by battling over the relations between signifiers and signifieds while leaving the structures of signification itself intact" (16). Although Jack, here, is concerned with the particularities of trans vocabulary, his criticism could doubly apply to these reproductive debates, as focus was placed on how to regulate unfamiliar and new ways of coming into motherhood instead of calling to question a system that immediately marked non-traditional reproduction with otherness—a system that deemed more fluid definitions of motherhood indigestible. This is the same system that exploited Puerto Rican women in the scientific exploration of contraception and created new reproductive technologies that excluded women of color on the basis of race and socioeconomic status. The remainder of this chapter will try to analyze the ways in which Margaret Atwood incorporates these political and social dialogues of the 1970s and 1980s in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

THE HANDMAID'S TALE RESPONDS TO AMERICAN CONSERVATISM

A little over a decade after *Carrie*'s publication, and three years following the release of *The Women of Brewster Place*, Margaret Atwood constructed her own

dystopian take on the projected future of the United States. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), recounts the religious regime plaguing the fictional Gilead in an unspecified, but near (in the context of 1980s) future. Although Margaret Atwood is Canadian, her decision to locate Gilead in New England reflects her understanding of American politics and cultural movements throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Throughout this period, Atwood documented the New Right's attempt to retrench the progress made by feminism in the decades prior, using conservative anti-feminism as a backbone for her conception of Gilead—the world of which she claims she "invented nothing." She collected clippings from newspaper articles that either articulated the New Right's anti-woman philosophy or chronicled political events. In *The Handmaid's Tale,* Atwood combines her fear of the conservative backlash against feminism and the "totalitarian excesses of the period" (Neuman 859). While Atwood's speculative fiction deserves individual analysis, her submersion into dystopian feminist literature is not wholly unique—the 1970s marked a rejuvenation of dystopian fiction furnished to fit the feminist cause. Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) all circulated simultaneously with the rise of the New Right (Stillman and Johnson 70). However, *The Handmaid's Tale* seems simultaneously to warn of a dystopian future if the New Right triumphs over progress and to expose the ways in which power functioned in the 1980s—especially around issues of reproduction and motherhood.

I use the word "dystopian" to describe Atwood's work, however I also aim to clarify that the dystopia/utopia binary that exists in literature does a disservice to the

subjective nature of these classifications. Conditions that one regards as dystopian, may reflect fragments of what another considers ideal, just as *The Handmaid's Tale* employs the attitudes of the Religious Right to implant horror in a disrupted feminist vision. In her essay, "'We lived in the blank white spaces': Rewriting the Paradigm of Denial in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," Danita Dodson illuminates how the founding of the United States depended on this utopian/dystopian dichotomy, and how its reliance on such binary thinking both creates an American notion of "Self" (serving a utopian vision) and "other" (threatening a utopian vision), while also masking the ways in which American politics and society is rife with abuses of liberty (67).

CONSTRUCTING BORDERS, BUILDING BINARIES

I argue that Margaret Atwood's awareness of oppressive binary structures present in discourses contemporary to *The Handmaid's Tale* inspired her own creation of a system of binaries and hierarchies. One important binary to establish is that of white and non-white. The Republic of Gilead is built upon eugenic agendas aligned with sterilization abuses present in the 1970s and 1980s. Joan Kelly's "Sterilization: Rights and Abuse of Rights" (1977) highlights the compulsory sterilization of women of color and cites the infamous case of Minnie Lee (age 12) and Mary Alice Relf (age 14) as proof of anti-blackness in these medical practices (150). Atwood takes this anti-blackness and extrapolates this racist ideology into the speculated future—black people, known as "Children of Ham" (a biblical reference) have been "resettled" in the Midwest, however their fate is never clarified further. Atwood seemed cognizant of American constructions

of blackness and the ways in which black Otherness was marked with danger. Their expulsion from Gilead reflects the racism embedded in American culture by paralleling the historical resettlement of Native Americans from the East.

