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# A Treason Against Goodness and an Argument for Death: Re-visiting the Trope of the “Bad Black Mother”

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## Abstract

Contemplating how the familiar trope of the “bad Black mother” is used to surveil, punish, and scorn Black maternal subjects this article considers how good motherhood is at once aspirational and coercive for Black mothers who are disciplined by the ever looming threat of badness and the unattainable promise of goodness. Stretching contemporary Black feminist analyses of how Black maternal revolt against anti-Black logics can be witnessed through forms of mortal sacrifice that secure future Black life, this article troubles ideals of sacrifice through an auto-ethnographic reading of maternal death as a respite from the continuous labors of goodness for the subject that tires under the relentless force of racism and its anticipations of bad Black motherhood. Badness is then explored, through personal narrative, as a form of affective resistance against the drudgery of willing towards goodness as the maternal refuses to discipline their discontent.

I begin by telling a story. A story that comes from my personal life narrative and sets up the types of questions I want to ask, however uncomfortable they may sometimes be.

When I was a very young child my Mother died. She chose to forgo possible life-saving cancer treatment in the immediate interest of protecting the gestating life she carried that became my sister. As such, in my family’s complicated grief surrounding the loss of my Mother’s life there is a lasting sense of her as a self-sacrificing, life-giving, deeply loving parent whose capacity to love is immortalized through the conditions that surround her death. That is, securing a Black future for the Black fetus in exchange for the loss of the good mothering Black subject. My commitment to this particular narrative of my Mother’s sacrifice and goodness is so deeply ingrained, from a lifetime of its familial repetition, that it feels treasonous to her memory to even suggest that things might have been otherwise. And yet, I want to introduce a kind of complexity which investment in an angelic, selfless, and silently enduring motherhood quietly erodes. It is in this vein that I allow myself to ponder: was her death as selfless as it seems or could it have come as a reprieve from a devouring goodness that asks for so much—

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asks for too much? Shortly after my Mother's death my Father remarried and introduced into our lives a figure who quickly came to embody the good mother's fabled opposite: the Stepmother. A cruel, loveless, manipulative, and jealous figure who rages against the children not of her body. In short, a type of bad mother. By way of troubling my incomplete and admittedly, heavily biased childhood recollections which borrow from the familiar genealogy of the evil Stepmother, I seek to meditate on how my Stepmother's seeming refusal to love or to perform care might have allowed her to save herself from good motherhood's mortal consumptions modeled in the good mother's martyred wake. I am not, for one, attempting to do away with the badness of my Stepmother by proposing that she might have performed good motherhood in covert or non-normative ways. Although I will suggest that she did at one time flirt with goodness I propose that it lost its luster in the face of goodness' relentless demands. I then contend that badness might be a perfectly apt response to a bad situation (see Srinivasan 2018), especially when we consider the fatal costs of being good. I thus encourage us to ask: *What's so bad with being bad?*

Over the last several years, my research has examined anti-Black racism as well as Islamophobia through the violences directed against Black reproduction and intimately visited upon Black mothers and Black pregnant bodies within the Northern welfare states of Canada, Sweden, and Norway (Mendes 2020, 2024). The thing is, as I continue to interrogate these intimate violences I find that the lens I bring to this topic has also become more intimate as I begin to be curious about the motherhood of my own Black mothers. My aim here is to complicate readings of goodness and badness, of love and lovelessness, of sacrifice and cruelty by auto-ethnographically revisiting my memories through the nuance of Black feminist analyses of (i) the trope of the "bad Black mother"; and (ii) the necropolitics that surround everyday Black life for the ways that they inform discourses of Black maternal love and maternal sacrifice. Even as I build on these Black feminist inheritances I also trouble them by taking Black motherhood into arguably, less familiar places. As I contemplate the ways Black maternal subjects are insistently disciplined and surveilled by the dehumanizing racist logics that anticipate their badness I allow for deeper layers of complexity when it comes to the range of possible maternal feelings and behaviors. In short, I examine examples of Black maternal goodness and badness for the ways they witness the duress of mothering under white supremacy and the exhaustion or fury of striving for a goodness that appears intangible while still living. Because anti-Black racism expects the badness of Black mothers, I argue that good mothering is performed under the constant shadow of an awaiting badness which makes a lasting maternal goodness difficult or impossible to obtain, even as the desire to be good is meant to remain as an enduring pursuit diligently sought after by Black maternal subjects who aspire to save themselves and their children from the hopelessness of social death. What I propose is that both the sacrificial demands of goodness and the endlessness of its pursuit can become tiresome or too much to bear for Black maternal subjects who perceive that their affective labors are in vain, especially when racist logics maintain the constancy of the Black mother's badness. Amid these tensions, I seek to introduce into the affective archive of Black motherhood a space to contemplate the possible pleasures of premature death as well as the affective rebellions of badness as found in unsubdued misery or the withholding of care, which I explore by building on feminist writings on affect as well as the mythical qualities assigned to maternal love. I explore the agentic possibilities of death and disappointment as testaments to my Black mothers' respective refusal of the unquenchable demands of good motherhood as they appear under the conditions of an anti-Black world.

