We are living at a time in human history where the unthinkable has become reality, as the Supreme Court ruling overturning Roe v. Wade, which derails hard-won reproductive freedoms, makes glaringly obvious. Against this backdrop, Jennifer Nash’s Birthing Black Mothers is a timely and important contribution to the literature on reproductive politics in America. Nash draws attention to the public dimension and civic potential of Black American cis maternal grief that coalesces around the joint crises of infant and maternal morbidity, incarceration, and death. In the process, Nash deftly interweaves events, campaigns, controversies, and actions that captured the public imagination and went viral on social media, making this book a rewarding and relevant offering, as useful for scholars and lecturers as for lay publics.

Problematising the economy of grief that has made Black American cis maternal suffering respectable and secured it left-wing political currency, Birthing Black Mothers critiques the gains made in racial and reproductive struggles that use a sentimentality of crisis. Nash works both in and against this frame of crisis to illuminate the way that it functions as a double-edged sword. Crisis being linked to a temporality of urgency serves to erase the ongoing structural violence and systemic racism that is an enduring condition of ordinary Black American life. Furthermore, crisis plays a role in essentialising trauma in Black American social life, with grief and loss legitimised as inescapable affects. Simultaneously, a crisis frame makes Black pain visible in ways that authorise a Black American maternal politics. Indeed, Nash describes crisis as an echo-chamber that Black American feminisms and Black mothers themselves contribute to because its symbolic currency is one that produces compassion, support, and encouragement.

Nash’s book shows that despite sustained attention to Black cis maternal crises, a lack of meaningful change is indicative of the American status quo’s investment in and

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reproduction of Black trauma and loss. This paradox is one that exemplifies the way “sentimental politics” works. Lauren Berlant (2002, pp. 108–9) argues that in using trauma to describe the effects of structural violence, the achievement of justice is predicated so entirely on the eradication of pain that “it enables various confusions: for instance … that changes in feeling, even on a mass scale, amount to substantive social change. Sentimental politics makes these confusions credible, and these violations bearable” even as it ensures that the hegemonic structure of social inequality remains intact.

Chapter 1 begins with a description of an image used by clothing brand GAP in its Instagram marketing. Widely lauded in support of Black American women’s breastfeeding, the image depicts a Black married woman breastfeeding her toddler. Nash puts this image to use as a brilliant opening into discussion of a supposed racial “breastfeeding gap”. Through use of a “rich visual archive of images supporting Black women’s breastfeeding efforts”, Nash reproduces for the reader the visual register of a new, politicised breastfeeding aesthetic (p. 36). A series of photographs form part of this aesthetic: ones representing Black American mothers as queens wearing crowns, sitting under trees breastfeeding their children; in another, clad with tribal face paint and standing naked on rocks in the middle of a river breastfeeding their toddlers. For Nash these images portray “the Black breast as itself able to mitigate violence, to engage in risk reduction, to remake Black babies, families, and communities” (p. 62). From a different standpoint however, the blatant romanticisation of bare-chested Black women imagined as having a pure, primitive connection to the natural world is predicated on settler-colonial constructions of Black women’s unrestrained sexual lasciviousness. In my reading, then, these images reinscribe Black women’s hyper-sexualisation and makes permissible, rather than mitigates, further violence(s), just as the hyper-sexualisation of Black African and Indigenous women’s bodies makes them “un-rape-able” (Gqola, 2015).

In Chapter 2, Nash sets out the ways doulas have become key political actors, enacting birth justice through their very presence “in the birth room”. She traces how doulas have become urgent, life-saving components of birth despite being unregulated, receiving training of varied quality and little compensation. This was a fascinating chapter to read, particularly as a practising doula myself. In South Africa doulas are seen as subversive specifically because they are positioned as a-political in a birth world understood to be seeped in politics. A doula’s non-medical, informal status means they cannot be positioned within a medical hierarchy and, hence, are non-threatening to medical professionals, which is the point. Their work is to attend to the psychological, emotional, and embodied aspects of a pregnant person’s experience of birth, holding their hands, providing comfort and words of reassurance, cocooning them in love. So, to read about doulas “as actors who have become foot soldiers in a birth justice movement that is rooted in Black feminist praxis and increasingly supported by both state actors and non-profit organizations invested in eradicating – or at least downplaying – the crisis” was surprising (p. 71). Sitting with the provocations of this chapter I wonder about the beguiling assumptions that presuppose that a marginalised group with little recourse to medical power or authority can destabilise heartbreakingly obstinate Black infant and maternal mortality.
Chapter 3 asks how Black American cis female celebrities leverage their motherhoods to rewrite their politics. Nash argues that popular representations of Serena Williams, Beyoncé Knowles, and Michelle Obama as “dangerously proximate to Blackness” is transformed through motherhood (p. 108). For Williams this transformation centred on the catsuit that in 2002 was condemned but in her 2018 return to professional tennis was rebranded to have postpartum benefits. For Michelle it was her “anti-American” sentiments during Obama’s presidential campaign that was rebranded by her “mom-in-chief” title after his election to office. For Beyonce, the Super Bowl performance in 2016 that was associated with BLM protest action was transformed by her performance at the Grammy’s in 2017, the latter becoming an allegory to intergenerational maternal bonds. Where the book claims that Black American cis mothers’ visibility is tied to crisis, the use of celebrities as exemplars of alternative performances of Black motherhood is confusing. Do these mothers transcend crisis because of their visibility as tennis star, first lady, or popstar? Or is it because they transcend Blackness through a register of the universal, as argued in the chapter, that they transcend crisis? This distinction is an important one because Mothers of the Movement, whom these celebrity figures are compared to, cannot transcend either their Blackness or their trauma, as their visibility is forever tied to the racist killing of their Black children.

