A MOTHERHOOD SO WHITE: NORMATIVE MOTHERHOOD AS ENACTED AND RESISTED IN THE MOTHERHOOD MEMOIR

UMA MATERNIDADE TÃO BRANCA: A MATERNIDADE NORMATIVA CONFORME REPRESENTADA E RESISTIDA NO GÊNERO MEMORIALISTA

ABSTRACT

The article explores the unexamined whiteness of the motherhood memoir to consider how normative motherhood is enacted and how it may be resisted in the genre. More specifically, the article will examine how normative definitions of motherhood serve to exclude racialized mothers from the genre of the motherhood memoir. The article will show how the motherhood memoir as authored by white middle-class women is complicit with and reliant on normative motherhood, which has caused this genre to become synonymous with white middle-class women's meanings and experiences of mothering. The article will then consider how Nefertiti Austin's bestselling motherhood memoir—*Motherhood So White: A Memoir of Race, Gender, and Parenting in America* (2019)—in its black maternal standpoint and thematics of motherwork, other/communal mothering, mothering as social activism subverts the presumptions, priorities, and practices of the normative motherhood memoir to radically redefine and reform the genre and deliver a counter black maternal narrative of empowerment and resistance.

Keywords: Motherhood memoir. Normative motherhood. Black motherhood. Nefertiti Austin.

RESUMO

O artigo explora a branquitude não examinada do gênero memórias quando aborda a maternidade para considerar de que forma a maternidade normativa é representada e como ela pode ser combatida. Mais especificamente, o artigo examinará como as definições normativas de maternidade servem para excluir mães racializadas no gênero *motherhood memoir*. O artigo mostrará como as memórias literárias sobre a maternidade, escritas por mulheres brancas de classe média, são cúmplices da exclusão e dependem da maternidade normativa, o que fez com que este gênero se tornasse sinônimo de significados e experiências de maternagem das mulheres brancas de classe média. O artigo irá então considerar como o best-seller de Nefertiti Austin sobre a maternidade - *Motherhood So White: A Memoir of Race, Gender, and Parenting in America* (2019) – em seu ponto de vista materno negro e suas temáticas de trabalho materno, da maternagem comunal, e da maternagem como ativismo social, subverte as presunções, prioridades e

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práticas do gênero *motherhood memoir* normativo, para radicalmente redefinir e reformar o gênero e entregar uma narrativa materna negra de empoderamento e resistência.

Palavras-chave: Memórias da maternidade. Maternidade normativa. Maternidade negra. Nefertiti Austin.

In her *Paris Review* article "Why All the Books about Mother?", Elkin (2018) writes: "These books are putting motherhood on the map, literarily speaking, arguing forcefully, through their very existence, that it is a state worth reading about, parent or not." Indeed, as Lily Gurton-Wachter notes, "These writers are making a space in the literary world where there didn't seem to be room before; a space in which pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum experience are neither ignored nor pathologized, but simply -at long last- described" (apud ELKIN, 2018). However, not one of the twenty-one books listed in *The Paris Review* was written by a woman of colour, leading New York Times critic Parul Sehgal (2018) to comment: "So many of these books seem wary of, if not outright disinterested in, more deeply engaging with how race and class inflect the experience of motherhood." In response to *The Paris Review* article, several have asked, in Quereshi's' (2019) words "Why are all the motherhood memoirs so white?", have wondered, as Garbes (2021) does, "Why are we only talking about 'mom books' by white women?", and have emphasized, in Reddy's (2018) words:

> [the] need to talk about whiteness in motherhood memoirs. [...] Motherhood's the literary zeitgeist for the moment, and these books—along with the reviewers who discuss them as a group—are shaping the contours of a new genre. And currently it's a genre steeped in largely unexamined whiteness[1]. It's striking that not only are these books so white, but that their whiteness has gotten so little attention in what has otherwise been a really rich conversation about these new motherhood memoirs. (REDDY, 2018)

The article explores "the unexamined whiteness" of the motherhood memoir to consider how normative motherhood is enacted and may be resisted in the genre. More specifically, the article will examine how normative definitions of motherhood and memoir serve to exclude racialized mothers from the genre of the motherhood memoir. The article will show how the motherhood memoir as authored by white middle-class women is complicit with and reliant on normative motherhood, which has caused this genre to become synonymous with white middle-class women's meanings and experiences of mothering. The article will then consider how Nefertiti

1 She uses white as a catch-all here to refer to women who are white, straight, partnered, middle-class, college educated.

Austin's best selling motherhood memoir—*Motherhood So White: A Memoir of Race, Gender, and Parenting in America* (2019)—in its black maternal standpoint and thematics of motherwork, other/community mothering and mothering as social activism subverts the presumptions, priorities, and practices of normative motherhood memoir to radically redefine and reform the genre and deliver a counter black maternal narrative of empowerment and resistance.

