

“Can You Hear Me Now?” Race, Motherhood, and the Politics of Being Heard

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Motherhood as a political identity grants women political legitimacy, enabling them to make rights-based claims. However, the efficacy and possibility of motherhood as a political identity is entangled in the sexist and racist narratives that are inextricable from white supremacy. In this article, I analyze the language used by the Mothers of the Movement (MothM) at the 2016 Democratic National Convention to demonstrate how the identities and experiences of Black women, specifically Black mothers, are co-opted and reproduced as deficient, criminal, and irrelevant, thereby limiting their ability to make claims as mothers and citizens. How, then, can marginalized mothers confront the tools of white supremacy, which portray them as “bad” mothers and “bad” citizens, to be heard within the dominant order without conforming to it? I contend that in appropriating the very discourses and spaces that seek to exclude and subjugate them, the MothM demonstrate the hypocrisy of the system of “good motherhood” — all the while reaffirming their status as equal citizens deserving of political recognition. Drawing from Black feminist thinkers, I demonstrate how motherhood and the rights that the MothM claim as mothers can be conceptualized as assertions of freedom and equal citizenship.

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“One year ago yesterday, I lived the worst nightmare anyone could imagine. I watched as my daughter, Sandra Bland, was lowered

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into the ground in a coffin,” Geneva Reed-Veal told the audience at the 2016 Democratic National Convention.¹ Dressed overwhelmingly in black, the Mothers of the Movement (MothM), a group of Black mothers united by the deaths of their children at the hands of police, stood in a semicircle, passing the microphone between the group’s members: Gwen Carr, Sybrina Fulton, Maria Hamilton, Wanda Johnson, Lucia McBath, Lezley McSpadden, Cleopatra Pendleton-Cowley, and Geneva Reed-Veal. Together, these women advocated for justice for their community and their children, appealing to normative conceptions of mothers as moral authorities to render their claims legitimate within a system that sees and treats them as anything but. However, in contrast to the maternal language and imagery used by the MothM, critics denounced the women as the “mothers of dead criminals” (Fernandez 2016), highlighting an inherent challenge to leveraging motherhood as an efficacious political foundation: women who are situated outside of white visions of motherhood face steeper challenges to being seen by the state and society as “good” mothers and citizens with justifiable rights claims by virtue of their status as nonwhite.

Motherhood arguably provides women with a political foundation from which to make claims to citizenship and, in doing so, legitimize them as speaking subjects, yet how such claims are entangled with larger systems of dominance, specifically white supremacy, is often left uninterrogated (Bayard de Volo 2004; Noonan 1995; Sparks 2016). If the claims made by the MothM are easier to deny because of the sexist and racist structures that prop up hierarchies of power, how can women such as the MothM hope to be heard?

I contend that the ability of Black mothers to leverage maternal discourses to disrupt white supremacy and its attempts to disavow their identities as “good” mothers and equal speaking subjects is dependent on a series of performative declarations and acts. They must play the role of the “good mother” and embody specific features of motherhood designated as valuable by dominant systems of power and pertaining largely to white women. Yet in their status as nonwhite women speaking from a stage and an identity historically refused to them, the MothM contest the notion that they are excluded from notions of “good motherhood” simply because they are Black. By appropriating the

¹ The full text of the speech can be found in Will Drabold, “Read What the Mothers of the Movement Said at the Democratic Convention,” *Time*, July 26, 2016, <http://time.com/4424704/dnc-mothers-movement-transcript-speech-video/> (accessed October 23, 2018).

language of “good” mothers, the MothM situate themselves within the dominant system of power as political subjects to reveal the racist hypocrisy of that very same system. In claiming an identity historically and often still out of reach for Black mothers, the MothM’s language repositions motherhood as an assertion of equality and freedom, emphasizing both their obligation as mothers and their right as free and equal citizens to defend their children. In this way, the maternal language of the MothM resists conformity to whiteness and instead operates as a “political foundation from which to confront an increasingly hostile state and the polity legitimizing it” (Gilmore 2007, 187). Their discourse uses motherhood to challenge institutional practices and statements that position their children as criminals rather than as citizens deserving of justice, resituating blame and fault to a broken system whose promises of equality and justice for all remain unrealized.

To illustrate these theoretical claims, I examine the appearance of the MothM at the 2016 Democratic National Convention and the backlash it provoked. As the language and actions of conservative media outlets such as Fox News and commentators such as Bill O’Reilly and Rudy Giuliani demonstrate, the MothM are seemingly limited in their ability to leverage motherhood as a political foundation by the collection of histories, associations, icons, and rhetoric writ upon their very skin and seized by the dominant community to control and silence them. By using racially derogatory stereotypes and narratives, the rhetoric of white supremacy delimits and disavows Black mothers as credible and “good,” constraining their ability to be recognized as equal citizens and their claims as valid and genuine by shifting accounts of blame onto their shoulders. Yet in calling for stronger gun laws and changes to the relationship between the police and marginalized communities, the MothM refuse to accept fault for their children’s death, pointing to the broader systemic issue of racism.