Similarly, as the United States constructed gender on an unequal binary system, so, too, does Atwood's Gilead. While I realize this binary seems obvious, it is necessary to acknowledge this male/female dichotomy as it proves central in understanding other existing structures within Gilead. Even within this dichotomy, the Gileadean social structure offered means of distinguishing legitimacy from illegitimacy—a distinction between women and Unwomen is made. Unwomen are those who are deemed inassimilable into Gileadean society (sterile women and politically dissident women), while women are further splintered into class organizations: Wives, Aunts, Handmaids, Marthas, and Econowives. These classifications revolve around the striation of motherhood as Wives are responsible for mothering the children born of the Handmaids, Aunts instill future generations with specific moral codes, Handmaids—whose names imply female servitude—are the vessels of reproduction, and Marthas are responsible for housework. Econowives are the only women (and lowest class) who are responsible for the execution of all those traditionally maternal duties. Dividing the role of the mother into separate classes is one of the Republic's methods of maintaining female oppression and dependency. While men are also broken into various classes, their division into Commanders, Eyes, Angels, and Guardians are all defined by their military or policing authority—male classification revolved around control.

One binary that Atwood seeks to explode is that of a bifurcated timeline denoting a wholly good pre-Gileadean era and an oppressive Gileadean regime. Even as Offred uses her memories with Luke to sustain her own sanity, Atwood highlights how women conceived femaleness in the time prior to the Gilead to which we are made privy. Atwood suggests that the alleged free world pre-dating the Republic's revolution relied on men to validate female subjectivity. Before Offred and Luke were married, she remained "imaginary;" it is only after their marriage that Offred is "solidified" (50). Even though this memory reflects a time before Gilead degrades women in the mode present in Offred's account, women could only conceive of themselves through men's existences—it is their ability to enter traditional relationships with men that sustains their realities, that makes real their ghostly impressions. Without men, according to Offred's experience, there seems no way of negotiating femaleness. The classifications of Gilead makes these negotiations impossible and erecting these boundaries within her fictional realm allowed Margaret Atwood to obscure identities, one identity being the single mother.

WHERE ARE THE SINGLE MOTHERS?

While my first two texts, *Carrie* and *The Women of Brewster Place* offer explicit narratives of single motherhood, *The Handmaid's Tale* diverges from this trend. Nevertheless, the erasure of this social category proves striking. I think it is important to recognize that a story without a main single mother character can still be a story about single motherhood. While the Handmaids function primarily as surrogate mothers, I

claim that their coercion into their social position—these women were threatened to be sent to the Colonies to do hard manual labor and clean toxic waste—drastically shifts their narrative from that of a consenting surrogate mother to one of potential single maternity, even though the Handmaids are stripped of their reproductive rights and their right to mother their children. The survival of Gilead hinges on reproduction as the Republic assumes control, in large part, to effect change in the declining birth rate. "Fertile" women's bodies are exploited by the Republic as the women, the Handmaids, lack reproductive freedom and any semblance of autonomy. Many of the Handmaids are either single women who have had children in the time before Gilead, or women whose marriages fell outside the scope of traditionalism—the narrator, Offred, was married to a man named Luke, however their marriage was not acknowledged by the Church because of Luke's previous divorce. Their inability to fit the mold of a nuclear family is what endangers their lives and their freedom. The only single mother character that Atwood makes explicit is Offred's mother.

Offred's mother is explicitly involved in the women's liberation movement as Atwood paints images of her mother involved in various kinds of second-wave activism. Atwood portrays Offred's mother participating in Take Back the Night marches, employing the feminist jargon at the time (she jokes that Luke is a "chauvinist"), and firmly opposing pronatalism—often seen as a prominent debate during this era in which reproductive technologies became more accessible. In fact, while the Handmaids fall right outside the definitions of single motherhood, Offred's mother embodies the empowered single mother. In a memory, Offred relays her mother's stance on her single

status as Atwood writes, "…I don't want a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds' worth of half babies. A man is just a woman's strategy for making other women. Not that your father wasn't a nice guy and all, but he wasn't up to fatherhood. Not that I expected it of him" (121). Here, we are shown not only her mother's independence, but also her recognition of maternal agency—for her, mothering was a choice, a vehicle of bodily autonomy. This autonomy, however, is retracted by Gilead's systems of power.