A Genre So White: The Motherhood Memoir and its Compliance with, and Reliance on, Normative Motherhood

In the introduction to their book *Motherhood Memoirs: Mothers Creating/ Writing Lives*, Dymond and Willey (2013) define the motherhood memoir as "a site for self-representation of the mother as she negotiates her multiple roles and how her roles are interpolated by the other aspects of her subjectivity" (p. 10). Motherhood memoirs explore how motherhood shapes women's lives and how writing about those lives, as Dymond and Willey (2013) note, "transforms the individual experience and institution of motherhood" (p. 21). Motherhood memoirs, thus, hold the possibility for critiquing the status quo and transforming it. With the reading and writing of motherhood memoirs, Dymond and Willey (2013) continue, "We are actively participating in the creation of a cultural storytelling, a cultural memory, which both gives meaning to our lived experiences and helps us find new models to live our lives" (p. 15). However, given the whiteness of the motherhood memoir genre, the cultural memory of mothering that is being created is solely that of normative motherhood. Indeed, as Sehgal (2018) observes, while the motherhood memoir may "dissolve the borders of self, it shores up, often violently, the walls between classes of women." The question that must be asked then is what has caused the whiteness of the emergent canon of the motherhood memoir? To this discussion I now turn.

In her chapter "Letter to a Young Black Mama on Writing Motherhood Memoir", Philyaw (2013) asks "Where are the 21st century blackmommy memoirs?" (p. 218). She argues that this absence may be attributed to both demand and supply: publishers assume there is insufficient market interest in these memoirs, and racialized women remain largely uninterested in writing them. The books that publishers accept are ones that have a supposed universal appeal; they reflect what is assumed to be the normative experience of motherhood—that of white middle-class women. "The prevailing assumption," Philyaw (2013) explains, "is that [Black women] represent a niche market with a limited audience, a separate category from the existing motherhood writing canon" (p. 225). But Philyaw (2013) also argues that writing about motherhood may not be possible or a priority for black mothers, as they simply may not have the time, or they may be more interested in larger social, economic, and political issues. She explains: "We would rather talk about family on a macro level, perhaps because too much has been made of the 'dysfunctional'

Black family for us to be comfortable writing about it on a personal level" (p. 221). Moreover, motherhood memoirs are primarily concerned with how women balance the demands of family and careers, which as Philyaw (2016) explains, "is neither the experience nor the concept of most women of colour". In her *The New Republic* article, Brown (2015) argues that "Society sees women of color's shameless writing as proof of deviance, not a relatable and fun story to share." What black motherhood writers must contend with, as Charlton (2014) argues, "is not the myth of the Good Mother, but that of the Bad Black Mother ... a myth that renders [our] motherhood at turns invisible and suspect." Moreover, as Hewitt (2019) discusses in her chapter on the motherhood memoir, white middle-class women have historically possessed the time and literacy to write and could claim motherhood as a respectable identity to write from, whereas racialized mothers have not been afforded the same freedom, opportunity, and legitimacy to write as a mother (p. 193). And even more troubling, as Philyaw (2016) notes, "is how the absence of Black mommy memoirs mirrors the relative absence of Black women's voices in mainstream U.S. media discourse about motherhood in general".

However, in her chapter from the *Motherhood Memoirs* collection, Willey (2013) argues that "African American women have been telling and writing their stores as long as they've been mothering, but those stories are not always made public; therefore, they are often not available, and even more often they are not celebrated, at least not in the same category as more traditional motherhood memoirs" (p. 238). For Willey (2013), the absence of motherhood memoirs by racialized women is less about whether they do or can write about mothering but more about how normative definitions of motherhood and memoir serve to exclude racialized mothers from the genre of the motherhood memoir. In contemporary patriarchal culture, normative motherhood defines mothering as natural to women and essential to their being, positions the mother as the central caregiver of her biological children, and assumes that children require full-time mothering. This good mother is nurturing, altruistic, patient, devoted, loving, and selfless; she always puts the needs of her children before her own and is available to them whenever needed. And should the mother work outside the home, her children rather than her career should be at the centre of her life. Good mothers are the primary caregivers of their children, and the care potentially provided by others is viewed as inferior and deficient. Although our culture regards mothering as natural to mothers, that same culture paradoxically requires mothers to be well-versed in theories of childrearing. Hayes (1996) defines this dominant mode of motherhood as intensive mothering, wherein the mother is "the central caregiver; mothering is regarded as more important than paid employment; [and] mothering requires lavishing copious amounts of time, energy, and material resources on the child" (p. 8). Douglas and Michaels (2004) coined the term "new momism" to define normative motherhood, and they describe it as the following:

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> The insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, intellectual being, 24/7, to her children. The new momism is a highly romanticized view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet. (DOUGLAS AND MICHAELS, 2004, p. 4)

Although normative motherhood is representative of very few women's lived identities and experiences of mothering, it is considered the normal and natural maternal experience, as to mother otherwise is to be abnormal or unnatural. Mothers who by choice or circumstance do not fulfill the profile of the good mother—they are young, poor, single, work outside the home, or do not perform intensive mothering—are deemed bad mothers in need of societal regulation and correction.