The article proceeds as follows: First, I develop my theoretical account of motherhood as a political foundation, drawing from Black feminist scholarship to illuminate how motherhood can be and has been a radical, yet not unproblematic, political practice. Specifically, I demonstrate how motherhood has been central to conceptualizing the experience of freedom and equal citizenship for Black women. In affording women autonomy over their body, caring capacities, and even the very meaning of their children, motherhood becomes a powerful foundation for Black mothers from which to challenge white supremacy

and assert their status as equal. Next, I examine how the language of motherhood engages with systems of oppression, in many ways subverting ostensibly racist notions of “good” mothers to, instead, underscore the free and equal status of those whom such discourses have traditionally sought to subordinate. I then apply this theoretical framework to the case presented by the MothM to demonstrate that while motherhood as a political foundation for Black mothers is constrained by systemic racism and sexism, it can still be deployed as a radical force for refusing hegemonic narratives and asserting equality. In the conclusion, I contend with the ambiguity and nonlinearity of motherhood as a political foundation, taking up questions of success and failure to imagine how motherhood can operate as an assertion of equality even in the face of disavowal.

PUT ON MUTE

In front of thousands of people at the Democratic National Convention on July 26, 2016, and millions more watching at home, the MothM made a joint plea to the nation: help them heal the divide between Black communities and police officers and stop the violence. By tuning into nearly any major news network, an American viewer could watch and listen to the MothM’s “heartrending remarks” (Harrington 2016) in their entirety. But if a viewer switched the channel to Fox News at the very moment that Geneva Reed-Veal began speaking, recounting how her daughter, Sandra Bland, was found dead, hanging in her jail cell, they would not have heard any of the story. The viewer would have seen Reed-Veal’s face; they would have seen her grief, but that visual would have been it. A viewer would have heard nothing — not a word. Instead, Fox News relegated the MothM to a small box on the side of the screen, muting their words in a peculiar pantomime of politics. While viewers could see (if they squinted) the MothM addressing the nation, the largest portion of the screen was awarded to advertising. Rather than hearing Reed-Veal recite the names of other women who had died in police custody, viewers listened to a commercial for Poligrip, a brand of denture glue. When McBath recounted how her son, Jordan Davis, who loved practical jokes and conversations about God, was “shot and killed for playing loud music,” Fox News aired commercials for Men’s Wearhouse and joint pain reliever Blu-Emu. When Fulton asserted that she never asked to be on stage at the Democratic National Convention but felt

compelled to represent her son, Trayvon Martin, who “is in heaven,” the small screen allotted to the MothM disappeared altogether, replaced by former Fox News stalwart Bill O’Reilly and a slew of commentators.

Fox News’s literal and metaphorical silencing represents an active refusal to recognize the MothM’s claims as assertions of injustice and, thus, their experience as valid or credible. Rather than being heard as the mothers of *victims* of gun violence and police brutality, the MothM were rendered silent, dismissed and denigrated as the “mothers of dead, violent criminals” (Harrington 2016). As the mothers of “dead criminals,” the MothM were seen to not comply with normative expectations of motherhood, and thus not be the type of mothers who deserve acknowledgment by the nation — *they* are to blame for the deaths of their children. By transgressing the norms and customs of white supremacy in which acquiescence is demanded of Black bodies or otherwise excluded, the MothM are subject to efforts to rewrite their identities: to remake them as “bad” mothers and bad citizens and their claims as irrelevant.

THEORIZING MOTHERHOOD: GENDER, RACE, AND THE NATION

Who is designated as a “good” mother or a “real” mother often has little to do with their performance of “mother-work” and a lot to do with their race.² In the late twentieth century, “good” mothers were those “best suited for the tasks of reproducing both the American population and the alleged values of the U.S. nation-state,” Patricia Hill Collins (2014, 55) explains. As the “biological reproducers of the nation,” a certain type of woman and mother was required for nationalistic purposes to preserve the cultural (i.e., white) boundaries of the nation, placing additional value and importance on *who* these “real” mothers were (McClintock 1993). Describing “real” mothers as authentic, genuine, true, reliable, trustworthy, honest, and earnest, Collins (2014) contends that notions of motherhood — who is good, who is bad — are imbued with sociocultural ideas about class, race, and citizenship, limiting “real” mothers — regardless of their so-called authenticity or reliability — to an image that “fits” and supports the American population and its investment in whiteness. Understood to be “affluent, married, white, and holding American citizenship,” these “real” mothers would produce the

2. In this article, “good” can be treated as a synonym for “real.”

type of children needed to maintain a nation that saw itself as strong, unified, and *white* (Collins 2014, 55).

While white middle- and upper-class women were encouraged to reproduce and populate the nation with “good citizens,” reproduction for Black mothers was cast as a scene of degeneracy where, at each stage, Black mothers were characterized as corrupting their children (Hancock 2004; Roberts 1997). Black mothers, writes Dorothy Roberts (1997), were perceived as liable to “spread” depravity and thus poverty through the transmission of genes, thereby producing a generation of truants. By placing blame squarely on the shoulders of poor Black mothers, Roberts explains, it became ever easier for white patriarchal power structures to both abdicate responsibility and persist in regulating and monitoring poor Black mothers. “Ideas about motherhood, then, are often used to punish, reward, politicize, and, ultimately, police women in accordance with notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad,’” writes Karen Zivi (2005, 350). Motherhood becomes a site of regulation, functioning as a “norm that authorizes the disciplining of women’s lives and bodies” (Zivi 2005, 350). In order to protect the nation, then, the government “must” engage in policing and limiting the reproduction of non-normative, nonwhite bodies — in this case, Black women and the children they bear — and the simplest way to do so is by constructing Black mothers as “bad” mothers who are willfully negligent and biologically defective.

