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Review of *Black Feminist Mothering in 21st Century Literature: I Am Not Your Mammy* by Nicole Carr, Routledge, 2025, 166 pp. ISBN: 9781032719993

As Mikki Kendall posits, “It’s not silencing, or bullying, or toxic to refuse to make anyone else’s comfort more important than our lives or the lives of our children. We’re not here to be Mammy” (10). Kendall’s sentiment is strongly emphasized in Nicole Carr’s book *Black Feminist Mothering in 21st Century Literature: I Am Not Your Mammy*. Carr’s book sheds light on an inspiring aspect of female actions and relationships: how women, specifically Black women, resist the dehumanizing stereotypes and foster nurturing spaces for themselves and their communities.

The volume, available in open access, is part of the “Routledge Studies in African American Literature” series, which is dedicated to the critical exploration of African American literary works and cultural narratives. The book comprises an introduction and six chapters, in which the author portrays how Black women challenge the historically reductive stereotypes of them as mere caregivers or submissive figures. The Mammy stereotype present in the book’s title “was a means of neutralizing [B]lack women, presenting them as lacking agency, obedient, and grateful” (Hamad 49). Carr not only shows how the Mammy stereotype remains a persistent ideological tool for the exploitation of Black women’s labor but also dismantles the stereotype about both historical and contemporary figures by depicting multifaceted representations of Black females that reveal the complexities of Black women’s experiences and identities.

The author opens the introduction with references to the life of Butterfly McQueen (an actress known for her role as Prissy in *Gone with the Wind*) and uses her as an example of unacknowledged community mothering. The concept of *Black feminist mothering* is defined in the book as “the work required for ‘birthing new’ worlds” (1). The author clarifies how theoretical foundations from

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Patricia Hill Collins, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Joy James, and other scholars provide a framework for Black feminist mothering and explains which terms will be used interchangeably and why.

Chapter 1, “Riding with Death: Assata Shakur, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Revolutionary Black Matrilineal Consciousness,” derives its title from Jean-Michel Basquiat’s painting and uses “riding with death” as a metaphor for describing how Black women face reproductive violence. In this chapter, Carr presents Fannie Lou Hamer’s daughter dying due to healthcare discrimination as well as Hamer’s activism against forced sterilization. The author draws a connection between Hamer’s fight for reproductive justice under Jim Crow and the mistreatment of Black women by the healthcare system today. Assata Shakur’s story focuses on her prison experiences and “mothering” through poetry, community programs, and ancestral knowledge. The author argues that Shakur, in *Assata: An Autobiography* (a Black maternal manifesto and prison narrative), portrays Black female ancestors as oracles relaying information to new generations. The concepts of *Black matrilineal consciousness*, *politics of refusal*, and *high-risk anger* are explored. This chapter, like the subsequent ones, weaves in Carr’s own story—she discloses stories of her pregnancies to illustrate obstetric racism.

Chapter 2, “The Motherwork Continues: Merciful Mothering in the Black Lives Matter Era,” discusses *deathscapes/geographies of domination* and builds on Collins’ definition of *motherwork* to examine caregiving during the Black Lives Matter movement. Toya Graham’s pulling her son from protests after Freddie Gray’s killing and her “whupping” him, which went viral, is considered within a tradition of protective, sometimes controversial, mothering. Carr employs literary examples of Edward P. Jones’ *The Known World*, N. K. Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth* trilogy, and Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* to examine how fiction grapples with the legacy of slavery, parenting, and survival amid racial violence. The author draws comparisons between Frederick Douglass’ story of his mother’s absence and scarce visits and Henry’s perspective in *The Known World* as well as portrays difficulties in parenting during slavery, mainly lack of governance over one’s children as they are someone’s property and the detrimental impact of the owner’s violence on the parenting style, linking the problems from the novel with problems of present-day parents. Carr argues that the adverse circumstances in which Black people live are mirrored in the dystopian environmental problems depicted in *The Broken Earth* trilogy. She also asserts that “*The Broken Earth* may be categorized as an extended meditation on the negotiations, calculations, and miscalculations Black parents make under an exploitative system rivaling that of an American slaveholding society” (41). The brief commentary on *A Mercy* supports the chapter’s main points, and reproductive violence witnessed in real time is discussed.

Chapter 3, “Sisters in Bloom: Tending to the Garden of Sisterhood,” begins with references to Alice Walker and her *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, talks about *sisterwork* (mutual care between Black women), and defines *mother tongue* after Johnnie M. Stover, stating it will be applied to literary dimensions of letters of Black women writers. Chapter frames Phillis Wheatley-Peters’ friendship with Obour Tanner-Collins as an example of sisterwork and connects their 18th-century letters with Pat Parker and Audre Lorde’s correspondence, showing the continuity

of the mother tongue. The author draws parallels between Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Lorde's epistolary writing as spaces for healing and self-definition.