FOUCAULT: CONTROL AND POWER

As Margaret Atwood constructs a world in response to the backlash against the second wave of feminism, the dystopian fear of the novel rests largely in how Atwood foregrounds social and bodily control—something integral to the feminist fight for reproductive rights. I find a Foucauldian reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* necessary in recognizing the structures of power at work in Gilead as the people of this fictional republic succumb to both a panoptic form of self-discipline, but also an external participation in a spectacle-centered discipline of terror.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) Michel Foucault theorizes power to expose the state's structures of control that dictate behavior and its consequences. Foucault posits that 18th century forms of discipline (and the eras preceding the 18th century) relied on the ability of the spectacle of terror and public punishment, instilling fear in witnesses through the threat of bodily violence. However, Foucault notes a shift in how the state disciplines people as punishment "enters that of abstract consciousness" (9), maintaining

a system reliant on the "inevitability" of punishment, rather than "visible intensity," resulting in a change of the mechanisms of punishment (9). According to Foucault, the Western societies of the 1970s and 1980s abandoned the past "policy of terror" intent on "mak[ing] everyone aware, through the body of the criminal, of the unrestrained presence of the sovereign" (49). He then continues on to assert, "The public execution did not re-establish justice; it reactivated power" (Foucault 49). He later argues:

> The 'invention' of this new political anatomy must not be seen as a sudden discovery. It is rather a multiplicity of often minor processes, or different origin and scattered location, which overlap, repeat, or imitate one another, support one another, distinguish themselves from one another according to their domain of application, converge and gradually produce the blueprint of a general method. (Foucault 138)

This passage lends itself to a New Historicist conceptualization of not only the "new political anatomy" but of the discourses and modes of domination that interweave at specific moments in history to "produce the blueprint of a general method." The infiltration of social discipline by these methods of control and implicit punishment constitute Foucault's panopticism (employing the architecture of Bentham's Panopticon). Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* was published in 1975, its timeline parallel to that of American feminism, where women sought to dismantle the structures of control that withheld their bodily autonomy. Margaret Atwood seems to combine both the feminist push for reproductive justice and Foucault's theory of power in her narrative that encompasses both motherhood and prison-like regulation.

Margaret Atwood attempts to make visible the Foucauldian Panopticism of 1980s America by creating a world where the psychic violence and self-policed bodily restrictions of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* manifest themselves in visible mechanisms of control. Just as the Handmaids are marked by their very dress—as are all social positions within Gilead— the currents of power are masked, but familiar to those subjugated by the control. The constant threat of surveillance and the biopolitical medicalization of reproduction are Gilead's most pervasive methods of maintaining a panoptic system of self-discipline, all of which rely on the constructed boundaries that classify its citizens.

SURVEILLANCE

Foucault's panopticism is not possible without the constant threat of surveillance, as the Panopticon "arrange[s] things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" (201). Atwood employs the power of undetectable surveillance in *The Handmaid's Tale,* creating the Eyes—people who blended into the normal fabric of Gileadean society, but whose allegiance to the Republic made them agents who punished deviant behavior. As Offred goes about her daily life, she constantly polices her own behavior under the threat of a possible Eye. When she makes eye contact with Nick, she quickly corrects her behavior, positing, "Perhaps it was a test, to see what I would do. Perhaps he is an Eye" (Atwood 18), however this paranoia is not unique to this moment. When Japanese tourists ogle at the sight of the Handmaids, an interpreter asks Offred and her walking partner, Ofglen, if they are happy. Offred, however,

"know[s] better than to look the interpreter in the face. Most of the interpreters are Eyes," but she then adds, "or so it's said" (28). Just as the Panopticon shields prisoners from viewing those who surveille (or the lack of surveillance), the Handmaids have no way to differentiate those who endanger their lives and those who are caught in the same web of restrictions and self-discipline. There are physical markers of Foucault's Panopticon in *The Handmaid's Tale* as the Handmaids' uniform include white wings around their faces "to prevent seeing, but also of being seen" (Atwood 8). Similarly, the Eyes are unseen, their vans concealed, the windows of their vehicles "dark-tinted" as the men "wear dark glasses" creating, what Offred deems "a double obscurity" (Atwood 22). Just as Foucault's prisoners are isolated, able only to see the threat of surveillance in the center tower without any visual confirmation, the Handmaids, too, are socialized to assume they are under authority's gaze, fully visible to all but one another.