Representations of Black mothers as culpable, if not entirely responsible, for their own oppression are echoed in the national welfare debates of the 1990s. During this period, stereotypes of Black women as licentious and overly fecund allowed politicians to describe Black mothers as an undeserving and illegitimate “underclass” who “threatened the nation by giving birth to a permanent underclass,” according to Marlo David (2016, 178).³ Notions about the “underclass” comprised stereotypes about the identities of people on welfare: Black mothers were lazy, preferring to “steal” from the government and its citizens. Such ideas were further supported by media that conflated welfare recipients with Black women and need with degeneracy (Hancock 2004; Roberts 1997; Threadcraft 2016). Those arguing in favor of ending welfare centered their criticism and insults on Black mothers and their inability to care for their children. A bumper sticker distributed at the North Carolina State

3. From the era of slavery onward, perceptions of Black women as highly sexual enabled white males’ abuse and rape of Black women. Similarly, regulations failed to criminalize and take seriously claims of sexual abuse made by Black women (Hancock 2004; Roberts 1997; Threadcraft 2016).

House in 1998 read, “Can’t Feed ’Em, Don’t Breed ’Em,” pointing once again to the ways in which welfare recipients were positioned as wholly to blame for their relative poverty (Hancock 2004, 52).

Despite the space of a decade or more, this logic persists. In 2005, former U.S. secretary of education Bill Bennett suggested that “you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down” (David 2016, 179). By exploiting and blaming Black mothers as well as connecting their identities as *Black women* to crime and delinquency, these representations contribute to the obscuring of the racist institutions and discourses that constrain and shape the lives of Black mothers. Even when single, poor Black mothers organized to express *why* current welfare policies failed and *why* these policies were important to themselves and their families, the decades-long treatment of Black mothers as domineering and calculating welfare queens registered their claims as only further complaints. The rejection of these mothers’ vocalization of legitimate needs as anything but a selfish desire to avoid work or theft from the nation served as a constant reminder of “their distance from the promise of full citizenship” (Cohen 2004, 29).

“I’m a ‘Good’ Mother”

Efforts to discredit and disavow the voices and experiences of poor Black mothers as legitimate partly center around an individualistic, neoliberal framework of blame and responsibility that perpetuates the logic that poor Black mothers are to blame for poverty, crime, and just about any misfortune or tragedy that befalls them. For many scholars, activists, and community leaders, the solution has been to teach poor Black mothers to accept and embody the very narratives that are used to deny their voices and status as “good” mothers. This strategy has a long history, reaching back to the Progressive Era, when white and Black clubwomen alike sought to connect issues of the home to politics and activism in order to acquire standing and legitimacy in the public. One of the goals central to the work of the Black clubwomen was the disabling of racist beliefs about Black women that portrayed them as hypersexualized and “overly fecund” and enabled the state and white males to co-opt, control, and rape Black women (Gilmore 2007; Hancock 2004). In their fight, the clubwomen advocated for an embrace of Victorian morality and middle-class values, urging mothers to teach their daughters “to look toward Victorian ideals of motherhood as the solution to their

problems,” Ange-Marie Hancock writes (2004, 52). Poor Black mothers and their daughters were encouraged to secure a husband to protect against moral reproach and the predatory behavior of white men. In other words, poor Black mothers were told to replicate the images of the ideal white woman propagated by the white heterosexist patriarchy. By putting on the dress of white legitimacy, the logic went, poor Black mothers would be protected from the intrusions and violations of their persons, she adds. However, the so-called individual improvement model (perhaps most famously advocated by W. E. B. Du Bois) unfortunately complements state reproach of poor Black women and state abnegation of responsibility, blaming the poverty and hardship these women experience on their personal behavior rather than state investments in white supremacy.

This approach to “redignifying” Black mothers and women is not a relic of the past. Believing that “respectability” provides access to equal treatment, respect, and success both academics and community leaders have advocated for the adoption of normative structures, such as the nuclear family and traditional gender roles, in a manner that leaves unexamined how such policies pathologize and de-politicize the most vulnerable members of Black communities, Cathy Cohen (2004) claims. Cohen points to William Wilson’s 1987 book *The Truly Disadvantaged* as a contemporary example of such interventions. Wilson, she explains, calls out Black mothers, specifically poor and/or single mothers, as responsible for the increasing rates of poverty he witnessed in Black communities. His solution? Enhancing the marriageable pool of Black men. Wilson saw the female-led household as a scene of degeneracy — a pox on the Black community. Yet, in focusing on the embrace of “respectability” (i.e., white norms) by the community, such movements fail to interrogate the broader systemic issues that require conformity. Further, Cohen contends that such prescriptions fail to imagine the myriad ways in which Black communities can and do engage in “creative, adaptive, and transformative” political practices that refuse to abide by the rules of dominant culture (2004, 36).

