

# Bereaved Black Mothers and Maternal Activism in the Racial State

Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.

—Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*

Honor your son and his life, not the circumstances of his alleged transgressions. I have always said that Trayvon was not perfect. But no one can ever convince me that my son deserved to be stalked and murdered. No one can convince you that Michael deserved to be executed.

—Sybrina Fulton, letter to the Brown family, *Time*

THE DEATH OF A BELOVED COMPELS US to find new meanings in a permanently altered reality. For some Black mothers, grief over the violent and unexpected death of their child can lead to activism to change unjust social relations. Here, I speak of maternal grief as “public motherhood” rather than as a private expression of pain.<sup>1</sup> A public expression of grief, as noted by Judith Butler in the epigraph, can furnish a

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1. See Lorelle Semley, “Public Motherhood in West Africa as Theory and Practice,” *Gender and History* 24, no. 3 (November 2012): 600–16.

type of political community. In the United States, maternal activism is evidenced by Mothers of the Movement, a group comprised of African American women whose children have been unjustifiably and violently killed.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, for some bereaved Black mothers, the transformative possibilities of maternal politics informed by grief often emerge from the everyday impacts of structural racial violence. Some Black parents mourn their children who are entrapped in “punishing circuits of surveillance, containment, repression, and disposability,” which sometimes result in their deaths.<sup>3</sup> Mothers of the Movement and Black Lives Matter articulate the concern that the disposability of Black lives is driven, in part, by the economic and racial injustice that sustains capitalism at the nexus of race and the manufactured fear of Blackness.<sup>4</sup>

In recent years, an alarming number of Black men and women have been killed in the United States. Many of these deaths have resulted from, although they are not limited to, Black people’s encounters with law enforcement agents and armed private citizens. In view of violence as a social problem, attempts have been made to upend its root causes. In addition to programs and policies—most recently, former President Obama’s My Brother’s Keeper initiative to provide opportunities for racialized young men—efforts include activism on the part of bereaved mothers and fathers to make sense of the deaths of their children and to

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2. See Will Drabold, “Meet the Mothers of the Movement,” *Time*, July 26, 2016, <http://time.com/4423920/dnc-mothers-movement-speakers>. The Mothers of the Movement, listed here with their respective child’s name in parenthesis, are Sybrina Fulton (Trayvon Martin), Lesley McSpadden (Michael Brown), Gwen Carr (Eric Garner), Geneva Reed-Veal (Sandra Bland), Cleopatra Pendleton-Cowley (Hadiya Pendleton), Maria Hamilton (Dontré Hamilton), and Lucia McBath (Jordan Davis). Among other goals, the Mothers of the Movement aim to advocate for an end to gun violence and to promote criminal justice reform.
  3. Henry A. Giroux, *Disposable Youth: Racialized Memories and the Culture of Cruelty* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 3.
  4. Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Travis Linneman, Tyler Wall, and Edward Green, “The Walking Dead and Killing State: Zombification and the Normalization of Police Violence,” *Theoretical Criminology* 18, no. 4 (2014): 506–27; Barbara Ransby, “Ella Taught Me: Shattering the Myth of the Leaderless Movement,” *Colorlines*, June 29, 2015; Sidney M. Willhelm, “Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Experience in America,” *Journal of Black Studies* 10, no. 1 (1979): 3–19.

advocate for legal and social change. As well, in the interest of ensuring that we not lose sight of the number of Black women who have also been killed, in May 2015, the African American Policy Forum launched the #SayHerName campaign.

This article addresses how some Black mothers whose children have been killed by legal and extralegal violence in a country where racism is integral to both governmentality and social life take up maternal activism to articulate their own political subjectivity for justice. In this article, I conceptualize political subjectivity and its transformative possibilities in relational terms with respect to dead Black men and Black women's affective and intimate connections to them as mothers. I do so with the knowledge that Black women, especially those related to Black men whose deaths are widely publicized, can be vilified or lauded for their ties to these men depending on how they are represented in the media and popular culture, and that this representation further complicates how women are able to grieve.<sup>5</sup>

How bereaved Black mothers mobilize maternal grief can be further conceptualized as political subjectivity by the view that "subjectivity implies the *emotional* experience of a *political* subject... caught up in a world of violence, state authority and pain" and by how this maternal subject responds to such a world.<sup>6</sup> Black women's maternal grief is, therefore, a public feeling insofar as "political identities are implicit within structures of feeling, sensibilities, [and] everyday forms of cultural expression and affiliation."<sup>7</sup> Here, I suggest that the public feeling that engenders the trauma of Black mothers' pain and their motivations for resistance rests on traces of plantation slavery that strove to deny Black knowledge and self-worth and to exclude Black women and men from organized political participation.