Feminist scholars rightly argue that normative motherhood is disempowering if not oppressive for a multitude of reasons, including the individualization and devaluation of motherwork, the endless tasks of privatized mothering, the incompatibility of wage work and motherwork, and the impossible standards of idealized motherhood (O'REILLY, 2021). However, for black women, motherhood is often a site of power and empowerment. As hooks (2007) has argued, the "feminist analyses of motherhood reflected race and class bias" and caused "some white, middle class, college educated women to argue that motherhood was the locus of women's oppression" (p. 122). She continues: "Had black women voiced their views on motherhood, it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women. Racism, availability of jobs, lack of skills or education ... would have been at the top of the list—but not motherhood" (p.133). Indeed, in African American culture, as hooks (2007) elaborates, the black family, or what she terms "homeplace," operates as a site of resistance: "a site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist ... where one could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied to us on the outside in the public world" (p. 42). Moreover, as Collins (1993) argues, black women assume an economic role and experience gender equality in the family unit:

> "Black mothers have long integrated their activities as economic providers into their mothering relationships. In contrast to the cult of true womanhood, in which work is defined as being in opposition to and incompatible with motherhood, work for black women has been an important and valued dimension of Afrocentric definitions of black motherhood. Whether they wanted to or not," Hill Collins continues, "the majority of African-American women had to work and could not afford the luxury of motherhood as a non-economically productive, female 'occupation'. (COLLINS, 1993, p. 48 and 49)

Finally, the African American cultural practice of othermothering makes black motherwork more communal in contrast to the privatization and individualization of normative motherhood.

The normative definition of motherhood renders the motherhood memoir problematic for black women, precisely because their experiences of mothering are different from what is prescribed and presented as the real and universal in this genre. In other words, because motherhood memoirs have been overwhelmingly written by white middle-class women, for the reasons noted above, the genre reflects their meaning of mothering—that of normative motherhood. The motherhood memoir means normative motherhood as represented by white middle-class mothers. The themes and issues explored in the motherhood memoir are, thus, of interest to white middle-class mothers. Not surprisingly then, the three central themes that Brown (2006) identifies in her study of the motherhood memoir are those central to normative motherhood: "an emphasis on gender dualism and gender difference in parenting: the significance of the bodily experience of motherhood; and the natural mother myth which assumes women's superiority and ability as natural caregivers" (p. 202). Brown (2006) further elaborates:

> Rather than looking at the similarities between mothers and fathers and their parenting experiences, most authors stress gender differences resulting from biological processes and emphasizing the prominent experiences of the body for maternal experience. However, these biological differences are reaffirmed through social practices. The biological and social emphases in these motherhood narratives together contribute to gender essentialism and dichotomous categorization of gender [...] (BROWN, 2006, p. 209).

And while these writers may begrudge the natural mother myth and the persistence of traditional gender practices in their family, these concepts of normative motherhood are what frame and structure their narratives.

I have argued elsewhere that the three themes Brown identifies are precisely the assumptions that underpin normative motherhood—namely, that mothering is a highly gendered and embodied experience that women are naturally drawn to (O'REILLY, 2021). Although memoir authors may critique the consequences of these assumptions—women do all the work of mothering with little or no support—they do not challenge the assumptions themselves. I suggest this is because the motherhood memoir was born from the discourse of normative motherhood, or what Hays (1996) calls intensive mothering and Douglas and Michaels (2004) term the new momism. Memoir writers draw upon the ethos of the new momism to value and validate a public literature on motherhood. Although this new ideology of motherhood made possible a new public voice surrounding mothering, it simultaneously limited what that voice could say about it. More specifically, this discourse of motherhood ultimately

naturalizes and normalizes the very patriarchal conditions of motherhood that memoir writers seek to dismantle. The normative discourses of motherhood that inform the motherhood memoir reify gender difference and, hence, reinforce patriarchal notions of womanhood and motherhood—most notably, the private-public divide and the feminine-nurturer and masculine-provider gender dichotomy. I argue that because of the motherhood memoir's compliance and complicity with normative motherhood, it cannot discern, let alone contest, the root causes of mothers' oppression. In order to change and become less compliant to normative motherhood, the motherhood memoir must confront and counter the discourse of normative motherhood that defines it. Memoir writers, thus, must bite the hand that feeds them.

Putting Black Mothers on the Page: Nefertiti Austin's *Motherhood So White: A Memoir of Race, Gender, and Parenting in America*