BIOPOLITICS AND REPRODUCTION

Atwood presents a social order and structure of subjection would not be possible without biopolitical power over women. Gilead takes many steps to control female bodies monitor the Handmaids' health and, thus, their capacity to reproduce. Not only must the Handmaids observe the behavioral norms established by the religious state, their diet, hygiene, and doctor visits are regulated under Gileadean rule as well. While these seem to provide material health benefits, beneath this guise of protection, the regulation of the Handmaids' bodies reveal how the Republic has stripped these women of agency.

When Offred visits the doctor in the earlier pages of the novel, Atwood ensures that readers digest the wholly male constitution of the medical field. Both the nurse (who is armed with a pistol, asserting control via threatened punishment), and the doctor are male. The check-up is made as cold and objective as possible, and Offred tells, "At neck level there's another sheet, suspended from the ceiling. It intersects me so that the doctor will never see my face" (Atwood 60). Not only does this practice erase subjectivity by hiding Offred's face, her body is fragmented by the sheet, recalling methods of female objectification. After Offred lies down, she says, "When I'm arranged" (Atwood 60) as though she herself has become passive even in her own movement. This language reveals Offred's desensitization to her exploitation as a vessel of reproduction. She has relinquished bodily autonomy, however her passive language relays Offred's relinquished subjectivity.

Gilead further ensures biopower over the Handmaids as households by obliterating any means of suicide—however this concern for life stems largely from the loss of procreative resources (female bodies) and the loss of state power implicit in this action. The woman who occupied Offred's position before her leaves our Offred with a note—"nolite te bastardes carborundurom" (Atwood 52)—which translates, we later learn, to "don't let the bastards grind you down." However, under the constant threat of surveillance and the medicalization of reproduction, Offred is no longer a subject willing her body into certain actions, but a cog in Gilead's disciplinary machine.

Offred, in the world of Gilead, is but a subjectless and subjected women, an outsider, even to her own body. Atwood writes, "My body seems outdated" (63) as

Offred struggles to recall how she once had the semblance of authority over body before Gilead. However, she can no longer negotiate her own being into autonomy, she is not an agent in determining the fate of her body. Offred tells us, “I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it’s shameful or immodest but because I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to look at something that determines me so completely” (Atwood 63). She is aware her position in the narrative of religious conservatism and social hierarchies elevated by the Republic, however her inability to resist self-discipline due to fear of retribution exposes a panoptic structure of discipline and power. While earlier I cited Stanworth to establish the contours of the reproductive technologies debate, Atwood takes the age of conceptive technology and erases the option of debate. In her 1975 work *Immaculate Deception: A New Look at Women and Childbirth in America*, Suzanne Arms asks, “Is it worth the effort to create a machine-age birth if it means that even our bodies are turned into machines? If the technological merry-go-round is not about to slow down, then where is it heading?” (92). Atwood poses a future that emphasizes how women’s bodies—even when recalling puritanical America—are machines regardless the accessible technology. However, the “technological merry-go-round” is a mechanism of 1970s and 1980s America that Atwood replaces with rituals in the context of Gilead. While these rituals range from extreme scenarios—the Salvaging extols public executions—to ritualized daily actions—Offred’s walks with Ofglen—they function to indoctrinate the religiosity of the state into its people, while also generating uniformity. This uniformity makes divergent behavior more legible, and thus, more punishable—Offred, thus, internalizes the state-enforced discipline.

Even in moments where Offred narrates moments of near subversion, she remains powerless, captive to Gilead's puritanical regime. In one scene, as Serena Joy and Offred gather to listen to the Commander read from the Bible, Atwood writes, "We watch him: every inch, every flicker" (87) as though offering a sliver of redemption, a moment where the power relations between man and woman are subverted. However, Atwood reinforces Offred's dependence in the next few lines: "We're all watching him. It's the one thing we can really do, and it is not for nothing: if he were to falter, fail, or die, what would become of us?...But watch out, Commander, I tell him in my head. I've got my eye on you. One false move and I'm dead" (88). Even though Offred assumes the position of the Eye, she remains powerless in a constant state of danger. Women are dependent on men materially and abstractly and these women (whether Wife, Aunt, Handmaid, or Martha) fill definitions of femaleness in how the patriarchal society can use them for its own agenda. While Atwood highlights the shortcomings of pre-Gileadean society (Offred's self-description as "imaginary" into "solidified") along with Offred's present, Atwood creates a disparity between Offred's past life and the totalitarian authority during which she tells her narrative. How, then, does the United States shift from muted Panopticism that still allowed feminists to resist certain structures that refused their bodily autonomy, to the Gileadean system of discipline? Atwood seems to argue that the oppressive conditions of Gilead were built on silence and complicity.