I argue further that the politics of Black motherhood are shaped by violence against Black women in the racial state. This is a type of violence that Achilles Mbembe describes as necropolitics, the sovereign's

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5. See Jennifer Nash, "Unwidowing: Rachel Jeantel, Black Death, and the 'Problem' of Black Intimacy," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41, no. 4 (2016): 751–74.
  6. T. M. Luhrmann, "Subjectivity," *Anthropological Theory* 6, no. 3 (2006): 346 (italics in original).
  7. Ann Cvetkovich, "Public Feelings," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 459–68.

power over life and death, the roots of which Mbembe locates in the technologies of enslavement.<sup>8</sup> Not only was necropolitical violence evident in the plantation economy, in recent times, it is manifested in what Stephen Dillon has described as the “afterlife of slavery” in order to articulate how vestiges of the past are evident in the lives of Black people in the present in the US racial state.<sup>9</sup> As such, this paper moves between the past and the present to argue that Black women’s grief is borne of a suffering that is located not just in the singularity of the deaths of their children in contemporary times, but in the longer temporality of violent racial practices that have ensnared, and continue to ensnare, Black lives. In locating my arguments in the past-present framework, I am able to address the historical dimensions of Black motherhood in the racial state, while also providing a more contemporary analysis of how Black maternal activism challenges violence against Black children, both dead and living, in such a racial state. In addressing Black women’s maternal activism, the article examines media accounts of how two Black women whose children were murdered turned their grief and anger into activism. They are Lucia McBath, mother of Jordan Davis, and Sybrina Fulton, mother of Trayvon Martin, both of whose children were killed in encounters with armed private citizens.

A focus on bereaved mothers does not suggest that fathers and extended family members are outliers in the expression of grief; nor is it my view that grief is exclusive in a range of complex emotions felt by the bereaved person. While grief is not exclusively maternal, it is a differently gendered emotion with unique implications for women’s activism.<sup>10</sup> In fact, men are hailed into cultural tropes about masculinity and

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8. Achilles Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40.
  9. Stephen Dillon, “Possessed by Death: The Neoliberal-Carceral State, Black Feminism, and the Afterlife of Slavery,” *Radical History Review* 112 (Winter 2012): 113–25.
  10. E. Ashby Plant, et al., “The Gender Stereotyping of Emotions,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 24 (2000): 81–92; Judith M. Stillion and Susan B. Noviello, “Living and Dying in Different Worlds: Gender Differences in Violent Death and Grief,” *Illness, Crisis and Loss* 9, no. 3 (2001): 247–59; Anne C. Woodrick, “A Lifetime of Mourning: Grief Work among Yucatec Maya Women,” *Ethos* 23, no. 4 (1995): 401–23; Lorraine Bayard de Volo, “The Dynamics of Emotion: Grief, Gender, and Collective Identity in Revolutionary Nicaragua,” *Mobilization: An International Journal* 11, no. 4 (December 2006): 461–74.

fatherhood that are differently produced from those that frame expectations about femininity and motherhood. And, importantly, by giving and preserving life, Black mothers threaten anti-Black necropolitics in the racial state.<sup>11</sup> It is for these reasons that this article locates the gendered contours of activism within the domain of maternalism.

The arguments in the article unfold as follows: Part one discusses the conceptualization of the racial state and how Black motherhood is governed within it. Here, I address how contemporary forms of governmentality regarding Black motherhood are rooted in the altered continuity of slavery that originated in the plantation economy, thus expanding on my earlier point that anti-Black violence transcends a fixed temporality. Part two examines the epistemological foundations of maternal politics that inform how women challenge the injustice to which they and their children are subjected. Part three analyzes two narratives by two bereaved Black mothers, named above, that appeared in the media. In this section, I look at how each mother articulated her reaction to the death of her child in ways that facilitated making sense of a tragic event and that led to activism. Although this article uses specific examples of how two African American mothers take up maternal bereavement, it draws more broadly on Black women's maternal politics to illustrate that while Black women live heterogeneous lives, the advocacy that they engage in as maternal subjects is remarkably similar, in part, because of the transnationality of anti-Black, gendered violence. Specifically, it is in this section that I more fully address how I view the women's activism as an expression of political subjectivity informed by Black feminist praxis. Part four of the paper provides a summary, references maternal activism as an expansion of the democratic imagination, and concludes with remarks about the limits and possibilities of this type of activism in an increasingly hostile racial environment.