### The trope of the “bad Black mother”: Deviance, the Black womb, and migration

Through a mythology of “badness” the figure of the “bad Black mother” is vested with a stupefying series of deplorable and pathological traits: depravity, deviance, slothfulness, and a fraudulent reliance on social welfare encompass but a few (Roberts 1997a, 1997b; see also Rousseau 2013). In her ground-breaking work on the stigma of corruption and degeneracy that came to give Black motherhood its familiar, contemptible shape in the racist imaginaries and punitive policies of a 1990s US Dorothy Roberts attests that, “[t]he degrading mythology about Black mothers is one aspect of a complex set of stereotypes that deny Black humanity in order to rationalize white supremacy” (1997a, 8). Incurrable in their badness and propensity towards criminality, the supposed “degeneracy” of the Black mother is also conceived to be intergenerational (Roberts 1997a, 9). As such, the fetus is imagined to be corrupted through the very process of gestation itself, “damage[d]” by its intimate proximity to and dependence upon the damaged maternal figure (see Roberts 1997a, 9; 1997b, 945). The child of the Black mother is thus not nurtured but as Roberts conveys, “doom[ed]” (Roberts 1997a, 4). This child is not loved but defiled—as one destined to live a life rampant with deviance and clouded by despair. Roberts’ empirical research on the “corrupting tendenc[ies]” (1997a, 4) ascribed to Black motherhood is also an important inheritance for Black feminist scholarship beyond the US where versions of the “bad Black mother” take shape with their contextual and national nuance (see Browne 2002; Maynard 2017).

In my own writings on the degradations ascribed to Black reproduction in the Nordics and Canada—the latter being the national context in which my Mother briefly lived, bore new Black life, and died—I have often turned to the dread and sense of burden ascribed to the Black migrant womb in particular (Mendes 2019, 2020; see also Browne 2002). To put it most simply, the national imaginary of these Northern welfare states champions ideals of multiculturalism even as they continue to invest in the supremacy of whiteness (see Thobani 2007; Walcott 2019) and thus, quite revealingly, balk at the prospect of more Black life. Scorned by the nation, the womb of the Black migrant is an object of excessive and reckless fertility that in the nightmares of the racist imagination threatens to unleash more unproductive, unassimilable, criminally inclined subjects who are learned in the deviant ways of the “pathological” mother (see Browne 2002). In dialogue with Black feminist theorists who remind us that racism reaches into the very insides of Black people (Nash 2019, 2014; Sharpe 2016), I have thus argued that fear of Blackness is not only of the Blackness *that is* but also of the Blackness *that could be* in a way that renders the Black womb, what I call, a “death machine”: reproducing more unwanted Black life and those who prophesy the death of social order (Mendes 2020, 2019).

Perhaps ill-fated, my Mother moved from the Caribbean just ahead of a cultural moment when the ills of Black migrant mothers and the excesses of the transnational Black womb inflamed a popular Canadian imaginary, as seen in highly publicized cases that preoccupied 1990s Canadian news media as well as the immigration department. The utility once ascribed to migrant women from the English-speaking Caribbean—when their labors were needed to fulfill Canada’s increased demand for domestic workers through the West Indian Domestic Scheme (1955–1967) (Lawson 2013)—had long since lapsed into aversion by the time my Mother arrived with her young family as landed immigrants in 1989. The visceral and institutional apparatuses that secure public resources, patrol the values of social belonging, and surveil the national border in defense of racial trespass were soon openly suspicious of the hyper-fertility, immorality,

and social welfare reliance of what were deemed to be “psychotic” Jamaican and “deceptive” Somali mothers (see Aiken and Scott 2000; Browne 2002; Maynard 2017; Wright 2000). I thus wonder to what extent this hostile terrain of public feeling came to haunt my Mother’s motherhood. More precisely, I am left to ponder whether the popular chastisement of “bad Black mothers” and their hopeless offspring galvanized my Mother towards certain performances of goodness and good mothering choices as a way to escape the persistent pathology of badness that informed public sentiment and public policy in the early 1990s.