In thinking about the MothM, one might be tempted to claim that they are a recent manifestation of the politics of respectability; one might claim that they are conforming to culturally dominant notions of motherhood, as their language does, in fact, draw from traditional notions of motherhood. This, though, would miss a critical distinction between how groups such as the clubwomen and the MothM engage with traditional notions of motherhood. While motherhood for the clubwomen fits into a

constellation of Victorian values to which they must conform in order to access full citizenship, for the MothM, motherhood is a political foundation to which they do not need to conform because they are *already* good mothers. For the MothM, the language of "good" motherhood is appropriated not as a "putting on" of white motherhood but as a refusal to be cast as anything but a good mother. They are not leveraging "good" white motherhood. Rather, in their appearance, they are simply refusing the notion that "good" motherhood is reserved for white women.

While the MothM speak through the identity of "good" motherhood, aligning themselves with normative notions of what constitutes a "good" mother, they do not make individualistic arguments for change — they do not advocate for Black mothers to act this way or that. They are not making claims that it is their community that needs to change. Rather, their language is an intervention, countering narratives of personal responsibility and respectability, to mount a confrontation with the larger system of policing and governance. Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (Mothers ROC), a group formed in the 1990s in response to the increasing incarceration of their children, provides an illuminating example of how a group can draw from normative ideas of motherhood while simultaneously rejecting calls for conformity to challenge the governing system (Gilmore 2007). Rather than advocate for mothers to adopt state-sponsored ideas of morality, ROCers claimed that as mothers they had rights in regard to their children that the state could not deny (Gilmore 2007). The group's engagement with motherhood was *not* "a defense of traditional domesticity as a separate sphere," Ruth Gilmore asserts, "rather, it represented political activation around rising awareness of the specific ways that the contemporary working-class household is a site saturated by the neoliberal racial state" (2007, 239). The ROCers used motherhood as a political foundation to mobilize their communities and challenge the spaces and authorities that sought to discount and disconnect them, while refusing ideas that as mothers they are at fault for the situation in which their children find themselves.

Like the Mothers ROC, the MothM's status as mothers is a contentious political resource. Claims about "motherhood" have been used against them to subdue, control, and deny Black mothers' reproductive freedom. It has been used as a means to demand conformity. However, motherhood, as noted above, also serves as a political foundation for asserting equal treatment and systemic change, and it is from this latter tradition that the MothM draw. The language of the MothM, as will be

discussed in the following sections, asserts that motherhood is accompanied by a series of rights and obligations. As mothers, it is their duty to protect their children from those who threaten them and their very existence. In this way, motherhood comes to embody “a reason for social activism,” stimulating Black mothers in service of their children and their race (Gilmore 2007, 4). Mother-work affirms their humanity in the face of those who seek to deny it, existing as a challenge to those who sought and continue to seek to deny them their right to care for their children. Motherhood becomes a statement of freedom and equality. The appropriation of the language of “real” motherhood, then, by these groups can be argued to operate as a strategy of survival, an expression of their freedom and status as citizens in the face of state violence and intrusion. Because they are free citizens, they have the right to protect their children, thereby solidifying their children’s status as victims. In protecting their children, these groups not only experience themselves as free but also reveal the continued exercise of white supremacy against the bodies of Black mothers. Following in the footsteps of Black women activists, the MothM’s campaign against police brutality and gun violence represents a “struggle for institutional transformation,” not self-improvement (Hancock 2004, 39).

But a major question looms: is this struggle recognized and afforded credibility by dominant systems of power? While certain communities recognize the appeals of these mothers on behalf of their child as direct challenges to a government that seeks to treat them as lesser citizens, if citizens at all, others hear their pleas and arguments as further complaints from the undeserving underclass. Even when these mothers insert themselves into the dominant order, appropriating its language and appealing to its norms, Black mothers continue to face barriers to being recognized as “good” mothers and equal citizens. When threatened by the political presence and action of these mothers, those with a systemic investment in white supremacy are able to tap into the hegemonic narratives that reconfigure the voices of the marginalized through the destructive stereotypes it constructs and continues to disseminate. By maintaining specific sociohistorical and cultural narratives, the systems that support and further white supremacy subvert the ability of Black mothers to be read as equal, coherent citizens. Instead of seeing mothers grieving for their children, some see a “hate group,” violating the “codes of conduct” (Fernandez 2016). Instead of recognizing a plea for reconciliation and cooperation, the MothM are decried as an “anti-police, anti-law enforcement rally disguised as ‘Let’s

talk about the victims” (Fernandez 2016). Is this, then, where the fight ends?

Speaking for Status

It is not that the claim being made by the MothM is unintelligible; it is that the subject positioning of the speaker renders the complaint trivial and dismissible. As Elizabeth Wingrove (2016, 417) explains, the inability (or refusal) to hear the words of the marginalized and disadvantaged for what they are is an “all-too-coherent product of the police order — signs not of unintelligibility per se but rather of irrelevance, triviality, or endless interchangeability.” When these subjects speak or protest, their demands to be treated as equal are being “persistently disciplined into a logic of irrelevance” (Wingrove 2016, 418).