The motherhood memoir as authored by white middle-class women is, thus, not only complicit with but also reliant on normative motherhood, which has caused this genre to become synonymous with white middle-class women's meanings and experiences of mothering. Indeed, as Willey (2013) notes, "It is often the case that white motherhood memoirs are written by people who at least seem to be part of the comfortable confines of Motherhood" (p. 235). Thus, the issue, to return to the point above, may not be whether black women write about mothering but whether the genre of the motherhood memoir, given its alliance with normative motherhood, is the venue for the narration of black mothers' stories. Willey (2013) argues in her appropriately named chapter, "In Search of Our Mothers' Memoirs: Redefining Mothering through African American Feminist Principles" that mothering stories by Black women have always been there but under "different guises"—such as slave narratives and diaries—and have explored themes specific to "African Feminist principles" (p. 238 and 239). However, with the recent publication of Nefertiti Austin's bestselling motherhood memoir *Motherhood So White: A Memoir of Race, Gender, and Parenting in America* (2019), we now have an opportunity to explore how a black mother memoirist, in the words of one reviewer, "draws attention to crucial issues often left out of mainstream discussions of motherhood … and how the 'I' of the motherhood memoir is often assumed to be white" (apud HAGOOD, 2019). When Austin is asked what she wants readers to take away from the book, she explains, "For black mothers, I want them to see themselves on the page. It's important that we see ourselves in parenting narratives. It was the book I wish I had" (apud LANDRY, 2019). By way of what I have termed "matricritics," I will now consider how Austin's memoir puts black mothers on the page and, thus, subverts the presumptions, priorities, and practices of normative motherhood in traditional motherhood memoirs to radically redefine and reform the genre and deliver a counter black maternal narrative of empowerment and resistance.

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Patricia Hill Collins's Standpoint Theory

Matricritics is a mode of reading that employs maternal theory to excavate and amplify maternal themes in women's writing. In this article, I propose and consider a matricritics for the reading of Austin's memoir through Patricia Hill Collins's standpoint theory and three salient themes -motherwork; other/community mothering; mothering as social activism- of African American maternal theory. "Every culture," Collins explains in *Black Feminist Thought* (1991), "has a worldview that it uses to order and evaluate its own experiences" (p. 10). She continues:

> Black women fashion an independent standpoint about the meaning of Black womanhood and motherhood. These self-definitions enable Black women to use African-derived conceptions of self and community to resist negative evaluations of Black womanhood advanced by dominant groups. In all, Black women's grounding in traditional African American culture fostered the development of a distinctive African-American women's culture. (COLLINS, 1991, p. 11)

Black female standpoint has developed in opposition to and in resistance against what Collins (1991) calls "the controlling images of Black womanhood" (p. 11). Black female standpoint, she argues, develops through the interplay between two discourses of knowledge: "the commonplace taken-for granted knowledge" and "everyday ideas" of Black women that are clarified and rearticulated by Black women intellectuals or theorists to form a specialized Black feminist thought. In turn, as Collins (1991) explains, this thought may transform the consciousness of Black women (p. 20). She elaborates:

> Through the process of rearticulation, Black women intellectuals offer African American women a different view of themselves and their world from that forwarded by the dominant group.... By taking the core themes of a Black women's standpoint and infusing them with new meaning, Black women intellectuals can stimulate a new consciousness that utilizes Black's women's everyday knowledge. Rather than raising consciousness, Black feminist thought affirms and rearticulates a consciousness that already exists. More, importantly, this rearticulated consciousness empowers African-American women and stimulates resistance. (COLLINS, 1991, p. 31 and 32)

In other words, black female standpoint, which emerges from black women's everyday experiences and clarified by black feminist theory, not only provides a distinct angle of vision on self, community and society, but also, in so doing, enables black women to counter and interrupt the dominant discourse of black womanhood.

The formation and articulation of a self-defined standpoint, Collins (1991) emphasizes, "is [thus] key to Black women's survival" (p.26). As Lorde argues "it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment" (apud COLLINS, 1991, p. 21). However, emphasizing the importance of self-definition, Collins (1991) recognizes that Black women, as an oppressed group, inevitably must struggle to convey this self-definition, positioned as they are at the periphery of the dominant white male culture. Black women's standpoint is, thus, in her words, "an independent, viable, yet subjugated knowledge" (p. 13). By way of maternal standpoint, African American maternal theory takes up the core themes of black mothering and develops from them a new consciousness of black motherhood, which both empowers black women and counters their erasure and demonization by normative motherhood.

Austin's memoir enacts the formation and articulation of a black maternal standpoint to radically redefine and reform the motherhood genre to deliver a specific black thematic of mothering. Austin's memoir is appropriately and compelling entitled *Motherhood So White: A Memoir of Race, Gender and Parenting in America* (2019)—the title signifies the unexamined whiteness of the motherhood memoir, and the subtitle signals a counter discourse of mothering by a racialized mother. Indeed, as a writer Austin was "fighting against white privilege's erasure of Black parenting perspectives and insistence that the word *mother* automatically meant *white*" (p. 9). In her memoir, she discusses the absence of parenting resources for black mothers when she adopted her son in 2008: "My quest for narratives about Black mothers was like looking for a needle in a haystack, but the white woman's story was told over and over" (p. 113-14). And in 2018, at the time of writing her memoir, there were fewer than two dozen available books in print written by or for black parents (p. 120). Her memoir seeks to counter and correct "the default definition of mother as *white woman*" (p. 112) and feminist writings that "remain gender-centered and short on racial issues" (p. 112), Indeed, as Austin explains in the epilogue, her goal in writing her memoir was to "encourage more women to choose how to curate a family and begin to bridge the racial divide that encapsulates motherhood" (p. 239).