### Maternal sacrifice as maternal goodness

Not long after being diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer my Mother learned that she was pregnant. The choice she was faced with was this: treat the cancer or carry the fetus; have life or give life. If the “bad Black mother” is imagined to be one who gives nothing of the self but, as Nicole Rousseau explains (2013), demands everything of the state, of social welfare, of the child, and so forth, my Mother’s relinquishing of her life authors a different story. Such a story accords most explicitly with what Tatjana Takševa (2017) describes as the “mythic dimensions, [of] mother love” whereby the “best mothers” are recognized by their unflinching willingness to put their “children’s needs ahead of their own ... [and to] suppress[s] their own needs and desires,” all in their “untroubled” capacity for “continuous self-sacrifice” (156). By giving over her body and her life to the pregnancy—and thus placing the mortal demands of the fetus above her own mortality—my Mother seemingly keeps nothing of herself for herself, as she aids in her own demise (see Steingraber 2001, in LaChance Adams 2014, 60). Goodness devours her, with her consent. Such a profound sacrifice potentially reproduces more Black life without reproducing her as a “bad Black mother.” Part of what might have necessitated such a martyred performance of maternal love, however, was the fact of the pregnancy itself and the badness it evidenced. Upon informing her that she had cancer and that it would require intensive treatments such as chemotherapy and radiation the doctor instructed my Mother *not to get pregnant*. My Mother is told not to get pregnant but she does anyway so that in effect, she does a “bad thing.” Her body does not obey. As the racist trope of badness therefore anticipates, her sexual choices are unmanageable and her fertility is disobedient and dangerously in excess as the damaged maternal irresponsibly bears more undesirable Black life (Mendes 2020, 2019). This is one possible reading of my Mother’s pregnancy, illness, and death when interpreted through the dehumanizing, punishing, and ever watchful lens of bad Black motherhood. Sacrifice then helps to metamorphose this badness into the goodness of a good mothering subject. At the same time, I pause here to recognize my Father’s participation in both upholding the image of my Mother’s goodness as well as in the reproductive disobedience that make her bad. I do not know to what extent my parents’ sexual and reproductive choices were or were not willfully in defiance of the medical advice my Mother received. I can however, note that my Father never shared a version of the narrative of my Mother’s loving martyrdom that would directly implicate him, through actions or desires, in the event of my Mother’s death, since he solely belabored the sentiment of sacrifice (“she chose your Sister over herself”). It was only in my young adulthood that I learned of the doctor’s fateful orders as recounted to me, not by my Father, but by my maternal relatives who remember this unheeded medical directive as part of their own perplexed grief that both mourns my Mother’s loss and continues to admire and rehearse her incomparable goodness.

Although the foreboding medical prescription has also become a difficult part of our wider family legend, it is not one my Father was willing to either repeat or be incriminated by in his undeviating chronicle of my Mother's selflessness.

The prizing of sacrifice is, I would argue, more than an animation of the norms of good white motherhood, even though it is anti-Black racism that surveils the Black mother's badness in particular. To put it differently: ideals of good motherhood do not only belong to white motherhood. Throughout our Black feminist past and present a heroic Black maternal continuously emerges through the struggle to safeguard Black life in defiance of anti-Black logics that deem Black existence as devoid of value, humanity, or a viable future (see Hartman 1997; Sharpe 2016). The tragic heroism and mortal rebellions of the Black maternal stretch from slavery's archives (Hartman 2016; Nash and Pinto 2020) to our contemporary moment that declares #BlackLivesMatter which sees Black mothers, in the words of Jennifer C. Nash (2021, 175), "literally hold[ing] onto their children in the face of death... bearing assault on their own flesh or risking their own deaths." If, as Erica S. Lawson contends, "[b]y giving and preserving life, Black mothers threaten anti-Black necropolitics in the racial state" (Lawson 2018 in Nash 2021, 8), there is room to alternatively read the goodness of my Mother's sacrifice through the legacy of Black maternal revolt against the exiles of social death as she insists on the value of safeguarding "More Life" (Nash 2021, 7) whatever the costs. From within this political frame her fertility is not undisciplined and chaotic but can instead be reimagined as a courageous and revolutionary choosing, as if the pregnancy is what she was intending all along. Because she rebels against anti-Black logics and treasures the Black future of the gestating Black fetus it can be understood that she is gallantly willing to protect it even in the face of death. In this way, the pregnancy can be transformed away from badness into a testament to the Black mother's good mothering. And yet, even as I present these transformative possibilities, I turn away from them in a gesture that is somewhat heterodox to Black feminist investments in the resistive love of the Black maternal since what I want most to contemplate here is how one might trouble even this form of emancipatory or insurgent goodness.

### The coercions of goodness and the respite of death

In the effort to further grasp what goodness entails as well as the consequences of its ostensible absence it is helpful to first consider an excerpt from Sara Ahmed's text "Killing joy" (2010) where she contemplates happiness and its subtle coercions. Ahmed writes:

Happiness can involve an immanent coercion, a demand for agreement ... coercion can shape the very direction of the will, as the will to will in the right way. Coercion can involve the affirmation of a "yes": "Yes, do that"; "Yes, that's a good thing"; "Yes, that's a good way to be"; "Yes, that will make you happy." You are affirmed because you find the right things pleasing. When we feel pleasure from objects that are supposed to cause happiness, we are thus aligned. We are facing the right way. (280)

I propose that if "goodness" can be allowed to replace "happiness" in Ahmed's formulation it can be reasoned that, because goodness and being a good mother are a potential means of escaping the badness of anti-Black logics, goodness is at once

aspirational and coercive. To put it slightly differently, the will is directed towards goodness as “a good thing” if one wishes to demonstrate that one is not “the bad Black mother.” Coercion thus appears through this calculus. Aligning oneself with the goodness of good motherhood as both “a good thing” and a “good way to be” presents, perhaps, one of the only means of getting out from under the racist trope of badness—a trope that in itself has socially devastating consequences. Goodness therefore reveals as coercive when considering that the costs of badness are so high for both the reputed bad mother and her corrupted offspring, thus leaving little room for an active choosing of anything other than the performance and ethic of good motherhood.