Acknowledgment of claims of injustice is thus predicated on an ever-changing set of epistemological, historical, and cultural discourses. The MothM’s ability to be counted and heard as equal political subjects and good mothers is inhibited by the intersecting powers of racism, classism, and patriarchy, which have positioned them alternately as “welfare queens,” “domineering matriarchs,” “hypersexualized jezebels,” and the “lazy poor.” In the space between speaking and being recognized, sexist and racist discourses entwine to transform the MothM’s claims into (to borrow from Wingrove’s title) “blah blah blah RACE blah blah blah VIOLENCE blah blah blah INJUSTICE.” In doing so, not only is the importance of one’s words and experience negated but also one’s very existence and worth. The speaker’s credibility is denied; their status as knower of their own experience is denied; their ability to speak *and* be listened to — denied (Baldwin 1962, 7). What Fox News does, by muting the MothM and marginalizing them onscreen, is more than just a turning away from their story. Fox News is refusing to give credit or credence to the lived reality of the MothM and, even more broadly, Black Americans. They refuse to recognize or legitimize them as “good” mothers, deserving of sympathy and airtime. It is a form of social death that dehumanizes individuals, while shoring up the power structures that continue to privilege white America.⁴ When former New York City

4. Black individuals, by being subject to a repeated denial of their own experiences, experience a form of visceral and violent social death. It smothers and relegates them to the margins. As Audre Lorde writes of Black individuals, this type of total marginalization is understood as the “death we are expected to live” (1984, 38).

mayor and Donald Trump campaign surrogate Rudy Giuliani told Fox News, “They never should have done what they did and left out the widows of police officers who died. I mean it’s the police officers who died who prevent thousands and thousands and thousands of other Blacks from being killed” (Guest 2016), he is refuting not the claims made by the MothM but their importance. What Giuliani is conveying here without declaring it directly is that the MothM have done nothing to deserve “the stage,” and neither have their dead children. The widows of the fallen police officers are the women deserving of sympathy and attention. Such language effaces the police brutality that the MothM address as a real threat to their communities while raising officers to the position of saviors and their wives to victims. In effect, this line of reasoning renders the MothM and their claims irrelevant with respect to the pain and loss felt by the widows of police officers. The widows, being as they are representative of members of the dominant order of power and the status quo, are the women deserving of the audience’s attention.

Fox News’s disavowal brings into stark relief the role of white supremacy in shaping reactions to claims of injustice. Disavowal, as Neil Roberts (2015) writes, is a “double movement” in which the experience or reality of the group in question is both repeatedly denied and acknowledged. In doing so, the existence of the event, experience, or subject is neither silenced nor avowed. Rather, disavowal “strategically locates an event and then rejects its relevance, knowing full well that it occurred” (Roberts 2015, 29). Fox News acknowledges the MothM’s existence and claim yet then refuses its worth. It refuses the MothM claims and voice by rendering them irrelevant and trivial. In effect, disavowal acknowledges an initial claim only to reject it by reproducing it in a manner beneficial to the disavower and to the detriment of the disavowed. Fox News’s disavowal of the MothM is an inherently political act occurring within a system that privileges and protects whiteness.

With the realm of what is possible presented as immutable and finite to marginalized persons, and the details of acceptability proscribed by white heteronormative patriarchy, the MothM’s efficacy seems predetermined by their skin color and gender. From within “a system that spelled out with brutal clarity and, in as many ways as possible, that you [are] a worthless human being,” how do the MothM establish their “political bona fides”? (Wingrove 2016, 412). Must these women couch their claims of injustice in language acceptable to the system, that is, the language of the “good” mother? Wingrove reveals how being heard is contingent upon a particular paradox: raced and gendered individuals

who seek to disrupt a dominant order in which they do not "count" must leverage and speak through the existing systems of signification. Essentially, it claims the MothM must place themselves problematically within the dominant order, drawing from what is "acceptable" in order to be counted as equal citizens and enable their assertions of injustice to be recognized as injustice.

Yet this strategy is vulnerable to effacing the very problem that requires Black mothers to speak as white women in order to be heard. Simply adopting the language of white motherhood obscures the particularities of the MothM's experience and fails to challenge a system that demands conformity if Black women want even the slimmest chance of being heard. While Black clubwomen were able to achieve certain goals (laws against lynching), for example their language made change incumbent upon the individual rather than the system. As noted in the preceding sections, rather than using the language of the dominant to shed light on the ways in which disproportionate levels of poverty in the Black community, for example, were intimately tied to and enforced by white supremacy, Black clubwomen sought to "reform" Black mothers and women in the image of white heteropatriarchy. They focused on the individual, not the systemic problems shaping Black women's daily struggles. For the clubwomen, speaking as "good" mothers was tantamount to speaking as "good" white mothers. Yet the MothM manage to evade this problem. By speaking through the settled networks of signs, meanings, and understanding, the MothM disrupt the dominant order, exposing the incoherency between hegemonic narratives and lived experience. Being as they speak from and are understood through a complex set of histories, social norms, and biographies that are writ upon their very bodies, the MothM integrate accepted norms into their activism while also "activating [sic] new sets of political meanings and references" (Halberstam 2011, 97). The MothM describe themselves as occupying identities often foreclosed to them: they are both "good" mothers whose duty it is to care for their children in life and death and citizens wronged by the nation. The MothM's use of accepted norms and language thus is not an admission of fault or a move to conformity but a political act condemning the systems that continue to deny their claims of injustice and their status as "good" mothers and equal political subjects. But can it work? Are the MothM legible to the dominant system as "good" mothers and equal citizens?