Chapter 4 asks how Black maternal memoirs upend or conform to the temporal, political and aesthetic frame of crisis. It makes use of an understudied repository of first-person accounts of lived experience to trace complex maternal relations with creativity, sexuality, intimacy, freedom, and ethics. Nash sets the stage for unsettling common modes of reading maternal memoirs with her interpretations of Adrienne Rich’s Of Woman Born (1976) and Alice Walker’s In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens (1983). Nash challenges the idea that the Black maternal memoir is principally concerned with an aesthetic of grief, and instead finds wishful mothering in Dani McClain’s We Live for the We (2019) and ecstatic mothering in Rebecca Walker’s Baby Love (2007). She argues that Black American maternal grief can emerge from the unmet need for children through infertility and miscarriage as represented in Michelle Obama’s Becoming (2018). Furthermore, the temporality of urgency that accompanies crisis is re-written in Lezley McSpadden’s Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil (2016) where Black motherhood is about long-term endurance of violence, and in Camile Dungy’s Guidebook to Relative Strangers (2017) where it is constituted by ecological connection to the natural world.

Inspired by the threads that link the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) and #MeToo movements, Nash’s book proposes that Black-Mamas-Matter. Given the global nature of these social movements, however, Birthing Black Mothers’ narrow cis-American-centric focus, which refrains from explicitly stating this limited scope (hence my own re-insertion of this focus into this book review), restricts the reach of the arguments made and audiences addressed. Sadly, there was no engagement with Black maternal experiences outside of US contexts, or even Black diasporic scholarship (except in Chapter 2, which explains the emergence of obstetric violence in Latin America). The result is a silencing and disregarding of some of these movements’ biggest successes: gaining trans-Atlantic and transnational relevance in calling out violations that curtail Black and minority people’s lives globally.
This was even more disappointing in relation to reproductive justice. A critical theoretical framework that originates from the USA, reproductive justice has similarly gained global traction precisely because several contexts besides the USA grapple with the devastations of racism, discrimination, and inequality in pregnancy-related mortality rates and reproductive injustices more broadly. The book argues that this critical feminist theory and basis for childbirth activism has been co-opted into mainstream political and hegemonic discourses. But this has occurred alongside scholarship and activism on sexual and reproductive justice in Global South contexts broadening the scope of the concept (see for example these recent edited collections: Bakhru, 2019; Morison & Mavuso, 2022), and becoming more widely adopted in the strategic frameworks of states and non-profits (Stevens, 2019). Hence, the American-centric perspective that frames Birthing Black Mothers results in a missed opportunity to advance cross-contextual understanding of lessons learnt in relation to reproductive justice.

Even within the USA, differences make important cuts in cis women’s experiences of pregnancy and birth. For example, Johnson (2015) demonstrates the way Global North-South divides are replicated in the experiences of immigrant women on Medicaid and American-born women. Reproductive (in)justices, which occur along multiple, intersecting lines of inequality, also interact with identities. Hence the structural and systemic conditions that exclude minority and stigmatised groups and privilege wealthier, cis-heterosexual others, are fostered by particular relations to power and normativity. Given the different lived realities, situated politics, and subjectivities of diverse Black birthing people, certain threads get lost in the book. For example, how are Black queer, intersex, and trans bodies made in/visible through maternal crisis? Which kinds of maternal bodies are more entitled to public grieving? Are the terms “women of colour” and “Black” used interchangeably, or are there discernible differences that might give rise to different politics? Finally, how might Black celebrity statuses that are permissive of transgressive maternal aesthetics be denied to poor Black women on welfare? I was therefore hoping for a more robust engagement with power than Birthing Black Mothers offers.

Although a cis-heteronormative maternal politics is revealed as central to popular uprisings and social justice causes, in presenting specific Black American experiences as though universal, differently-located readers might be alienated by essentialist threads within the text. Violations to Black maternal bodies are disproportionately enacted. So where Nash reproduces a cis-heteronormative frame of maternal politics that leaves out intersex and trans (including non-binary) people who do get pregnant and give birth, she reproduces a violent erasure of their experiences of pregnancy and parenthood, including grief. Just as where she leaves outside the frame of Blackness, transnational, diasporic and Black African experiences, she reimposes the violent hegemony of colonial injustices that marks the globally marginalised. These exclusions close-down the possibilities for gestational alliances. This is an impasse that Black Trans Feminism by Marquis Bey rectifies. Bey proposes an “abolitionist gender radicality” as a possible move towards collective liberation that can be organised according to “certain kinds of bodies but [that] provides knowledge and world-making onto-epistemic forces that can be mobilized by any and every body and nonbody” (Bey, 2022, p. 11). In moving
away from what specific bodies are capable of being, black, trans feminism provides the basis for articulating radically expansive means of revolt founded on an ethics of peace. Important criticisms notwithstanding, Black Birthing Mothers is lyrically and passionately written. It is an outpouring of the author’s conviction that Black American cis motherhood – for all that it might be tied to grief – is also creatively invested in new imaginings of itself. I applaud this book for establishing the Black maternal as generative of creative acts of refusal – actions that make more liveable Black (American) lives and futurisms possible.

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