What becomes evident is that certain qualities that define the good mother (such as a boundless selflessness, unhesitating sacrifice, and unflinching prioritization of the child’s welfare) are shared both by (i) the patriarchal cult of good motherhood against which Blackness is dominantly placed in antithesis (see Youngblood 2005) and (ii) the political convictions of Black feminism which offers a goodness that operates as antithesis to the racist trope of the “bad Black mother” and its necropolitical reductions. In either formulation, it is good to be good and to be in agreement about the qualities of goodness. However, I wish to make clear that I am not suggesting that the racist-patriarchal ideologies that sustain normative discourses of mother-love are identical to the counter discourses of Black maternal love which revolt against the inconsequentiality of Black life and death in the racial state. What I am proposing, rather, is that the championing of a limitless maternal sacrifice holds true in both. As the Black maternal subject reaches for good motherhood as a “good way to be,” this goodness can nonetheless be understood as an unstable virtue that becomes especially difficult to maintain or prove amid the force of ongoing representations of chronically bad Blackness and Black motherhood. In other words, because white supremacy is relentless and its ideological investments in the deviance and despair of Black life are longstanding, I propose that the trope of the “bad Black mother” is one that is hard to escape. The labors of goodness are potentially made ceaseless as the threat of badness surveils the Black maternal, anticipating a slippage and waiting for the subject to confirm the corruption that an anti-Black imaginary knows to be quintessential to Black motherhood. Goodness comes to entail an endless pursuit while badness is always there ready to swallow the Black mother up. What a tiresome task. Furthermore, what makes her good feels bad. That is, the rebellious Black maternal witnesses her goodness through the ever-looming prospect of pain and violence so that she constantly braces for injury, navigates crisis, and is in a state of willful readiness to give her life in defense of the life of the child (see Nash 2021). Or, as is the case with my Mother, goodness hurts since cancer overcomes her body and a painful death approaches as she appears to unflinchingly put the gestational needs of the fetus above the needs of her physical health. From here I ponder: can the relinquishing of her body to a cancerous death be perceived as something other than a sacrificial goodness when we consider the toils of goodness and the clinging of badness? I think another possibility is this: death presents a way out of this interminable loop for the Black mother that fatigues under the watchful weight of racism. With death, my Mother no longer has to ward off the racist trope, nor must she continue to prove her capacity to be what the bad mother is not. Death appears as a relief from the labors of goodness and as a respite from the insidiousness of anti-Black logics. The breast cancer diagnosis, of course, came as a surprise and is not something that can in itself be chosen. What I am contemplating is the possibility that the prospect of death was leaned into. Here I again recall, *she was told not to get pregnant, but she did anyway*. By choosing not to abort the fetus and thus not to receive

the treatments needed to save her life my Mother might have covertly clutched a type of freedom illicit to good motherhood: escape, through the abortion of her own life. The cancer presents the prospect of death and the pregnancy offers a rationale to not resist death's approach but, to welcome it.

Another probability that should be considered, however, is that my Mother sought a way out of the racist stereotypes of bad motherhood because she did in fact understand herself as good and as a good mother. As such, she may have wanted to demonstrate that she was indeed pleased by “the right things” that good mothers find pleasing (see Ahmed 2010)—including the duty of “continuous self-sacrifice” (Takševa 2017; see also Youngblood 2005)—to secure a sense of herself as good and to avoid a badness that did not equate with her interpretations of her own motherhood. Nevertheless, I contend that death can function as a form of respite from the labors of goodness even when the Black maternal is deeply attached to being good and to ideals of goodness. In this case it is not necessarily the ideals of goodness that are abandoned through death so much as the extraordinary effort that goodness constantly requires. Following my reasoning that, for Black mothers, badness is always lurking and goodness requires a relentless showcasing of one's capacity to be good, it is my conjecture that, even if my Mother wanted to be good (and, to be understood as good), she tired of the incessant work of re-establishing her goodness anew again and again. This kind of fatigue would however pose a dilemma if she wishes to have her capacity for goodness remain intact while still averting the risk of being enveloped by badness. It is through death that a solution arises: by giving up on life she can give up on the toils of goodness but still be preserved in memory as good since her death marks an unsurpassable act of maternal sacrifice. In this way, she is at last freed from an unstable goodness since death gives her goodness a type of certainty that she no longer has to work for and likely could not be awarded in life. By choosing to succumb to the disease, evidently, out of her love of the fetus and her commitment to a sacrificial good motherhood, her goodness can finally go unchallenged. A death that comes at the height of goodness, immortalizes it; she can be good even as she ceases the exertions of goodness.