WHITE SILENCE, AND COMPLICITY

While Offred's mother unapologetically assumes a feminist identity in a pre-Gileadean existence, Offred seemed turned off by the radical activism and combative nature of women's liberation. As she seems to resent her mother's strident feminism (Atwood 122), she chooses not to participate with the fervor that fueled her mother. However, Offred's retrospective narrative drips with regret, leaving Offred to yearn, "I want her back. I want everything back, the way it was. But there is no point to it, this wanting" (Atwood 122). A large part of Offred's narrative rests on her past inability to recognize inequality as she enjoyed relative freedom. Danita Dodson's "'We lived in the blank white spaces': Rewriting the Paradigm of Denial in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," she articulates the American tradition of failing to recognize hypocrisy in its conception of national identity. Both Dodson and Atwood recognize the irony of a "domestic imperialism and enslavement" in a nation pledging "liberty and justice for all" (Dodson 66). Dodson further argues that Gilead's divine mission of "rescuing the promised land from the subversive Mother/Other" recalls the Puritanical tendencies to expel those who did not conform to their established beliefs and practices (66). According to Dodson, Atwood employs tropes found in slave accounts of black women to reassess the failures of United States history in affording freedom.

However, Atwood is also careful in her criticism of white complicity by "presenting a once-privileged 20th-century woman's quantum leap through ignored parts of the American experience" (Dodson 68). In a passage that recalls the events leading up to the religious takeover, Offred narrates:

> Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it. There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated, interfered with, as they used to say, but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. None of them were the men we knew. The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others. How awful, we would say, and they were, but they were awful without being believable. They were too melodramatic, they had a dimension that was not the dimension of our lives.
>
> We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom.
>
> We lived in the gaps between the stories. (Atwood 56-7)

Here, just as Foucault acknowledged, "The 'invention' of this new political anatomy must not be seen as a sudden discovery," (138), Atwood recognizes the nuances in discursive constructions of a controlled people. Within the context of its publication, *The Handmaid's Tale* reflects the gradual ascendancy of the New Right as they mobilized throughout the 1960s and 1970s, establishing dominance as Ronald Reagan assumed presidency. The culture that allows the subjugation of women to the extent that Gilead is the same culture that validates the incendiary jargon of the New Right—that which labels feminism "the Terror," and its advocates "femi-nazis"—but also promulgates traditional values with subtlety in televangelism and the resurrection of 1950s family-oriented shows, as well as the erasure of women from the White House.

However, in this passage, Atwood also marks Offred with complicity in her act of ignoring—right before the above passage, Offred tells readers, "We lived, as usual by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it" (Atwood 56). She acknowledges the façade of comfort that accompanied her privilege as a white middle-class woman, however, in the case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, this recognition comes too late. Atwood makes clear the intention to maintain a pure, white bloodline in the careful reconstruction of Gileadean families: only white people are chosen to reproduce and raise children. In *Killing the Black Body* (1997), Dorothy Roberts asserts, "Reproductive politics in America inevitably involves racial politics" (9). Roberts traces the nation's history of expelling black bodies from agential realms of subjectivity and reproductive autonomy, claiming, "The white founding fathers justified their exclusion of Blacks from the new republic by imbuing them with a set of attributes that made them unfit for citizenship" (8). Atwood models Gilead on similarly exclusionary practices as she subsequently highlights the willful ignorance, or "ignoring," practiced by those who silently fell between the feminist movement and the New Right.