Thematics of Black Motherhood in *Motherhood So White:* Motherwork, Other/Community Mothering, and Mothering as Social Activism

Employing a black maternal standpoint, the final section of this article introduces three salient themes of black maternal theory and then explores how they are enacted in Austin's memoir. The three themes are motherwork, other/community mothering, and mothering as social activism. Together, they define black mothering as a distinct maternal practice of empowerment and resistance and one that positions it as a counter discourse to normative motherhood.

Motherwork

In her article, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood," Collins (1994) uses the term "motherwork" to refer to what is usually meant by nurturance, love, or mothering generally. Her word choice is a significant one because it foregrounds mothering as labour and calls attention to the ways in which mothering is socially and politically motivated and experienced. In her article, Collins's (1994) emphasis is on the ways in which the concerns of what she calls "racial ethnic mothers" differ from those in the dominant culture. Collins (1994) identifies the goals of "racial ethnic" mothers as the following: keeping the children born to you; supporting the physical survival of those children; teaching the children resistance and how to survive in a racist world; giving to those children their racial-cultural history and identity; and practicing a social activism and communal mothering on behalf of all the community's children. White feminist writing has traditionally concerned itself with the loss of female identity in motherhood and has argued that only by securing time away from children and creating a life outside of motherhood will women be able to maintain an autonomous identity separate from that of mother. What racial ethnic mothers fight against, in contrast, is not too much time with their children but too little. Forced to work outside the home and frequently employed in jobs, such as domestic service, that separate them from their children for days, weeks, or even years, as with overseas domestics, racial ethnic mothers must struggle to claim their identity as mothers and to fulfill the role of mother for their children. Motherwork for many "racial ethnic" women is also concerned with the physical survival of children.

> Physical survival is assumed for children who are white and middle-class. The choice to thus examine theirpsychic and emotional well-being and that of their mothers appears rational. The children of women of color, many of whom are physically starving, have no such choices, however. Racial ethnic children's lives have long been held in low regard: African American children face an infant mortality twice that for white infants; and one-half of African American children who survive infancy live in poverty. In addition, racial ethnic children often live in harsh urban environments where drugs, crime, industrial pollutants, and violence threaten their survival. (Collins, 1994, p. 49)

Indeed, as McClain (2019) notes in her recent book *We Live for the We: The Political Power of Black Motherhood:* "Many [black] parents experience a heightened fear that shapes our relationship with our children, distorts our perceptions, and creates a kind of vulnerability that verges on physical sensation" (p. 32).

Thus, central to the African American standpoint on motherhood is a challenge to the received view that links good mothering solely with nurturance.

African American motherwork foregrounds the importance of preservation, which is a dimension of motherhood too often minimized and trivialized in dominant discourses of motherhood. However, as Ruddick (1989) has argued, the first duty of mothers is to protect and preserve their children—"to keep safe whatever is vulnerable and valuable in a child" (p. 80). "Preserving the lives of children," Ruddick writes, "is the central constitutive, invariant aim of maternal practice" (p. 19). Although maternal practice is composed of two other demands—nurturance and training—this first demand, what Ruddick (1989) calls "preservative love," is what describes much of African American women's motherwork. In a world in which, to use Collins' (1994) words, "racial ethnic children's lives have long been held in low regard" (p. 49), mothering for many black women, particularly among the poor, is about ensuring the physical survival of their children and of the larger black community. Securing food and shelter and struggling to build and sustain safe neighborhoods are what defines both the meaning and experience of black women's motherwork. "Preservation," as Collins (1994) explains further, is "a fundamental dimension of racial ethnic women's motherwork" (p. 48-49). However, normative discourses of motherhood, particularly in their current configuration of intensive mothering, define motherwork solely as nurturance. "Physical survival," writes Collins (1994), "is assumed for children who are white and middle class. The choice to thus examine their psychic and emotional well-being ... appears rational [yet] [t]he children of women of color, many of whom are 'physically starving' have no such choices" (p. 49). Though exclusive to white middle-class women's experiences of mothering, the normative discourse of mothering as nurturance has been naturalized as the universal experience of motherhood. Consequently, preservative love, such as that practiced by African American mothers, is often not regarded as real, legitimate, or "good enough" mothering. However, for many African American mothers, keeping children alive through preservative love is an essential and integral dimension of motherwork.

The memoir *Motherhood So White* (2019) opens with Austin asking, "How could I protect my son? How could I give him the best life?" (p. 5). She goes on: "In my new skin as a mother of a Black boy, I had to think through how we would navigate a world set up to challenge his very existence.... As the death of Black boys became a way of life, my eyes opened to an important truth. Black mothers lived in a different America from white mothers" (p. 9). Whereas her white mother friend could allow her son freedoms as he aged, Austin knows that she had to be vigilant about her son's whereabouts and about how even his hoodie could be seen as a threat. Indeed, as Austin elaborates in an interview, "Racism makes our jobs harder because it adds another layer of stress and worry about the emotional and physical safety of our children" (apud WILLOUGHBY, 2019). Austin (2019) takes her "job as a mother seriously, not only teaching her son how to tie his shoes or his ABCs, but teaching him about the institutional racism that was and would be a part of his life ... he would need that information to stay alive" (p. 10). Black mothers must, she explains, "disrupt the inevitable depiction of what it meant to be a man and imposed

requirements and strategies to keep our sons safe" (p. 192). However, Austin (2019) also worries that in preparing her young son for racism, she will "frighten him" and "steal some of his innocence" (p. 4).