### Maternal ambivalence, racial injury, and intensive care

Interpretations of the maternal subject as either being destroyed by the child or as vigilantly protecting the child from destruction are, respectively, what appear to divide white and Black maternal discourses. What is interesting about the case of my Mother, however, is that she demonstrates how this duality between narratives of white maternal overburden and Black maternal vigilance can collapse, as these disparate variables come to inform the motherhood of the very same subject. By this I mean to indicate that the sense of ambivalence that has the maternal subject (of white maternal memoir and feminist lament) struggling against their consumption by the needs of the child does not necessarily designate a type of motherhood that is in opposition to the forms of sacrificial maternal care that witness the effort to safeguard the child from consumption by the deadly forces of anti-Black racism. In short, the lives of some mothers, like my mother, convey how this racial binary that divides analyses of maternal experience may not always remain clearly intact. To illustrate this point, I bring the work of Sarah LaChance Adams (2014) and Jennifer Nash (2021) into dialogue. In LaChance Adams' (2014) work on maternal ambivalence she explores the anxiety of mothers and mothers-to-be. Making note of the sense of revolt, longing, and loss that some mothers may feel, LaChance Adams explains that “[m]others do not always

revel in the self-forgetting and sacrifices that frequently characterize motherhood” (45). Going on, she writes of pregnancy as the possible inception of “[a] mother’s sense of conflict with her child” to the extent that the fetus is encountered as “a monstrous *Other* who threatens her body, eats away at her vitality, upsets her sense of self, invades her home, and ultimately seeks to commandeer her life” (46). Ambivalence, for LaChance Adams, cannot be completely described but only imperfectly captured as: (i) the sense of “the simultaneous and contradictory conflicting emotional responses of mothers towards their children” (35); or (ii) the opposition or disharmony between the needs and desires of the mother and child and the perplexity of feeling this creates for the maternal subject (36). Either way, a sense of consumption and destruction prevails. Thinking of my own Mother’s motherhood and pregnancy there is indeed room to interpret the fetus as “a monstrous *Other*,” albeit one whose threat extends beyond the metaphoric since its gestation quite literally compromises her vitality and commandeers her life towards death—even as it is the cancer that ultimately eats my Mother up. Either way, the threat of being overcome by the pregnancy characterizes aspects of my Mother’s Black maternal experience whereby the physical needs of the maternal subject are in direct tension with the physical needs of the fetus, which intersect with the insistences of goodness that already persists amid the racist anticipations of her badness.

Drawing LaChance Adams into conversation with Nash (2021) a correlation can be made between LaChance Adams’s analyses of what makes up the anxiety of mothers and what Nash identifies as the chronic repetition of testaments of ambivalence that have come to characterize “white maternal memoirs” (see Nash 2021, 136–37). Although LaChance Adams does not specifically name white motherhood as the focus of her analysis, the affective discourses she examines align with those that, in Nash’s reading, typify white maternal narratives. For Nash, the genre of maternal memoir in general (with some exception) and “white maternal memoirs” in particular, comprise a canon of texts that claim to offer an exposé on what are instead, as Nash critiques, obsessively rehearsed “truths” of maternal life: destruction of the maternal by the child, the child as unwished for, the banality of the maternal everyday, failure to conform to ideals of good motherhood (141). The prevalence of maternal consumption and destruction as outlined at length by LaChance Adams are thus also evident to Nash, yet as testament of redundant maternal narratives told ad nauseam and without the nuances particular to anti-Black racism. By contrast, Nash insists that Black maternal narratives are deeply informed by a sense of grief, trauma, crisis, and impending mortal injury whereby the child is imagined “not as an object of maternal destruction but as a figure who requires intensive maternal care” (136). Following Nash’s formulation it can be determined that the true “monster” is not the fetus or child (who needs to be protected, rather than be protected against) but anti-Black racism, which is what *eats away at the vitality* of still maturing Black life and informs the work and feeling of Black motherhood. It is in this place of tension between the monstrous fetus and the monster that is racism that I contend, however, that another potentiality for the Black maternal subject emerges. If part of what I have succeeded in conveying thus far is that goodness is a coercive ideal that Black mothers strive for, I hope to further illustrate through my Mother’s narrative that the familiar ambivalences which LaChance Adams reports and Nash problematizes can also be encountered by the Black maternal subject, who nurtures and revolts from the duties of maternal care simultaneously and in contradiction—yet, in a way that is further complicated and compounded by racism.

Taking Nash’s complaint seriously it does indeed appear doubtful that the ambivalences and anxieties of Black mothers are primarily shaped by a changing sense of



conflict with the needs and desires of the child amid the constancy of racist surveillance, degradation, and threat of injury. And yet, even as I agree that the threat of mortal trauma gives the work of Black motherhood a certain urgency amidst the encroaching violence and deathliness of anti-Black racism, I also find that the labors of Black maternal care, as Nash and other Black feminist theorists relay them, inspire their own subset of probing questions that are difficult to answer if one is unwilling to consider the possibility that anxiety, overburden, resentment, or a sense of destruction are also part of the affective repertoire of Black mothers. For one, I ponder if there can be a figuring of the self in Black maternal narratives that takes the subject beyond the dutiful defense or mourning of the life of the child? This in turn raises the question of whether the Black maternal becomes enmeshed in badness once more if they do not satisfy or continue to perform the heroic pursuit of saving the Black child. If so, would this subject come to be understood as behaving badly even within the measure of Black feminist logics of maternal sacrifice? In other words, does the non-self-sacrificing Black mother also become a bad Black mother within Black feminist thinking? How does this then increase the risk of badness and intensify the pressures of goodness for Black mothers who might hesitate, decline, or fatigue in satisfying the expectations of maternal love if there is no reprieve to be found even within the asylum of Black maternal discourses?