The challenge for the MothM is to assert an identity that disables and destabilizes stereotypes of Black women and Black mothers as criminal,

licentious, irresponsible, calculating, and/or undeserving. But how does one do this from within a dominant order that situates them as “nonspeaking subjects assigned to profoundly inequalitarian places, roles, and statuses”? (Sparks 2016). Can the signs and symbols of “good” motherhood counter the racist narratives used to disavow Black mothers? As I will demonstrate in the following sections, the reiteration of these symbols and signs both situates the MothM within the realm of the acceptable while flouting the constraints imposed upon them by white America. Ultimately, the MothM “fail” to reproduce and embody the racist social norms that have been used to control, oppress, and denigrate Black mothers. Instead, they defy the prevalent understandings of what it means to be a good mother, or, more specifically, what a good mother looks like, and who is really to blame for the deaths of their children.

Playing the “Mom Card”

The image presented by the MothM at the 2016 Democratic National Convention was one of solemn reverence but also one of resistance and resolve. Standing and mourning the loss of their children together, the MothM evoked images of funerals and traditions used to honor and mourn the fallen. Along with the six other mothers present, Reed-Veal’s words and presence evoked an easily read and understood image of maternal grief that *should* have situated the MothM as coherent and acknowledgeable subjects: mothers whose grievances deserve to be heard and seen. Yet despite speaking from their identity as mothers, the MothM still had to prove themselves worthy of acknowledgment. Their status as worthy speaking subjects was not presumed. In fact, because of their Blackness, it was tacitly, if not explicitly, denied by dominant systems of power. To be deemed deserving of acknowledgment, the MothM had to overcome, disable, or even undermine the racist sociohistorical tropes that shaped them and other Black women as negligent mothers, welfare queens, and licentious women.

In order to do so, the MothM’s language appealed to notions of “good” motherhood to contest attempts to trivialize and erase the systemic injustices practiced against Black individuals and, further, establish standing for assertions of wrong. For example, as each woman took her turn to speak, she established her “bona fides” for being onstage. Each woman is a mother — self-sacrificing and self-abnegating, accessing legitimacy through the virtue conferred upon mothers, particularly

grieving mothers. The death of Reed-Veal's daughter was her "worst nightmare." McBath explained, "You don't stop being a parent when your child dies. I am still Jordan Davis's mother. His life ended the day he was shot and killed for playing loud music. But my job as his mother didn't. I still wake up every day thinking about how to parent him. How to protect him and his legacy." Fulton reiterated this feeling: "I am here today for my son, Trayvon Martin, who is in heaven. And for my other son, Jaharvis, who is still here on Earth." Even more than announcing their reasons and, thus, qualifications for being onstage, the MothM's language suggests their identities to be, first and foremost, mothers. Being a mother is who these women are: it is their first priority, their *job*. In the closing remarks of her speech, Reed-Veal voiced how blessed she felt to be on that stage "so that Sandy can speak through her mama." Reed-Veal transformed herself into a mouthpiece for her deceased daughter, allowing herself to be embodied by the life of her child as well as her child's needs even after death. By describing their role as mothers in terms of obligation and duty to their children, the MothM's language can be perceived as playing to acceptable, self-abnegating ideas of motherhood, locating them within the dominant (white) discourse as "good" mothers. In this way, one could perceive the language of the MothM as fitting neatly into discourses of respectability and the history of the clubwomen, yet to do so would be to ignore the ways in which their language deploys motherhood against those who use it to dominate, exclude, and silence.

The language of the MothM in establishing them as "good" mothers is also asserting their autonomy from the state and their status as equal citizens. While Reed-Veal's role as the voice of her daughter might conform to narratives of "good" mothers, for Reed-Veal, acting as her daughter's microphone is a particular privilege that denies the government control of *her* children. They are her children, and it is through her — not the state — that their life acquires meaning. Much like in the tradition of female slave resistance, the MothM's "mother-work" is a form of political resistance, a challenge to white supremacy, which seeks to deny Black mothers' capacity and, thus, right to care for their kin. Because they are "good" mothers, the MothM resist the racist narratives that would paint them as "welfare queens" or licentious women, among other things, in order to discredit their status as political agents. Disrupting these stereotypes is accomplished by positioning themselves not only as grief-stricken mothers but also as politically wronged subjects. By stripping away the veneer behind which the

language of “good” mothers hides injustice, the MothM reveal the incongruity between the narrative that is being told about them, their children, and their actual lived experience.