Offred admits her silence when "other women" and "other men" were the sites of violence and control, illuminating the American tradition of creating distance between Self and Other and responding with silence in the face of discriminatory violence and exclusion. Just as Atwood obviates Foucault's panoptic model of control by making passive forces of surveillance and biopower active enforcers of discipline, she also transforms Offred's passive complicity into active participation. During the ritual of the Salvaging, all the women take an active role in executing alleged state traitors. As the

noose is placed around the woman's neck and the stool is kicked from beneath her, Offred says, "…I've leaned forward to touch the rope in front of me, in time with the others, both hands on it, the rope hairy, sticky with tar in the hot sun, then placed my hand on my heart to show my unity with the Salvagers and my consent, and my complicity in the death of this woman" (Atwood 276). While Offred claims she consents to the action, this near-future dystopian vision of America strips the Handmaids of consent—in fact, these women can no longer choose complicity, rather, they are forced into it.

THE ABJECT MATERNAL BODY

Offred seems capable of retrospective digestion of the violence unleashed upon black and brown bodies, only after recognizing her own body as a site of control. Towards the novel's end, Offred says, "I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject" (Atwood 286). She names herself abject, unlike the abject explored in *Carrie* or *The Women of Brewster Place*. Offred establishes her body as a point of dissociation, a vacuum devoid of subjectivity like an empty womb. As Kristeva paints abjection as the process of expelling that which blurs the boundaries of self-identification, Offred's admission—"I am abject"—marks the death of her will to identify, her will to maintain subjectivity. She is, however, willing to "obliterate," to "empty" herself, to "become a chalice" (Atwood 286)—in the face of fear, Offred relinquishes her previous convictions for the sake of survival. I further argue that Offred's abjection occurs in recognition of her subjectivity which she subsequently

forfeits. Throughout the novel, we are given her own recorded account of Gilead, allowing Offred agency through the act of constructing a narrative. By reviving this lost subjectivity through storytelling, Offred is reminded of her own multiplicities—as occupying types of womanhood not digestible in Gileadean society—that obscure the boundaries rigidly set in her world. The binary constructions that differentiate between Women and Unwomen, Wives and Handmaids, whiteness and non-whiteness cannot digest the multiplicity of Offred's femaleness, and she realizes that she cannot maintain subjectivity while occupying a womanhood more complicated than the categories of Gilead. In this moment Atwood presents a scenario in which one of two things must happen: either the death of subjectivity, or the death of the subject—however neither lives without the other.

CONCLUSION

Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel stands both as a reflection of American society during the 1980s, but also a warning against the rise of the New Right and the dangers of falling complicit in privileged silence as Offred did. Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood synthesizes debates surrounding reproduction—capturing the politics of pronatalism, the questions arising from new conceptive technologies, and the ever-present anti-abortion agenda—and questions of familial structures, focusing on the subjugation of mothers as both female bodies and as subjects. A Foucauldian analysis of the Gileadean structures of power also emphasizes the panopticism present in 1980s America. *The Handmaid's Tale* touches on myriad topics—too many to condense into a

single chapter—yet this complexity alone reveals the potency of circulating discourses in restricting women while also unveiling how these dialogues often consolidate in the challenging of non-traditional mothers.

CONCLUSION

Nolite te bastardes carborundorum.

My project is one that centers the single mother narrative, one that orbits her discursive thrust to model a way of conceiving the subjectivity eclipsed by more dominant discourses. Mother is the site from which all life arises, including the narrative life of fictional characters—whether she is named or obscured, active or absent, no character is without some shape of a mother. Both Stephen King and Gloria Naylor claimed authority in molding their literary mothers, however their pens followed different socio-political gusts, each attempting to erode unfavorable aspects of the women's movement to challenge their fear of or exclusion from the movement. Margaret Atwood crafts an intricate narrative embroidered with myriad contemporary discourses—including the masculinist backlash found in *Carrie* and Naylor's underscoring of black women's exclusion in *The Women of Brewster Place*. King's, Naylor's, and Atwood's writing function not as hosts, simply documenting power structures and dynamics during this specific historical moment, but as architects of agency and discourse. These writers generate narratives that re-allocated power to a people who reside in the margins; they infuse their work with subjectivity. While these works span eleven years, they ride similar discursive currents, ebbing and flowing, like the black women inhabiting Brewster Place.