The point that I want most to contribute here to the discussion of maternal destruction or vigilance is this: I believe that an alternative reading of my Mother's maternal narrative demonstrates what can emerge when the work of "intensive maternal care" is turned inwards and directed towards the Black mothering subject. Amidst the quotidian duress of racism that binds the maternal subject to an overdetermined badness and aspiring for a nearly elusive goodness, I speculate that it would become difficult for the Black mother to say (i.e., of motherhood, of racial subjugation, of goodness, of sacrifice): "I don't find this pleasing," "This is too much," "I've had enough," "My needs matter," or "I also want to be protected from racist injury." Through death my Mother protects *herself* from a future of racist indignity as she is liberated from the work of showcasing goodness to forestall an ever-looming badness—offering herself a taboo form of radical comfort. Saying "yes" to the fetus can then be reconfigured from being a selfless act of tragic heroism to my Mother's way of saying "no" to the bind of Black motherhood in anti-Black world so that in the acceptance of a premature death she is in this way, choosing herself. I speculate that the fetus is not the direct object of maternal destruction but is used as an object to justify the death of the maternal in a manner that reveals a response to anti-Blackness that attends to the desires of the mothering subject. Any disharmony between the needs of the gestating fetus and the body of the maternal subject that needs life-saving radiation treatment enters into a sort of unhappy harmony as the fetus is given life and the mother is able to give up on the pain of living. The badness of the "bad Black mother" could, of course, reappear in this kind of choosing if the respite of death is interpreted as a form of maternal abandonment and thus as another example of the Black mother's familiar absconding of her duties. And yet, if these are the conditions of Black maternal life and the sort of options available to Black motherhood, I must again ask: *What's so bad with being bad?*

### My stepmother: Making room for badness

One of the vivid memories I have of my Stepmother is a graphic scene of violence from when I was about 6 years old and my sister, the daughter of my Mother's sacrifice, was

around 2 or so. I remember a locked bathroom door, the sound of water gushing into the porcelain tub, the putrid smell of feces wafting into the hallway where I stood transfixed, and the harsh sounds of my Stepmother viciously berating my sister whose screams of pain and fearful wailing were heightened each time I heard the distinct thud of her being methodically beaten. My Father eventually forced the lock to get into the room; when he did the rank smell of shit, terror, and rage accosted my senses. This is a bad memory. I remember this as a bad moment. Any redeeming qualities of my Stepmother are indeed difficult to locate amid the visceral response this retelling so quickly evokes in myself and perhaps even in you, the reader. And yet, I want to allow for imagining otherwise by working against these disciplining affects. In her book on mad, bad, and good mothers LaChance Adams explains that “[m]aternal aggression is often a sign that the mother is in need of literal and psychological distance” (2014, 64). In turn, Patricia Hart (2009) argues that, in order to successfully adjust to the new marriage and the children that come along with it, “‘good enough stepmothering’ requires that the stepmother undergo major psychological change” (129). Pathology so quickly comes up when the mothering figure behaves badly (see also Richards 2003). What if we instead entertained the possibility that the stepmother chooses unkindness, wills not to love the child, and refuses to bestow care as she claims distinctly uncaring feelings—all without her also having to be psychotic or depraved in the way racist stereotypes of bad Black motherhood anticipate and the decorum of good motherhood seems to dictate?

Irrespective of whether my Mother wished either to secure or abandon goodness by abandoning her body to a mortal illness, our family’s interpretation of her death as sacrificial preserves her as good since, as I have illustrated above, death at last makes this virtue stable. It is then because the story of my Mother’s sacrificial goodness is what persists throughout our familial archive that it can be understood as a story that pervaded my Stepmother’s new marital life. With this in mind I propose that, as badness hauntingly surveilled my Mother in life, my Mother’s immortalized goodness eventually came to haunt and surveil my Stepmother. However, when considering the sheer force of the ideologies of good motherhood, as I have laid them out in this text, I also speculate that goodness is something my Stepmother did at one time aspire for and that my Mother was a figure she did briefly wish to emulate. The contradiction that might be found in my attempt to validate my Stepmother’s badness even as I introduce her aspirations for goodness is not, I would argue, a slippage in my theoretical approach but instead reflects the tensions and contradictions that shape Black motherhood.

