

# Forget Hallmark:

## Why Mother's Day Is a Queer Black Left Feminist Thing

Alexis Pauline Gumbs

---

After reading:

*The Anti-Social Family* by Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh (1982)

*Fear of a Queer Planet*, edited by Michael Warner (1999)

*Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* by Roderick Ferguson (2004)

"Of Our Normative Strivings: African American Studies and the Histories of Sexuality" by Roderick Ferguson (2005)

"Queerness as Horizon: Utopian Hermeneutics in the Face of Gay Pragmatism" by José E. Muñoz (2007)

"A 'New Freedom Movement of Negro Women': Sojourning for Truth, Justice, and Human Rights during the Early Cold War" by Erik S. McDuffie (2008)

*Blood Dazzler* by Patricia Smith (2008)

*Something Like Beautiful: One Single Mother's Story* by asha bandele (2009)<sup>1</sup>

My mother is Black. So the means through which I was produced is a matter of national instability. My mother is Black. So the trace of slavery waits every moment to ink my body with meaninglessness. My mother is Black. So my living is a question of whether or not racism will be reproduced today. My mother is Black. This same piece of information threatens my survival. But my mother is Black, which is at the same time the only thing that makes my survival possible.

It's early morning. I am a little bit drunk on the sound of rain, but it occurs to me that I should get (you) ready for Mother's Day. It is very easy to notice that I am obsessed with mothering and mothers. "Mother" is the single most interesting and confusing word that I know. Next to Black.

---

<sup>1</sup> Outside of the above timeline, see Audre Lorde's "Litany for Survival," Cathy Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," and Hortense Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," which I did not reread this week . . . but have completely internalized such that I should be understood to be citing them no matter what I am saying about anything.

And here comes Mother's Day. For me, this year Mother's Day means a million things. Expectancy, fear, obligation, inspiration, joy, admiration, deep reflection. A few weeks ago my mother told me that she thinks I will be "such a great mother." It struck me that while I have always dreamed of becoming a mother, and intended to become a mother, it still comes as a surprise when anyone affirms that it is something that I can do, SHOULD do even. Because I live in a culture that criminalizes Black mothers for creating and loving Black children, a culture that criminalizes Black kids for being born. And Latino kids too. I have been taught that mothering is something that happens to you, and you deal with it, and fight for it, swallowing down shame and living with the threat that the state wants nothing more than to take your kids away from you in every way imaginable.

But it is not my mother who taught me that. My mother repeats again and again that mothering us is her greatest accomplishment, like *asha*, mothering is her enduring joy and triumph despite everything. And trust, she has other great accomplishments. My mother, not through perfection, not through ease, but through sincere struggle, intense and sometimes even overwhelming love taught us something in her very being. My sister (now an ambitious account exec in New York) once confessed to me that though it might seem unfeminist, the only thing she really cared about, the one thing that she knew she wanted to do for sure in life was to be a good mother. And I told her what I more recently wrote in a poem to one of my feminist theory students, who blessed us by bringing her daughter to class, "mothering is the most feminist act of all." My mother, like every Black mother, has been slandered. But we know a lie when we see it. My brother wanted to punch every producer of CNN's disgusting "Black in America" series for daring to suggest that being raised by a Black mother was the key liability destroying the life chances of Black people. How dare they? How dare they? When our Black mother is the only reason we know how to breathe and survive despite the toxic racism filling this world. How dare they?

It is no mystery why it is a cultural truth that talking about a Black person's mother is a great way to unleash a universe of anger. Our mothers are slandered every single second of every single day. The media does it like it's its job. And indeed it is.

**And here is the risk.** All this talk of mothering, all this affirmation and privileging of mothering puts me at risk, not only in a mainstream

narrative working to reproduce a nation built on racial hate and genocide, but also on the academic queer left. It is not very queer of me to keep talking about my mother this way. In fact (as Michael Warner suggests) the only queer way for a Black person to talk about a mother is the "irony" of the house mother in Black gay ball culture. CNN is dead to me. The deeper betrayal is that queer studies participates in the slander of the Black mother, agreeing with the story that says she should not exist.

Has Warner not considered (as Cathy Cohen makes very clear in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens") that Black mothering is already a queer thing? Because we were never meant to survive. So the Queen Mother in the house movement is not just throwing shade, the queen is doing the necessary work of mothering. Of saying these bodies Black and queer almost to redundancy, these spirits that every facet of our society would seek to destroy, **MUST** survive and **WILL** transform the meaning of life whether you like it or not. That is what a Black mother does. Sincerely. No irony. It is no joke.

