

Book Review

Birthing Black Mothers

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Book's Author: Jennifer C. Nash

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The issue of the protagonism of black mothers in the public space has gained notoriety in the USA in recent years, especially in recent decades. The beginning of this process dates back to the 1970s, when black and indigenous women began to demand, more insistently, greater visibility and recognition of their actions, particularly among social movements. However, Jennifer Nash, in this extremely important publication for the discussion of this topic, questions the spaces and places that have been dedicated to black mothers in the public sphere. Thus, *Birthing Black* mothers presents a rich discussion based on debates on public health and visual culture, establishing two timelines in dialogue: the first, which refers to activist work around state violence against black men; and the second, which refers to the set of aesthetic and activist projects around medical violence against black women.

According to the author, the book was born from a desire to question the narrative about black motherhood, as well as seeking to understand the political usefulness of this narrative, recognising that black mothers themselves make use of it. She also considers black affections that are culturally valued, such as mourning or sadness, while anger, for example, remains unauthorised, often being treated as reckless or excessive.

Furthermore, the book is interested in naming, describing, and analysing what the author calls the 'feminist birth industry', highlighting the place of black motherhood in this industry, as well as the centrality of female praxis for this same industry. It is also interesting to think about the challenges imposed on black feminism. Nash understands that black mothers have used motherhood as a form of activism, since the US struggle for civil rights. By subverting domestic space, they transformed public space into arenas of resistance and empowerment. Nash also considers maternal policy both as a practice of defence, survival, and a strategy to safeguard maternal and child life, and as a way of making obstetric violence visible as a form of state violence.

This book is divided into four chapters. In the Introduction, the author calls attention to the theme of the crisis with a device that frames black mothers through a discursive representation of concern and care. Still, in this initial part, the author argues that black mothers only appear in the public and political discourses of representation through crises involving pathology or lack of support. In this sense, the author investigates how the 'narrative market' treats violence as an exception and not as a permanent condition that permeates the lives of black people. Following this thought, she discusses how black mothers would like to be seen, as they refuse to be represented as places of crisis. Nash continues, provoking interest in knowing how black mothers manage to make their needs visible, especially during the perinatal period. She studies how the black mother in labour becomes a political sign that can bring together affective engagement through compassion and pity. At the same time, she proposes thinking about the visibility of the black mother regardless of the temporality determined by the crisis. Meanwhile,

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black mothers continue to be *objects* of political value and symbolic support, being forced to navigate between medical racism and state-sanctioned violence, which day by day makes such black lives disposable and vulnerable. Black mothers continue to be invoked as bodies that inhabit the crisis, constantly experiencing the trauma, since they only gain strength from mourning, where their respectability and visibility take shape from the loss. Furthermore, the book traces how black mothers in general have become a political category for the US Left. In addition, the author argues that black mothers are figured as bodies that deserve compassion, education and support, due to their proximity to death, as they live in crisis. Thus, black mothers have become a political commodity for those who speak on their behalf.

Having black motherhood as a guiding principle, in the first chapter, entitled 'Black gold – black breasts', Nash explores the crisis faced by black mothers and the struggles developed to support, encourage, and reinforce black breastfeeding in the face of a construction of black mothers as not - breastfeeding. By analysing the idea of the black breastfeeding gap, he traces how this breastfeeding is represented by the state, by black feminism and by corporations, how it is starting to be seen instead as a practice marked by fullness, health, and nutrition. Drawing from this and the public health literature, he examines how in a short period black breastfeeding came to be seen as a cure for black precariousness. This chapter concludes by debating how black women respond to the temporalities of the crisis, as the images suggest that the structure of the crisis continues to shape and constrain the very registers through which black maternal flesh can be imagined and represented.

In the second chapter, called 'In the bedroom – childbirth', the work of black women doulas in Chicago is discussed, dealing with how doulas have been seen as being in the front line of defence for pregnant black women. Based on the analysis of 23 interviews carried out in 2018 with birth doulas working in the Chicago metropolitan area, the author addresses three tensions that permeate contemporary doula practice: issues of professionalisation, medicalisation and the exceptionality of childbirth. By treating doulas as actresses who brought visibility to what happens in the delivery room, the author perceives doulas as instrumental in reformulating the black pregnant body and, in this sense, as a political category.

'Black maternal aesthetics' is the title of the third chapter and presents the controversial black maternal aesthetics by analysing the ways in which three black celebrities are seen differently from the prevailing conception that sees precariousness, scarcity, and crisis in black mothers. By following these three contemporary performances of black celebrity motherhood, the author argues that these performances allow black motherhood to be re-narrated and reorganised. Furthermore, she traces how Black celebrity performances centre female friendship as a distinct form of relationality that Black motherhood makes possible. She further argues that this conception of black maternal friendship is enacted and represented in different ways than other contemporary public performances. Thus, this performance is rooted not in shared trauma and grief, but in black motherly pleasures, in glamour, and fun. In this sense, this trio is an example of the remodelling of black motherhood, imagining it not as a position of urgency, but rather as a complex and self-authored aesthetic that can be playful, cheerful, creative, sensual, and fabulous, even when related to loss and grief and in solidarity with more recognized black maternal political efforts such as in the activist group, Mothers of the Movement.

In the fourth and final chapter, 'Black motherhood – maternal memories and the economy of mourning', the author returns to black maternal memories, examining how the writing of contemporary black maternal life positions itself with and against the crisis. The author studies black maternal memories with attention to how the writing of black maternal life conforms and subverts the temporal, political and aesthetic demands of the crisis, presenting black motherhood as a space of communion, tranquillity, and connection, instead of precariousness and trauma. At the same time, the author argues that black maternal memories resist ecstatic, spiritual and natural motherhood, disturbing the expected logic and problematising the loss in a different way. These memoirs contest the association between pain and black motherhood and challenge the dominant conception of gender aesthetics and politics. Nash also argues that black maternal memories remain under-analysed, being little explored by the academy. The author's proposal, in this chapter, contemplates the desire to tell a different story of black maternal memories, a story that reflects on the intellectual and creative exchanges between black and white women. The investigation then focuses on perceiving the concern with motherhood as an experience permeated with feelings, even if these feelings are expressed in different ways.

Finally, in the Coda, we have a discussion about the place of black women in the COVID-19 pandemic, about the recent killings of black people by the police, and also about black maternal mortality. Relating these situations to black mothers, Nash problematises the use of black maternal flesh as a symbolic currency, a use that leaves the bodies of black mothers vulnerable to recruitment by the state and black feminism. By alerting to this type of use, the author intends to understand the variety of political needs of black mothers, as well as the multiplicity of their affections. Thus, in this imaginary reconfiguration exercise, black mothers can be much more than a political category to be mobilised.

Featuring rich analyses, whether on black breastfeeding, the work of black female doulas, black maternal aesthetics or black maternal memories, *Birthing Black Mothers* brings to light the discussion on the association of

black motherhood with loss and trauma. Instead of reinforcing this association, Nash skilfully demonstrates that black motherhood is much more than the pain associated with it, being permeated with affection, solidarity, creativity and joy. In particular, the work brings forward a new representation of black motherhood as a locus of black life, precisely as something that must be maintained, preserved and celebrated, not because of its ability to reproduce, but because of its ability to speak of a distinct and urgent position.

Overall, the publication is a very timely contribution to the field of gender studies, particularly on social representations commonly related to black women. The different approaches and analysis methodologies used by the author, with interviews and document analysis, make the publication extremely attractive and easy to read, both for scholars from different areas of knowledge and for those people who want to know more about the reflections that have been about maternity and black women.

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