### A dalliance with goodness

My Stepmother knew my Mother. They were casual friends whose small children attended the same daycare. The very first time my Stepmother spoke with me about my dead Mother she shared a memory of the two of them grocery shopping. According to my Stepmother’s account, my Mother fondly pointed at different items on the store shelves that her three children liked to eat: “Jan likes this.” After divulging this memory to a 10-year-old me my Stepmother immediately offered her interpretation of this domestic episode. In my Stepmother’s reckoning of this grocery store encounter my Mother was: giving her blessing for my Stepmother to take her place in our family as our new Mom (and our Father’s new wife), in anticipation of her impending cancerous death. There is, of course, no way to verify whether my Mother’s intentions were indeed as altruistic or omniscient as my Stepmother discerns. I am however intrigued

by my Stepmother's desire to enter into the place so recently vacated by a maternal figure whose mothering she was witness to. At the time of my Mother's death many of the social conditions of my Stepmother's motherhood were difficult: she was a single parent to a child she had given birth to as a teenager; possessed limited post-secondary education; had immigrated with her family from Jamaica; and was employed in a low-wage sector of the healthcare industry. These basic, and incomplete, facts of her life are facts that the trope of the "bad Black mother" would likely cling to and from which my Stepmother might have, in turn, attempted to get out from under. Because my Mother chronically modeled ideals of good motherhood I speculate that this made her motherhood outwardly appealing in a manner that encouraged my Stepmother to imagine certain good things and good feelings would too be hers once she occupied my mother's evacuated place. I do not suggest my Stepmother's hopeful imaginings to be a form of devious plotting. Rather, I see them as a wistful fantasizing for the good things that good motherhood promises (e.g., respectability, relief from racist scorn).

Returning to Ahmed's meditations on happiness, she indicates that happiness is "promised through proximity to certain objects" which establishes the anticipation that, "if you do this or if you have that, then happiness is what follows" (2010, 576). By once again substituting Ahmed's "happiness" for "goodness" in my own theorizing I propose that it is through her immediate proximity to the family and children of the confirmed good mother that my Stepmother seeks to find her own way out of badness. To put it slightly differently, my Stepmother attempts to borrow from my Mother's goodness by attaching herself to the objects through which good motherhood is displayed (i.e., the family, the children)—thus clutching the goodness verified through the mortal sacrifice. It is by desiring to have what the good mother had that she aspires for whatever is promised to follow maternal goodness, which might very well include the happiness that Ahmed writes of. In this vein, my dying Mother's sentimental remarks in the grocery store are also taken as a promise that the Stepmother can indeed become good (and overcome her presumptive badness) if she heeds this lesson of attending to the desires and well-being of the children: "Jan likes this."

### Willing not to be "affected in the right way"

I speculate that the demands of goodness become too much to bear for my Stepmother as the rewards for occupying good motherhood neither outweighed the costs of persistent self-abnegation that goodness insists upon nor the forms of surveillance it invites. Suddenly mother to three more children, the labors of mothering swiftly intensify. At the same time, the Stepmother's capacity for maternal love is keenly measured by both the virtuous ghost of my Mother's martyred goodness and the grief of the family which keeps the memory of her angelic goodness alive. We all watch the Stepmother ever so closely. In her study of the stepmother-stepdaughter relationship in kinship constellations where the biological mother is present Hart (2009, 130) writes that, "stepmothers must develop and define their relationship and role in the context of the primacy of the biological mother. The stepmother occupies a culturally and psychologically ambiguous role standing in the long shadow of mother cast by culture and society." What I am suggesting is that, even as a deceased parent, my Mother remained a forceful presence in our familial home. To live under the long shadow of this kind of irreproachable maternal goodness was perhaps more than my Stepmother bargained for when she initially sought a way out from under badness and reached for the promises of good motherhood held out in that grocery store endorsement. If my Mother's goodness is

ultimately possessed only through the instrument of death however, it would follow that the Stepmother cannot truly inhabit such unwavering goodness without undertaking an equally sacrificial act. Regardless of whether or not my Stepmother did at one point wish to discipline her will to emulate the limitless goodness performed by her maternal predecessor, death ultimately poses its own limits or steep expectations. The toils of goodness therefore amplify for the Stepmother even as the scorn of “bad Black motherhood” continues its persistent scrutiny—all without any assurance of the rewards that a proximity to the objects of goodness may have once appeared to promise.