#### PART ONE: BLACK MOTHERHOOD IN THE RACIAL STATE

The modern racial state attributes both symbolic and material meanings to reproductive and laboring bodies; it mobilizes sexual, gendered, and other forms of identities in the production and treatment of racial

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11. Christen A. Smith, "Facing the Dragon: Black Mothering, Sequelae, and Gendered Necropolitics in the Americas," *Transforming Anthropology* 24, no. 1 (April 2016): 31–48.

subjects, and its practices are legally codified in targeted and racial forms of governance.<sup>12</sup> Because state formation is intricately threaded with the politics of race, “every state institution is a racial institution,” with potentially deadly consequences, social and physical, for Black people.<sup>13</sup> Anti-Black racism and the practice of racial violence are compatible with, and central to, liberal democracy, so that rather than being indicative of its malaise, the extralegal deaths of Black men and women in the United States indicate the resilience of American democracy.<sup>14</sup> By proposing this argument, Tommy J. Curry signals the centrality of death in social relations and as a disciplinary technology for staking out the racial boundaries of citizenship. This being the case, the murders of their children by state agents and private citizens raise questions about how mothers attempt to reclaim the value of their children’s lives and express themselves as political subjects in a deeply misogynistic, racial system of governance.

In racial states, laws and policies shape Black motherhood and the meanings of childhood in response to the shifting demands of synchronized market and racial ideologies. Such laws and policies are further framed by colonial thinking related to belonging and citizenship in the nation-state. Consider, for example, the recruitment of Black women from the Caribbean to work as domestics in Canada in the 1950s and 1960s. These women were recruited to meet specific Canadian labor and economic needs, but their entrance to Canada was simultaneously regulated by stringent immigration rules and ideologies inflected by gendered racism.<sup>15</sup> For example, labor and immigration policies required Black women of childbearing years to declare themselves childless and,

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12. David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002); Charles W. Mills, “Racial Liberalism,” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (October 2008): 1380–97.
  13. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 83–84; Priya Kanadaswamy, “Gendering Racial Formation,” in *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Daniel Martinez HoSang, Oneka LaBennett, and Laura Pulido (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 23–43.
  14. Tommy J. Curry, “Michael Brown and the Need for a Genre Study of Black Male Death and Dying,” *Theory and Event* 17, no. 3 (2014).
  15. Erica Lawson, “The Gendered Working Lives of Seven Jamaican Women in Canada: A Story about ‘Here’ and ‘There’ in a Transnational Economy,” *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 138–56.

therefore, “job ready” within a framework of beliefs that constructed Canada as a Eurocentric nation where Black bodies must be managed. The denial of their children is indicative of the convergence of anti-Black racism and an imagined white nation in the governance of Black motherhood and access to citizenship rights. Similarly, moral panic in the United States over crack cocaine in the 1980s led lawmakers in South Carolina to prosecute mothers, most of whom were Black, for drug use.<sup>16</sup> In more recent times, we have witnessed an increase in violence against queer and transgendered Black women, including those who are mothers, who transgress heteropatriarchal norms.<sup>17</sup> Thus the criminalization of Black mothers and the implementation of multi-faceted carceral policies to manage them is an example of political rationality as governance. Conceptualized as such, this article addresses how, in an increasingly militarized “democratic” project, bereaved Black women devise counterstrategies to express themselves as political subjects.

The racial ruling of Black motherhood illuminates how the gendered and racialized labor of slavery informs contemporary practices. In “Necropolitics,” Mbembe argues that enslavement within the plantation economy is one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation by the state and the platform for modern technologies of terror in racial states. Some experimentations, for example, took place on the bodies of enslaved women without regard for pain because they were considered property, and those who owned property had rights within the Enlightenment framework of liberalism, including the right to do grievous harm to their property with impunity.<sup>18</sup> Dialoguing with Michel