Critical to refusing these dominant narratives is the practice of naming — that is, naming their children, not as they are described to be by white America — as criminals, drug users, unruly persons — but as they were known to be — as dutiful sons and daughters. They are the devout children, sufferers of unlawful violence, and deserving of national remembrance. While a calling forth of the memories of their children — the telling of stories, the reading of names, and the honoring of their lives — coincides with normative understandings of the kind of actions “good” mothers would take, the framing used by the MothM to tell their children’s stories disrupts the narrative deployed by the dominant order. It calls into question the very same tropes and tactics the status quo uses to disavow and control the MothM, and it refuses to allow the meaning of their children’s lives to be determined by those who wish to co-opt their children and their deaths in service of maintaining a system of oppression. “We’re going to keep telling our children’s stories and urging you to *say their names*,” McBath stated.⁵ Reed-Veal echoed the sentiment, saying, “So many of our children gone but not forgotten.” Recognizing a person by their given name refuses to surrender their humanity and their story to those who seek to portray them as nameless and agency-less. Saying their names is, thus, a political act; it refuses disavowal or the compulsion to forget or fail to see. By saying the names of children killed by police violence, the MothM refuse to allow such injustices to be forgotten and the lives of these individuals to be disavowed as irrelevant. Saying their names identifies their children as persons deserving of equal treatment under the law. In reclaiming the narratives of their children, the MothM concomitantly call into question the dominant system while rejecting its control and claiming space for both themselves and their children within it. The MothM name their children and their oppression, and in doing so, refuse to be repositioned as victims and, once again, powerless. They are making meaning in a manner that has been historically foreclosed to them both as women and Black mothers. By reclaiming their children, their stories, and their deaths, the MothM assert their status as equal citizens whose children and caretaking capacities are of their own determining — not belonging to the state or other agents of white supremacy.

5. Italics are my own.

Reed-Veal refused to allow her daughter's life and death to be reproduced by the dominant system as one more instance of a Black woman "acting out" and paying the consequences. "Sandy," Reed-Veal explained, was found dead following "an *unlawful* traffic stop and an *unlawful* arrest."⁶ Here, the term "unlawful" works on multiple levels: it signifies not only where blame for her daughter's death is *not* to be placed — that is, on her daughter — but also that her daughter's political standing as a free and equal subject has been violated. Because Bland's death was preempted by a series of unlawful actions, she is a victim who deserves justice not defamation. Reed-Veal rebuts the narrative that places her daughter — and by extension herself — at fault for all that transpired. How could she or her daughter have prevented such actions or behaviors? Her daughter is neither reckless nor irresponsible nor is she to be held up as a broader indictment of the Black community. No, her daughter was the victim of extralegal action, symptomatic of systemic violence that targets her and her daughter because they are Black.

Reed-Veal's language reveals the duplicity of white America's understanding and enactment of equality and how it relies on disavowal and denial to maintain such a pretense. Her language incites the listener to ask: Why are they to blame? As citizens, why were they not protected from unlawful behavior and abuse? Reed-Veal continued, "Sandy, my fourth of five daughters, was gone . . . found hanging in a jail cell." "Sandy," the language leads us to infer, did not just die as if in an accident or something innocuous. No, Sandy, a nickname reiterating her status as a child in relation to her mother, was "found hanging in a jail cell" — a phrase evoking the long history of lynching in the Black community. As an extralegal form of violence, propped up by lawmakers, community members, and law enforcement, lynching, both the term and the act, are saturated with meaning and history. By invoking lynching, Reed-Veal's language incites the audience to draw connections between an "historical" form of racial violence, what happened to her daughter, and what dominant narratives say about Sandy.

Reed-Veal's language suggests that the circumstances leading to and surrounding Bland's death were not just outside of the law but also in contradiction to it — they were *unlawful*. The traffic stop, the arrest, the death — the timeline of events all trouble the legal and social norms of white America that should have recognized Bland as an equal and afforded her a different process and outcome, if not response. Reed-

6. Italics are my own.

Veal's language is a pointed critique of the system and refutation of normative discourses that would suggest her daughter would still be alive "if only she had/hadn't/..." This is where we see the sharp divergence between the language of clubwomen and respectability and that of the MothM and groups such as Mothers ROC. Whereas the MothM are positioning themselves as traditional "good" mothers, they do not advocate for the embrace of dominant systems that sustain and are, in turn, sustained by systemic racism. Instead, they opt to use their privileged status as "good" mothers to critique what they see as the unjust application of law to Black bodies, starting with their children.