I think that my Stepmother’s violence and anger might reflect this astounding disappointment with goodness’ false promise as well as a rageful rebellion against the unyielding impositions of her new maternal and marital life. It is amid the fetid insistence of the defecating toddler and the watchfulness of the grieving family—that remind her of what she is not and of what she does not have—that I contend that my Stepmother recognizes the “untroubled” self-sacrifice and “unflinching” attentions meant to witness maternal love (see Takševa 2017) as something she either cannot or does not want to feel. In her analysis of what it means to be “affected in the right way” Ahmed calls upon Arlie Russel Hochschild’s (2003) example of the unhappy bride who must “correct” her unhappy feelings since these “inappropriate affect[s]” are ill-aligned with the “ideal feelings” (Hochschild 2003, 59, 61, in Ahmed 2010, 581) that are meant to be present on the wedding day. As Ahmed puts it, “the bride [must] make herself happy by stopping herself from being miserable” (2010, 581). In the case of my Stepmother I propose that she did at some point invest in the ideals of good motherhood and thus sought to be “affected in the right way” by the children (i.e., their desires, well-being, or prospect of mortal injury). However, she came to find that she was unable or unwilling to stop herself from being miserable once, I presume, the endless drudgery of maternal self-surrender became a clearly shitty job. Ahmed explains that disappointment or rage can be incited by the affective dissonance “between how we feel and how we think we should feel.” Ahmed thus writes, “[y]our rage might be directed against the object that fails to deliver its promise or it may spill out toward those who promised you happiness through the elevation of some things as good” (581). Applying Ahmed’s reasoning I contend that, because my Mother’s grocery store blessing and good mothering example leveraged certain promises, she in effect “elevated” good motherhood as a good thing. Deceived by my Mother’s careful model of boundless goodness and thwarted by its unattainable satisfactions, the new family and the stepchildren become, for my Stepmother, the “object[s] that fail to deliver [their] promise” as they cling, surveil, and soil themselves. It is therefore against these disappointments that my Stepmother rages. Even if she was able to appropriately assimilate her feelings to be the happy bride she is unwilling to do so to become the good mother. She will not hide her misery. She will not discipline her discontent. She will not to and in doing so indirectly accepts the risk of being the “bad Black mother.” It is plausible that being bad comes to feel better than enduring the expectations and effort of being good. My Father once, in anger, said to my Stepmother, “You are not half the woman that Sandra was!” As hurtful as this accusation was meant to be, I do not think that she continued to want to be the woman or mother that my Mother was and instead began to actively rebel against the idealized maternal virtues of her predecessor. It then appears as significant that my sister became the object of her wrath, as seen in my dreaded bathroom recollection. In a moment where the toddler has soiled herself and regresses towards infancy the Stepmother revolts against the needs of the very child for whom the biological Mother surrendered

everything. If good Black motherhood entails *bearing the assault of one's own flesh and risking one's own death* (Nash 2021, 8), the Stepmother rejects these ideals by assaulting the child's flesh in rage, in disgust, in dissent, in badness. She will not be devoured by the demands of good motherhood; she will not give over her life to the life of the child. She wills not to, as she beats the clings of dependence, care, and sacrifice back and away. She frees herself through violence from that which my Mother freed herself from through death; badness becomes its own reprieve.

Reflecting further on the mythological qualities given to ideals of maternal love Takševa (2017, 159) conveys that “maternal feeling”—in terms of “how mothers feel and should feel about their children and the task of mothering”—is surveilled “by society” and by “mothers themselves,” which in turn inhibits discussion of the broad range of feelings felt by the maternal subject. In contemplating the disciplining work of surveillance through the exercise of auto-ethnography I concede that the child is also involved in the scrutinizing of “maternal feeling” for what should be, could have been, or is not felt by my mothers. Many of my childhood memories of my Stepmother are painful as I recall, what I deduced to be, her rage and unloving feelings (as seen through her constant yelling, use of corporeal punishment, odd manipulations that would pit us siblings against each other, the scarcity of her physical or emotional affection, and examples of her seeming indifference that stunned my still-maturing psyche). In contrast, the memories I have of my Mother often inspire my fondness and longing for the care and doting attention that I felt once was and then was lost. Yet these ways of remembering locate either Black maternal as figures of badness or goodness without nuance, which says very little about who these women are or were and more about what they have come to represent in the measuring of appropriate maternal feelings and behaviors. It has been my effort to upset this affective reflex in myself and in readings of Black motherhood. My intent is not necessarily to discipline my feelings but rather to trouble the discourses that discipline Black mothers. Although the content of my memories will not change I invite a shift in how I understand what happened and why, without the need for punishment or rebuke of either maternal figure. As I have explained, I am not attempting to redeem my Stepmother by enclosing her in a covert goodness, since what I am proposing is that badness is not a bad way to be. Even so, in the effort to truly attend to a range of maternal feeling I also question whether badness should be understood as a fixed state of affective refusal once adopted. More precisely, I am intrigued by the unexplored possibility that my Stepmother moved cyclically between a rebellious misery, to re-investing in the project of maternal goodness, and then back again to a willful badness when goodness' familiar disappointments and labors are felt once more. Similarly for my Mother, goodness might have been a waning or fluctuating investment rather than something she performed without complaint, anger, or hint of bad feeling towards the child or motherhood itself. In this scenario, death can be figured not only as a reprieve from an unstable goodness and tormenting badness but as a quieter raging against the surveillances and demands of motherhood whereby her anger is turned inwards through a willful self-annihilation. What I am attempting to hold onto here is the tension, contradiction, and changeability felt by Black mothers in a way that encourages us to witness their human complexity and move beyond the disciplining binary of extraordinary goodness or extraordinary badness.

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