So this week I have been picking a bone with a queer theory narrative that sees mothering as the least radical thing one can do, in so much that it becomes irrelevant to the majority of the discourse on queerness. Clearly, like Moynihan, they don't know my mother. Asserting that the labor of mothering is always in collaboration with a reproductive narrative, always reproducing heteronormativity, ignores the fact that there has been a national consensus for centuries that Black people should not be able to mother. Every force, from coercive sterilization, to the dismantling of welfare has been mobilized to try to keep us from doing it. Where has dominant (read white) queer theory been while politicians have been ranting and raving about how welfare queens, (which despite the actual statistics becomes a code name for poor and racialized mothers) are going to destroy civilization as we know it not only by creating Black surplus children, but by influencing these children with their deviant and risky and scary behavior? And isn't this the organizing desire of queer theory . . . to destroy civilization as we know it?

I just wish everyone would listen to Cathy Cohen (who by the way is a Black co-mother to a beautiful fierce Black girl child) so I wouldn't have to stand here screaming (or more accurately sit here taking, deconstructing, and rebuilding the premises of queer theory all week long). But here is the quick and dirty of it: mainstream queer theory was inaugurated by Warner's edited volume and influenced by a Marxist femi-

nist tradition of critiquing the heteropatriarchal family as a complicit force in the reproduction of capitalist oppression. And they throw the Black babies out with the bathwater of their universalism. The “tyranny of motherhood” as described by Barrett and McIntosh does not leave room for those other deployments of “mother” and “hood” (excuse me “inner-city”) in the American vernacular of culture of poverty discourse.

This is why Hortense Spillers should be required and repeated reading for queer theorists. Four words. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” Which means there is no reason that the act of mothering would reproduce patriarchy, or even take place within the confines of patriarchy along normative lines because the practice of American slavery has so fundamentally ripped the work of mothering from the bodies of Black mothers, forcing them to do the labor of mothering for white and Black children while fully denying them any of the authority of motherhood by killing and selling away and raping and mutilating their biological children and their chosen kin. (I have written before about my discovery, while reading slave code, that even a free Black mother had no legal right to defend an enslaved daughter from abuse by a slave master.)

The complexity of the term “mother” (next to “Black”) requires a queer theory that deuniversalizes race and highlights the function of racism in reproducing the heteropatriarchal status quo. Cathy Cohen, Roderick Ferguson, and José Muñoz do this work of reminding us that Third World Feminism and the Third World Gay Liberation movement are an alternative starting point (contemporary with the Marxist feminist arguments that Warner’s version of queer theory inherits). Their work is crucial because it says something very obvious. We are people of color. The whole system wakes up every day trying to exterminate our bodies and our spirits. Our very survival is queer.

We were never meant to survive, and if mothers are part of why we are here (and they are), then they are the queerest of us all. But this is not even news. If we remember what Black women have been up to in the United States, we can just go ahead and let go of the assumption that mothering is conservative or that conserving and nurturing the lives of Black children has ever had any validated place in the official American political spectrum.

Eslanda Robeson    Shirley Graham Du Bois    Maude White Katz  
Charlotta Bass    Mary Church Terrell

Take the fierce Black women writers, mothers, publishers, actresses, activists who would become the Sojourners for Truth and Justice and their work starting in the 1940s to protest the imprisonment of Rosa Lee Ingram, a Black mother who was sentenced to death for standing up for herself, and defending herself against a white man who tried to rape her. It was Black women activists who changed her sentence to life in prison and then eventually (after twelve years of incarceration) got her released from prison. And always, always the key word in their organizing strategy was "mother." Their understanding of Ingram, who was willing to fight to keep this violent man away from her body and away from her children, epitomized the term "mother" for this set of Black women revolutionaries. They framed the state's violence against Ingram as a violence against Black mothering itself. How dare this Black woman take a stance against rape? Standing against rape is a mothering act. How dare she threaten the perceived truth about what happens to Black people, that Black bodies are infinitely rapeable? How dare she stand ferocious, daring and teaching? This is what will happen to you if you come at me.

This is the act of mothering that mobilized a national movement, Black women gathered twenty-five thousand signatures for a petition in 1949 . . . way before the era of the text message e-blast petition. They made it an international human rights issue, contacting every single member nation of the UN. And I need you to know this, remember this if you remember nothing else: On Mother's Day, exactly sixty years ago the Black left internationalist feminists of the Ingram Committee sent TEN THOUSAND MOTHER'S DAY CARDS to the White House and scared Harry S. Truman so bad that he made up an excuse to miss their scheduled meeting the next day.

Ten thousand Mother's Day cards from Black women to the white house. Stolen holiday. No justice, no peace in the form of ten thousand paper-cuts. A floral dare saying: celebrate this. This is what mothering means: organized support for radical self-defense. **A complete refusal of rape by any means necessary. Ten thousand Mother's Day cards. A threat saying we are Black mothers. We are survivors. Try us.**

Forget Hallmark.

Have a revolutionary Mother's Day, people.