Chapter 4, "We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: Sisterwork in the Time of Betty, Coretta, and Myrlie," portrays the friendship of Betty Shabazz, Coretta Scott King, and Myrlie Evers-Williams after the assassinations of their husbands, as well as examines how the women navigated public grief, political pressure, and societal expectations. Carr argues, borrowing Lorde's phrase, that "learning how to 'mother ourselves'" (96) is vital for sustaining activist women. The chapter references concepts such as *mother wound*, *blackpain*, and *artificial distances*. The literary aspect of this chapter is largely limited to Lorde and Parker's letters and poetry and the commentary is rather brief.

In Chapter 5, "I Am Not My Brother's Keeper: Black Women M(o)thering Themselves," Carr explores contemporary cases such as Korryn Gaines and Megan Thee Stallion to explore the mother wound (lack of protection within one's community). The idea of *gendered ideologies of victimhood* and *Black patriarchal stealth* are presented as well. Carr explores intraracial politics and explores how sometimes Black women have to prioritize self-care over taking care of men. The author presents, in this chapter, "Black feminist mothering as the process by which we memorialize Black female lives beyond the headlines" (101). Elaine Brown's autobiography *A Taste of Power*, Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as well as Carr's own experiences, are the focal elements that contextualize examined issues.

The final part of the book, Chapter 6: "I Am Not Your Mammy: Kamala Harris and the Politics of Refusal," whose title links with the book's subtitle, is mainly an examination of Shirley Chisholm, Condoleezza Rice, and Kamala Harris' political careers, showing how it is possible to both resist and adopt harmful power structures. Carr illustrates the notion that in politics, Black women are often presented as saviors, yet at the same time, they are often denied leadership or autonomy. The limited literary analysis in this chapter focuses on using Morrison's *Sula* as a framework for understanding ambition, identity, and community accountability. This chapter ends with a commentary on the 2024 presidential election, bringing the book to a close, as there is no separate conclusion or coda that recapitulates the provided examinations and links all the separate chapters into one whole by showing connections, reflecting on implications, or pointing to future research. Instead, the closing argument seems to be embedded in the ending of the last chapter.

The book draws heavily on Black feminist theorists, incorporates cultural criticism, and applies a Black feminist lens to literature, historical figures, and both past and present events, showing how Black women's experiences and labor are often marginalized. By interweaving literary analysis with broader social and political issues, Carr provides a critical exploration of the selected texts. While rooted in literary criticism, the book is an interdisciplinary study; the author's approach extends beyond traditional literary criticism into areas of activism and social theory. The literary works examined serve to explore real-world issues but often merely provide a backdrop for the main analysis.

The title of the book suggests that its primary focus will be literary analysis of 21st-century literature, but the content leans more toward cultural theory, historical case studies, and Carr's personal narrative than to sustained textual literary analysis. The provided analysis frequently uses the selected texts as illustrative examples rather than conducting close readings. This lack of formal literary criticism stands in stark contrast with the book's title, which is often overshadowed by discussions of political figures, historical movements, and personal experiences of the author. Moreover, although the author does engage with literature, most of these are 20th-century texts, which means that the book does not exclusively—or even predominantly—analyze 21st-century literature, as the title suggests.

The style of writing is clear and engaging, but sometimes the frequent shifting between literary analysis and examination of historical or contemporary events can be experienced as slightly chaotic. Although most sources are cited correctly, there are numerous instances throughout the book (for example, pages 2, 5, 8, 19, 21) where a direct quote lacks a citation. One source, "Reproductive Justice" (page 8), has a citation in a different style than the style of other referenced sources. Moreover, this source is not in the bibliography provided at the end of the chapter (even though in the text we have a title and reference to the supposed authors), and it is not the only source referenced in the text but not included in the bibliographies, which are separate for each chapter. Sometimes, for example on page 19, there is a quote without a source reference, but a person is mentioned as a way of attributing the quote. However, no work ascribed to that person is provided in the bibliography; thus, the reader has no way of finding the origin of the quotation in question. There are quotes that are provided multiple times, and the citation is not always provided, as with the quote defining motherwork, which appears in the introduction (page 2), chapter 1 (page 22), and chapter 2 (page 33), but the proper citation is provided only on page 33; thus, the reader is in the dark as to the source of the quote throughout most of its use.

Overall, Nicole Carr's book is a vital source of information that provides important observations on the lives and struggles of Black women in the United States. The book's main aim seems to be to reclaim and redefine Black mothering as a force for survival as well as liberation, rejecting stereotypes and making visible the breadth of care work done by Black women in literature, politics, and everyday life. Autoethnographic storytelling is not a typical component of academic monographs. The author's firsthand experiences with the examined concepts and their incorporation into the academic text can be seen as both beneficial (providing validation for made observations and allowing readers to see perspectives not always available to them) and detrimental (one could argue a lack of scientific objectivity) to an academic text. The issues with quoting could be easily resolved by more detailed editorial work, but the fact that the title's literary emphasis and temporal scope may give a misleading impression of the proportion of actual literary criticism devoted to recent literature is not easily solved. The work itself is important, informative, and approachable, but the title-content misalignment may lead to intended readers missing the book and those expecting an in-depth literary examination (as the book is part of "Routledge Studies in African American Literature") being disenchanted with the content.

Works Cited

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