I want to return to the year of *Carrie*'s publication to recall an unprecedented moment in American history where Nixon's resignation plagued the executive branch of government with unprecedented uncertainty. In his impromptu 1974 speech, bidding

those who served his presidency a final farewell, Richard Nixon said, “Nobody will ever write a book, probably, about my mother. Well, I guess all of you would say this about your mother—my mother was a saint.” As he reflects on the people most instrumental in his life, Nixon’s words imply an innate motherly goodness mined from the cavern of a singular maternal experience. However, the pretense of a universally-experienced motherhood erases subjectivity by essentializing the category of mother and obscuring the intersection of identities that shape individual narratives. This pretense not only denies the multiplicities of motherhood, it also fails to acknowledge the negative constructions of mothers situated outside the idealized nuclear family—particularly single mothers. As I’ve explored throughout my paper, single mothers have occupied positions of both marginality and centrality as their social identity threatened to disrupt the structures that maintained hierarchical systems of power. Perhaps Nixon was right when reflecting on his mother, however, any book that has a mother character includes a narrative of motherhood symptomatic of the era. While authors’ writings may root themselves in genres and literary elements seemingly removed from political influence, all texts are entwined in the contemporary histories during which they are written.

The circulating women-centered discourses of the 1970s and 1980s—whether emanating from second-wave feminism or the New Right’s backlash—converged at the site of single mothers whose existence supplanted normative notions of gender, sexuality, family, race, and economy. Throughout my analyses of *Carrie*, *The Women of Brewster Place*, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, I explored the abject definitions of single motherhood across genres, time, and lived experiences, tracing the ways that shifting conceptions of

the abject reflected the cultural critique and subjectivity-formation present in each specific work.

To close my project, I want briefly to examine Atwood's fictionalized "Historical Notes," included after Offred's tale. A large part of my claim argues for a remembrance of history that looks for the women relegated to the margins—the voices "in the blank white spaces," but also the voices overpowered by dominant constructions intent on maligning certain populations. This final, supplementary section of *The Handmaid's Tale* paints a distant future in 2195 where Gilead stands at the center of academia, where the blatant puritanical structures of power are obsolete.

Despite the scholars' inquiry and archival research, Pieixoto, the keynote speaker, espouses a method of historicizing congruent with the rationale complicit in Gilead's domination. Throughout his talk, Pieixoto criticizes the racism and sexism of the Republic, while antithetically centering white men in his research. Pieixoto only mentions Offred by name once, and her name is bracketed within quotation marks. While one interpretation of his scholarship may suggest that he chooses not to employ her name because "Offred" attaches her identity to her Commander, Atwood ensures readers that his negligence comes not from a feminist perspective, but a male one. As Pieixoto talks about *The Handmaid's Tale* critically, commenting on Offred's insufficient account, he continually devalues her narrative stating, "Some of them [details] could have been filled by our anonymous author, had she had a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy. What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of print-out from

Waterford's private computer!" (Atwood 310). Here, Pieixoto disregards the power of subjective female narrativity by projecting his desire for information valued in masculine contexts—knowledge from Waterford, a white man, is privileged over Offred's narrative. This same male-centered mindset allows the foregrounding of men's authority in Gilead, reinforcing hierarchies of power. Pieixoto closes his speech with the following lines: "As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day" (Atwood 311). I understand Atwood's irony in these words as the core of her novel relies on filling the "echoes" with Offred's lived experience. While retrospectivity affords clarity in reflecting on the past, Pieixoto's belief that his present unravels in a "clearer light" is an assumption that inhibits recognition of present, concealed modes of domination.

I hope to illuminate the necessity of recollecting history in a way that resists binary thinking and accounts for a variety of circulating discourses. This careful synthesis of discursive histories will forge a feminist future—a future that affords women systems of power that resist hierarchical domination, as black feminists propose. Drawing on black feminist theory in shaping horizontal systems of power would forge new means of negotiating femaleness and motherhood. Loosing single mothers from the discourses whose constructions sought to dominate them would unpack many consolidated issues that affect women in terms of gender, sex, race, sexuality, and class. This unpacking would illuminate ways to liberate subjugated identities beyond just the single mother.

Doing so will make possible a history that transforms secretly carved, "Don’t let the bastards grind you down” into, "We didn’t let the bastards grind us down,” shouted in unison, perhaps with our fists raised in power or, better yet, with sturdy hands supporting the tired backs of our sisters—of our mothers.

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