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16. Dorothy Roberts, “Unshackling Black Motherhood,” *Michigan Law Review* 95, no. 4 (February 1997): 938–64; Dorothy Roberts, “Complicating the Triangle of Race, Class, and State: The Insights of Black Feminists,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 10 (August 2014): 1776–82.
  17. Darnell L. Moore, “When Black Lesbians Are Killed by Black Men,” *Out Magazine*, March 20, 2014, <http://www.out.com/news-opinion/2014/03/20/when-black-lebrities-are-killed-black-men>; Samantha Michaels, “It’s Incredibly Scary to be a Transgender Woman of Color Right Now,” *Mother Jones*, June 26, 2015, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/06/transgender-women-disproportionately-targeted-violent-hate-crimes>.
  18. In the mid-nineteenth century, Dr. James Marion Sims, recognized as the father of modern gynecology, experimented on enslaved Black women to repair vesico-vaginal fistulas. Sims is reported to have perfected the technique by operating on Anarcha, an enslaved woman, twenty-nine times before moving on to assist European women. See Martia G. Goodson,

Foucault's view of biopower, Mbembe argues that because biopolitics is explicated through the rationalities of the Enlightenment, it cannot adequately address the re/creation of death worlds. Mbembe utilizes the concept of necropower to expand the biopolitical and to examine race and death at the site of the plantation; it was within the plantation that enslaved peoples experienced an expulsion from humanity through the "loss of a home, loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political rights" and thus were relegated to a state of exception.<sup>19</sup> "As an instrument of labor," argues Mbembe, "the slave has a price and as property, he or she has value. His or her labor is needed and therefore used. The slave is therefore kept alive but in a *state of injury*, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity.... Slave life, in many ways, is a form of death in life."<sup>20</sup>

Necropower, in the context of property and labor, was deeply gendered, and Black women's reproductive capacities were made essential to the declining plantation economy within this necropolitical network. In Jamaica, for example, both slave owners and abolitionists enacted their desires at the site of women's reproduction: the former viewed enslaved women as bodies for procreating more property, while the latter viewed them as birthing future free laborers.<sup>21</sup> Historical records further show that in places such as Jamaica, enslaved women were offered rewards or threatened with punishment to entice them to have more children for profit.<sup>22</sup> These contestations at the site of the re/productive body foregrounded larger questions about freedom, captivity, and the meaning of being human, questions that, today, remain unresolved in liberal democracies with respect to racialized and gendered bodies.

Enslaved Black women birthed already-commodified children who existed in necropolitical systems of power. This allowed for some type of life, but lives situated at the nexus of social death and the ever-present possibility of physical death. Death itself and the multidimensional

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"Enslaved Africans and Doctors in South Carolina," *Journal of the National Medical Association* 95, no. 3 (2003): 225.

19. Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 21.

20. Ibid. (italics in original).

21. Sasha Turner, "Home-Grown Slaves: Women, Reproduction, and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, Jamaica 1788–1807," *Journal of Women's History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 39–62.

22. Ibid.

meanings attributed to it shaped social relations in the plantation such that life and death were deeply intertwined with motherhood.<sup>23</sup> That was the case in slavery and this is the case now, but in different ways and to varying contextual degrees in racial states that engender deep anxieties about the governance of Black mothers and their children. Black maternal politics confronts this type of racialized governance from a Black feminist perspective through what Patricia Hill Collins describes as Black women's self-valuation and self-definition.<sup>24</sup> These perspectives refer to how Black women challenge dominant knowledge-validation processes that manufacture stereotypes about their inner lives (as mothers) and how they engage in meaning-making on their own terms.

To be sure, the institution of Black motherhood does not hold the same meaning today as it did on the plantation. But the centrality of death to the social order of the plantation, what Vincent Brown describes as "mortuary politics," is variably evident in how the racial state seeks to manage Black motherhood today, as well as what to do about their children in societies that no longer need their labor.<sup>25</sup> My argument here is informed by Didier Fassin's proposition that it is useful to examine the lingering and malleable effects of historical violence, what he calls its trace, to understand how contemporary forms of violence on the body are daily enacted in social life to shape laws and public policy.<sup>26</sup> Today, the traces of plantation life are evident on Black women's bodies in how they are produced as burdensome to the conflicting desires and anxieties of the US racial state.