Austin (2019) reflects on the strategies black mothers use to negotiate and navigate the racism their black sons will experience: "Some of us heap love without discipline, thinking that would keep them close and out of trouble. Or we unconsciously give in to hundreds of years of racist social doctrines and overly masculinize our sons, treating them like men when they were still boys" (p. 193). Here Austin's memoir recalls the findings of King and Mitchell's research in *Black Mothers to Sons: Juxtaposing African American Literature with Social Practice* (1990). Protection was the primary aim of black mothering and manifested itself in two diametrically opposed modes of mothering: "mothers who whip their sons brutally 'for their own good' and mothers who love their sons to destruction through self-sacrifice and overindulgence" (p. 9). The first strategy is sustained by the belief that "a black man-child duly 'chastened' or broken at home will pose less of a threat to a society already primed to destroy him" (p. 10), whereas the latter seeks to shield the child from all that is deemed harsh and upsetting. Each position, King and Mitchell (1990) argue, psychologically maims the son—the first by breaking the child's spirit, and the second by thwarting the child's maturation to true selfhood. The conflicting demands of protection and nurturance first identified by Ruddick in *Maternal Thinking* (1989) become, in the instance of rearing black sons, an impasse as well as an irreconcilable contradiction. The women interviewed by King and Mitchell (1990) all spoke of this paradox in the mothering of black sons: Although sons must go into the world to mature socially, psychologically, and otherwise, the same world threatens their very physical survival. Golden also discusses this impasse in her book *Saving Our Sons: Raising Black Children in a Turbulent World* (1995). As she remarks about her own son: "The unscathed openness of Michael's demeanor was proof that he had been a protected, loved child. But this same quality was also suddenly a liability, ones that he has to mask" (p. 95). Nurturing sons to be confident and proud, mothers recognize that these same traits—because they may be misconstrued as insolence, obstinacy, and arrogance by other black youth, police, or whites—put their sons at risk. The question black mothers ask in the raising of their sons is, in Golden's words: "How [can we] help sons develop the character, personality, and integrity a black man-child needs to transcend these forces?" (p. 19).

Austin (2019) enrolls her son in a private school "to avoid the school-to-prison pipeline our culture has developed" (p. 192). With her son in a predominantly white private school. Austin (2019) understands the importance of connecting her son to his people and enrolls him in all-black baseball league so her son would have "masculine role models" and "a village of Black men" (p. 195 and 196). Austin's decision recalls that of Golden, who also withdrew her son from public school in Washington, D.C., and enrolled him in a private boarding school, as she and her husband had purchased a house in the suburbs. However, in saving her son this way, Golden realizes that she has also removed him from the black community as well as the "sites of resistance"—

family, community, history—that have traditionally nurtured and empowered black people by creating black-defined narratives and identities. With integration comes the loss of communities, traditions, beliefs, legends, narratives, and rituals—the "sites of resistance" that have long sustained and enriched black culture. Although the suburbs and boarding schools may save black sons from the killing fields of the so-called American inner cities, they also result in the further disintegration of black communities, the very thing that sustains and empowers black children. Although Austin (2019) does not discuss her adopted daughter as much as her son, since she was still young when her memoir was published, she does emphasize the importance of black traditions and rituals in the raising of her daughter to counter the racism she will experience. Austin (2019) examines the self-hatred black girls learn due to the lack of black female protagonists in literature, television shows, and movies. Austin is determined to teach her daughter "that Black [is] beautiful, and she is enough" (p. 219). Most dolls she buys for her daughter are black, and she regularly compliments her daughter's "textured and thick air". If her daughter should ever ask why there are only blond girls in films and books, she would explain "that it was racism and another attempt at her erasure" (p. 228). With both children, Austin (2019) teaches them how to "code switch" as a survival mechanism (p. 227). She elaborates further in an interview:

> Black parents do not have the luxury of not teaching our children about the perniciousness of racism and how, despite, our best efforts, microaggressions and random acts of discrimination will come their way. Our children learn to code switch (act one way with us and another way with whites) and what to do if detained by police or surveilled by merchants -early. These lessons—i.e. innocence-snatchers—occur as early as 5 years old, because white privilege perpetuates a system with the deck stacked against us. These are our gifts to Black children to keep them safe. (apud WILLOUGHBY, 2019)

Although Austin (2019) does not want "to talk about race every day, every week, or even every month" (p. 228), she knows she must because her son "was a Black boy, assumed to be less innocent than he was, and her daughter was a Black girl, thought to be less beautiful, less smart, less kind, less everything" (p. 228). As Collins (1994) has argued, "Racial ethnic women's motherwork reflects the tensions inherent in trying to foster a meaningful racial identity in children within a society that denigrates people of color ... [Racial ethnic] children must first be taught to survive in systems that oppress them ... however, this must not come at the expense of self-esteem" (p. 57). In other words, and as Austin (2019) emphasizes, although black women often parent from "a space of fear" (apud LANDRY, 2019), they also must do so with love and hope.