McBath's language similarly contests the narrative that holds her son responsible by revealing how determination of fault is, in fact, predetermined by the processes that designate Black bodies as criminal and valued less. "I lived in fear my son would die like this," stated McBath. "I even warned him that because he was a young, Black man, he would meet people who didn't value his life." Here, her language disturbs the narrative told about her son and his death, emphasizing the injustice of his death. She articulates the understanding that because her son is a "young, black man" his life is perceived to be dispensable, again provoking the audience to question the "lawfulness" of a system that perpetuates the devaluation of Black citizens. McBath's rhetoric suggests the answer is obvious: since the dominant order systematically degrades Blackness both in persons and citizens, the death of her son is tragic but not shocking. However, although McBath warns her son of such violent possibilities, it does not lessen the injustice of his death, happening as it were, "*because he was a young, Black man.*"⁷ And because he was a young, Black man, "*he was shot and killed for playing loud music.*"⁸ This reasoning appears absurd, because it is absurd. But the absurdity is not in the claim being made by McBath but rather in the injustice it signifies. McBath's son was killed for doing something so many teenagers do, but, like Bland, he was not afforded the social and legal norms that protect white America. Because he was Black, McBath's son did not receive the benefit of the nation's declared commitment to equality. He is a victim of a system and a culture that dehumanizes and renders him more vulnerable simply due to the color of his skin. Again, the MothM reiterate: their children's deaths were the result of a series of unlawful

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acts, revealing a broken system in which to be Black is to be repeatedly wronged, erased, and even killed by a system that promised them equality.

“When a young black life is cut short, it’s not just a personal loss. It is a national loss,” Reed-Veal asserted. “It is a loss that diminishes all of us.” This language demands that their children’s deaths be seen for what the MothM claim them to be — a national tragedy. But it is not simply a national tragedy because someone’s child was killed. No, it is a tragedy because, by these killings, democracy and its promises of equality are revealed to be empty. Patriotic rhetoric claims all are guaranteed equal treatment under the law in the United States, yet, as the MothM expose, for many these promises ring hollow. They are equal citizens, but instead they are treated as second-class citizens separate from the nation. As “good” mothers grieving their children, why have they and, by extension, their children not been afforded the justice given to victims of unlawful violence and unimaginable loss? Speaking onstage at the Democratic National Convention amplifies both the voices and identities of the MothM. In claiming their children’s deaths to be a national tragedy, emblematic of the state of democracy, they show themselves to be speakers on behalf of the nation. While fighting for their children, they fight for all children, and while fighting for all children, they fight for the promises of democracy. By taking the stage, taking up space and airtime — all of which may have not been available to them in the past — the MothM assert and demand that the audience reckon with the space between the equality the nation promises and the equality the nation delivers.

CONCLUSION

Even as the MothM use the language of the dominant system to communicate their claims and position themselves as legible speaking subjects, they and their voices are still subject to disavowal. As Fox News’s Richard Grenell declaimed, the MothM are not grieving mothers; they are “anti-police” and “anti-law enforcement” (Fernandez 2016). They are not advocating for and acting as mothers on behalf of *all* children; rather, they are threatening the cohesion of the nation. They are the “mothers of dead, violent criminals” (Fernandez 2016). Such a backlash against the words and appearance of the MothM at the 2016 Democratic National Convention might lead one to conclude that this group of women was unable to make any measurable difference in the

national conversation, as those who lauded them as “one of the most powerful moments” (Kaleem 2016) of the convention were already positioned to do so.

However, borrowing from Jack Halberstam’s notion of the “queer art of failure,” one can understand the MothM’s “failure” to be recognized as “good” mothers as, in fact, a productive act of refusal and reimagining (2011, 88). In appropriating the language of “good” motherhood, the MothM reject the set of norms that hegemonic systems have sought to control them through. Failing to occupy the space given to them in the existing hegemonic system, the MothM reject the determinative power of the state and its authority to define who they and their children are. In doing so, they reveal the totalizing power of dominant systems as “never total or consistent” (Halberstam 2011, 88). Motherhood, in this case, enables the MothM to seize normative ideas of motherhood in order to undermine dominant notions about who they are, how they should act, and who is truly at fault. By acting in opposition to hegemonic, normalized understandings of Black motherhood, the MothM render themselves illegible to those complicit in maintaining systems of racial hierarchy. They challenge the image of the “good” mother by replacing it with one that contradicts the image produced by white supremacy, effectively creating a “counter-normative framework by which to judge behavior” (Cohen 2004, 30). In doing so, they simultaneously call into question the legitimacy of the narratives told about Black mothers, Black women, and their community as a whole.

The MothM’s advocacy deepens our understanding of the power and potential of motherhood as a political foundation, especially for marginalized groups of women. Motherhood and the recognition of being deemed a “good” mother does more than offer a platform from which to speak. It confers upon these women the ability to affirm their status as equal citizens, rejecting the narratives by which they were historically denied reproductive autonomy and the authority to protect their children. While certain segments of society continued to disavow and deny the experiences of the MothM, they were, in fact, speaking on stage at one of the two dominant political parties’ nominating conventions, further conferring legitimacy on their message and identity as mothers. The MothM resists categorization insofar as their language practices renegotiate their position within the dominant order — asserting both their right to be heard as equals and their right to determine the meaning of their children’s lives — while simultaneously elucidating their unequal position within white America. Speaking from

within the system, using motherhood to establish their “bona fides,” the MothM assert themselves as wronged by the system, describing the deaths of their children as the fault of a dominant order that refuses to recognize them as equals while still positioning these deaths as a tragedy that belongs to us all; it is an act of reclamation and refusal, of situating and dislocating. It is a demand to be seen and treated as equals.

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