This reality is illuminated in, for example, the iterations since the 1980s of the "welfare queen," which conveys the economic disposability of Black women and their children. And in recent years, in vitriolic language that describes former First Lady Michelle Obama as an "angry, caustic, abusive, racist, sharp-tongued, anti-white and anti-American

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23. Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
24. Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): 14–32.
25. Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*.
26. Didier Fassin, "The Trace: Violence, Truth, and the Politics of the Body," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (July 2011): 281–98.

person.”<sup>27</sup> That Michelle Obama was named a “lady,” and self-identified as “mom-in-chief,” illuminates how she troubled these identities; she was deemed not to legitimately represent the Eurocentric and sentimentally gendered meanings embedded in them.<sup>28</sup> Thus, problematic discourses rooted in slavery continue to be mapped onto Black women’s bodies to clarify the operationalization of the trace, as well as the practices of racial formation.

As earlier stated, slavery has an afterlife.<sup>29</sup> And this afterlife continues to haunt Black motherhood through the regulatory practices that govern women’s reproduction and through the discourses of deservability that frame the murders of their children. This haunting is most clearly articulated by Assata Shakur, for whom “the affective, economic, racial, and gender politics of chattel slavery returned under a neoliberal-carceral state.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Shakur—exiled in Cuba for alleged crimes against the United States—clarifies “how [Black] people constitutively haunt a new phase of the life of global capitalism” in ways that are remarkably similar to their experiences within the plantation economy.<sup>31</sup> In his analysis of Shakur’s powerful article “Women in Prison: How We Are,” Stephen Dillon writes, “If a critical genealogy of the prison leads us back to the coffle, the plantation, the sweatbox, and the slave ship, the market also leads us back to slavery’s economic, ontological, and epistemological technologies.”<sup>32</sup> For Shakur, this circulatory route means that, although slavery may have legally ended, freedom remains elusive

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27. Brittney Cooper, “A’n’t I a Lady?: Race Women, Michelle Obama and the Ever-Expanding Democratic Imagination,” *MELUS* 35, no. 4 (December 2010): 48–49.
28. *Ibid.*, 39–57.
29. Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Joy James, “Introduction: Democracy and Captivity,” in *The New Abolitionists: (Neo)Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*, ed. Joy James (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), xxi–xxl; Dale W. Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).
30. Quoted in Stephen Dillon, “Possessed by Death”; Assata Shakur and Joanne Cheshire, “Women in Prison: How We Are,” in *The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*, ed. Joy James (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 79–89.
31. Dillon, “Possessed by Death,” 116.
32. *Ibid.*, 118.

for African Americans whose bodies bear the scars of new types of incarceration; who are subjected to humiliating strip-searches in prison that are reminiscent of the auction block, and whose kinship relations are destroyed or reshaped by the contemporary prison-industrial complex.<sup>33</sup>

Articulating a Black feminist perspective by insisting that “slavery is central to the economic, political and social present,” Shakur argues that incarceration is not limited to the confines of the prison but is also evident in the criminalization of bodies and in the production of poverty within the market economy, both of which rely on gendered racism.<sup>34</sup> It stands to reason that Black maternal activism, much like the Black Lives Matter movement, responds to the legacies of slavery as described by Shakur to craft a particular type of maternal-political subjectivity. It is not by accident, for example, that some bereaved Black mothers who seek justice for their dead children also advocate for prison reform. I turn now to a more specific and contemporary discussion about how bereaved Black mothers take up the foundational practices of maternal political activism to challenge the social or physical deaths of their children.

#### PART TWO: MATERNAL POLITICS IN THE RACIAL STATE

For four days in September 1955, thousands of people in the city of Chicago filed past the glass-covered casket of Emmett Till, a fifteen-year-old African American boy. Emmett Till had been tortured and murdered by white supremacists on August 28, 1955, in Money, Mississippi, for allegedly whistling at a white woman. This tragic incident comprises an important part of US history and continues to crystalize the devaluation of Black life in a state enmeshed in necropolitics. Emmett Till was killed by ordinary white citizens empowered by the legal, cultural, and social practices of the state. Mamie Till decided to place her son’s mutilated corpse and unrecognizable face on public display, a decision that led to accusations of transgressing the sentimentalized “good mother” construct.<sup>35</sup>

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33. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Julia Sudbury, “Ceiling Black Bodies: Black Women in the Global Prison Industrial Complex,” *Feminist Review* 80 (2005): 162–79.
  34. Dillon, “Possessed by Death,” 116.
  35. Ruth Feldstein, “I Wanted the Whole World to See’: Race, Gender, and Constructions of Motherhood in the Death of Emmett Till,” in *Mothers*