Othermothering and Community Mothering

James (1999) defines othermothering as "acceptance of responsibility for a child not one's own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal" (p. 45). Othermothers usually care for children. In contrast, community mothers, as Wane (2000) explains, "take care of the community ... [and] are typically past their childbearing years" (p. 112). "The role of community mothers," as Edwards (2000) notes, "often evolved from that of being othermothers" (p. 88). Othermothering and community mothering is developed from, in Edwards' (2000) words, "West African practices of communal lifestyles and interdependence of communities" (p. 88). The practice of othermothering remains central to the African American tradition of motherhood and is regarded as essential for the survival of black people. hooks (2007) in *Revolutionary Parenting* comments:

> Childcare is a responsibility that can be shared with other childrearers, with people who do not live with children. This form of parenting is revolutionary in this society because it takes place in opposition to the idea that parents, especially mothers, should be the only childrearers. Many people raised in Black communities experienced this type of community-based childcare" (hooks, 2007, p. 144).

The practice of othermothering is a strategy of survival; it ensures that all children, regardless of whether the biological mother is present or available, receive the mothering that delivers psychological and physical wellbeing and makes empowerment possible. Collins (1991) concludes: "Biological mothers or bloodmothers are expected to care for their children. But African and African American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible" (*p.*178). As a result, "othermothers"—women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities—traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood (COLLINS, 1991, p. 178). The practice of othermothering, as Wane (2000) notes, "serves[s] to relieve some of the stresses that can develop between children and parents [and] provides multiple role models for children; it [also] keeps the traditional African value systems of communal sharing and ownership alive" (p. 113). Othermothering and community mothering, Wane (2000) concludes, "can be understood as a form of cultural work or as one way communities organize to nurture both themselves and future generations" (p. 113). However, as McClain (2019) notes, "This taking a village-oriented approach to child-reading, black Americans may be out of step with mainstream white, middle-class American culture which is more centred on the nuclear family" (p. 57). Indeed, as she continues, "Our reliance on extended family networks and collective approaches to childcare, our rejection of the nuclear family as the only way to organize our lives, has been consistently derided throughout history" (p. 63).

Othermothering and community mothering are central themes in Austin's memoir. The turbulent lives of Austin's parents eventually leads her father to prison and her mother to rehab, resulting in her being raised by her grandparents. And though her grandparents never formally adopted Austin and her brother, "their family, and the rest of the world, soon recognized Ann and Henry [the grandparents] as our parents" (p. 22). Their devotion, Austin (2019) writes, "was palpable and warm, just like the heat in their homes" (p. 23). Significantly, the author locates the othermothering her grandparents provided in the larger context of African American slavery, sharecropping, and northern migration. Several pages of her memoir are devoted to these histories and the impact they had on black families; these histories often broke family units apart, which required extended family members, as well as the larger black community, to care for children. Austin (2019) argues that is why formal adoptions are so rare in African American culture: "We did not need social workers or dependency court, just the blessing of the elders to raise a child within our community" (p. 29). Her family, as Austin (2019) notes, "was fulfilling a cultural model created for us by our ancestors" (p. 29). At the age of thirty-six and single, Austin (2019) decides "to not wait on marriage or pregnancy" (p. 86) and becomes a mother through adoption. And though she realizes that in doing so she is "breaking code and acting like white people" (p. 56), she also knows that her "amazing grandparents modeled how to love and provide for a child they did not birth" (p. 53). Later, she reflects: "Black adoption was embedded in my DNA and the unconscious foundation for my decision to formally adopt a non-family member" (p. 87). After Austin adopts her son, she is determined to "build her village" (p. 173) and forge a male community for her son. She reflects: "I had no shame in asking male friends to talk to August [her son] if he was being naughty, play catch with him, or read him a story" (p. 181). When she decides to adopt a second child, she is committed to make it work by drawing on "the resolve of Black women and mothers who came before me" (p. 207). Austin (2019) continues and expands the African American tradition of othermothering in her decision to adopt children and in creating a village of friends and elders to support her and her family in motherwork. In this I argue that Austin, in the words of McClain (2019), "queers normative family structures. McClain (2019) explains: "Even when they're composed of people who identify as straight, black families often challenge heteronormative ideas of families and this queerness of the family can benefit those of us involved" (p. 60).

Motherhood as Social Activism

The practices of othermothering and community mothering serve, as James (1999) argues, "as an important Black feminist link to the development of new models of social transformation" (p. 45). Black women's role of community mothers, as Collins (1993) explains, redefines motherhood as social activism:

> Black women's experiences as othermothers have provided a foundation for Black women's social activism. Black women's feelings of responsibility for nurturing the children in their extended family networks have stimulated a more generalized ethic of care where Black women feel accountable to all the Black community's children. (COLLINS, 1993, p. 49).

Black mothers, as McClain (2019) emphasizes, "advocate for our children everywhere, from the playground to the schoolhouse to the doctor's office. There is always a campaign to wage" (p. 202). "A substantial portion of Black women's status in African-American communities," Collins (1993) continues, "stems not only from their roles as mothers in their own families but from their contributions as community othermothers to Black community development as well" (p. 51). Community mothering, as Edwards (2000) explains, has been expressed in activities and movements as varied as the Black Clubwomen, and Civil Rights movements and Black women's work in the church (p. 88). "More than a personal act," write Bernard and Bernard (1998), Black motherhood is very political. Black mothers and grandmothers are considered the 'guardians of the generations': "They have historically been charged with the responsibility of providing education, social, and political awareness, in addition to unconditional love, nurturance, socialization, and values to their children, and the children in their communities" (p. 47). Black motherhood, as Jenkins concludes, "is a site where [Black women] can develop a belief in their own empowerment. Black women can see motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization, for acquiring status in the Black community and as a catalyst for social activism" (p. 202). Indeed, as McClain (2019) emphasizes:

> "Black mothering is a political project, and our mission -should we choose to accept it- is nothing short of revolutionary...Our job as black mothers is to keep pushing the liberation ball down the course. Our obligation is to leave the world better [for our children] and to ensure that they are equipped with the tools that they need to fight. We don't have the luxury of living normal lives" (MCCLAIN, 2019, p. 201).

The inherent social activism of black mothering is signified in the opening of *Motherhood So White* (2019), when Austin takes her six-year-old son to a Black Lives Matter rally (p. 3). She explains its significance in the following way: "I could not ignore what was happening to Black boys all around me, or rationalize the violence away to convince myself that my son would be spared" (p. 8). Significantly, Austin (2019) describes and positions her decision to adopt a black boy as a form of activism: "The whole notion of an entire group of little boys being left behind awakened my Black Power roots. Adopting a baby boy would allow me to lift as I climbed" (p. 61). Later, when she learns in her adoption course about the reasons why biological

parents abandon their children—"they were human beings whose lives had come undone because of institutional racism, poverty, criminalization, race, gender, and poor choices" (p. 65)—Austin (2019) realizes the following: "Becoming a mother through adoption was no longer about me but about developing sympathy for the Dianes [her mother] of the world" (p. 66). At the conclusion of the course, Austin was "even more determined to make a difference in the life of a little Black boy.... I was ready to graduate to motherhood" (p. 79). And when she finally adopts her son, she becomes "an adoption ambassador" and is resolved to help the many black children in foster care: "What a difference we could make in the lives of these children, our children, if only we knew we could" (p. 169). Austin (2019) then decides to adopt a second child while knowing it will be a challenge as a single mother, but she does so because she could not bear to look back on her life and "feel sadness for choosing practicality over one more mouth to feed" (p. 207). Indeed, as Austin (2019) reflects when she attends the Black Lives Matter rally with her son: "It was one thing to send money or sit at home and hand-wring. It was another to publicly cry foul at a system that routinely oppressed Black people. That's what I had done by adopting my son, and that was the reason I took him out that night" (p. 3).

I also suggest that Austin's memoir is itself a form of social activism. Candice Braithwaite, the black British author of the memoir *I Am Not Your Baby Mother* (2020) describes her book "as part memoir and manifesto" (p. 6). I would argue that Austin's memoir is likewise "part manifesto." Her discussions on many and diverse black social issues and her advocacy of black adoption position the book as a call for activism. Philyaw (2013) argues that writing about mothering may not be a priority for black women because they are more interested in larger social, economic, and political issues. With its black maternal standpoint and by taking up central themes of black maternal theory, Austin's memoir locates her individual experiences of becoming and being a mother in the larger histories and realities of African American culture. Austin rightly shows that for black mothers, the personal is indeed political; one simply cannot talk about black mothering beyond or outside its social context. However, Austin not only describes the realities of racism for black people but also positions mothering as a way to confront and change them. In positioning mothering as social activism, Austin's perspective differs radically from that of the normative motherhood memoir, wherein mothering is presented as a private and nonpolitical undertaking. For Austin, mothering is specifically and profoundly a socially engaged enterprise— mothers can and do affect change. In this, Austin's memoir is indeed a manifesto for social activism.

Conclusion

The motherhood memoir is an important emerging genre, so as Reddy (2018) argues, "when we build this 'new canon' of books on motherhood, let's consciously

build a bigger canon." But, as Austin (2019) argues, "the path is not easy for a Black woman wanting to parent in America, where motherhood is filtered through a white lens" (p. 10). Indeed, as shown in this article, the genre of the motherhood memoir, given its compliance with and reliance on normative motherhood, may not be the venue for the narration of black mothers' stories. However, the article has also demonstrated that Austin's memoir—in its black maternal standpoint and themes of motherwork, other/community mothering, and mothering as social activism—challenges and changes the presumptions, priorities, and practices of the motherhood memoir. Austin's memoir provides practical strategies that advance the aesthetics of the genre from a liberatory perspective. In so doing, the memoir models and delivers new and radical renditions of motherhood to make possible a "not so white" canon of the motherhood memoir.

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