Judith Butler writes, “Certain faces must be admitted into public view, and must be seen . . . for some keener sense of the value of life . . . to take hold.”<sup>36</sup> By showing his face and insisting that, “I wanted the whole world to see,” a bereaved Mamie Till sought to reclaim her son’s humanity by bringing him into a community of mourners.<sup>37</sup> Butler argues that it is through collective mourning that we sharpen the “keener sense of life we need to oppose violence.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the chilling photos of Emmett Till’s mutilated body illuminated the normalization of violence in the southern United States and intensified public anger about the socially organized and legally sanctioned cruelty to which African Americans were daily subjected. Mamie Till’s decision, which is an example of maternal politics, is widely credited for quickening the pace of the civil rights movement. But hers was a cruel experience that could only be fully indexed by a Black mother and a community of African American mourners intimately familiar with the fragility of Black lives and the discretionary use of death technologies against them. The use of these technologies and their continued relevance to the emerging US democratic project continue to inform Black maternal praxis today. That is, Black women now, much like Mamie Till then, must humanize their children who are constructed as “thugs” by state perpetrators of violence to rationalize the deservability of their deaths, at the same time as challenging anti-Black violence through politically focused, maternally informed activism.

Maternal politics is a contested epistemological and activist site. It is grounded in lived realities and political economies and is informed by cultural practices and meanings attributed to motherhood in a society.<sup>39</sup> Maternal politics rejects essentialist categorizations and is, therefore, reflective of women’s complex and contradictory locations. Some mothers sacrifice their sons (and daughters) to war, but may also use their maternal position to call for peace; others use their maternal status

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*and Motherhood: Readings in American History*, ed. Rima D. Apple and Janet Golden (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997), 131–70.

36. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), xvii.
37. Feldstein, “I Wanted the Whole World to See.”
38. Butler, *Precarious Life*, xviii–xix.
39. Sara Ruddick, “Maternal Thinking,” in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, ed. Andrea O’Reilly (Toronto: Demeter Press, 2007), 96–113.

to challenge environmental destruction, citing concerns for living children and future generations; still others participate in pronatalist motherhood to further nationalist projects and promilitary agendas; and both state and nonstate actors valorize those mothers who sacrifice their children in conflicts believed to be for the “greater good” of the nation.<sup>40</sup>

Black women’s maternal politics implicates their bodies at the intersection of the physical and the emotional to form the basis of political subjectivity. Like other mothers who engage in maternal activism, their political subjectivity is struggled for, in, and through, a judicial-political system based on what Charles Mills describes as the racial contract that governs authority over the individual.<sup>41</sup> Black mothers are charged both with grieving the deaths of their children as well as confronting the tropes that position them as deserving to die. The epistemological foundations of bereaved maternal politics are reflective of a Black feminist praxis whereby Black women identify structural and intersecting forms of violence and devise ways to challenge them. Bereaved Black mothers, both social and biological, convey an embodied Black feminist standpoint informed by how the racial project that was the plantation continues to operate within the modern militarized US state to justify the deaths of their children. Indeed, both Black and Indigenous women’s

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40. Lorraine Bayard de Volo, “Mobilizing Mothers for War: Cross-National Framing Strategies in Nicaragua’s Contra War,” *Gender and Society* 18, no. 6 (2004): 715–34; Nancy Scheper-Hughes, “Maternal Thinking and the Politics of War,” *Peace Review* 8, no. 3 (1996): 353–58; Susan Zeigler, “She Didn’t Raise her Boy to be a Slacker: Motherhood, Conscription, and the Culture of the First World War,” *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 1 (1996): 7–39.
- Terisa E. Turner and Leigh S. Brownhill, “Women’s Oil Wars in Nigeria,” *LABOUR, Capital and Society* 35, no. 1 (2002): 132–64; Terisa Turner and Leigh S. Brownhill, “Why Women Are at War with Chevron: Nigerian Subsistence Struggle against the International Oil Industry,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 39, no. 1–2 (2004): 63–93; Daphna Birenbaum-Carmeli, “The Politics of ‘The Natural Family’ in Israel: State Policy and Kinship Ideologies,” *Social Science and Medicine* 69, no. 7 (2009): 1018–24; O. Winckler, “The Failure of Pronatalism in Developed States ‘with Cultural-Ethnic Hegemony’: The Israeli Lesson,” *Population, Space, and Place* 14 (2008): 119–34.
- Rebecca Ann Otis, “Palestinian Women: Mothers, Martyrs, and Agents of Political Change” (PhD diss., University of Denver, 2011).
41. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

expressions of maternal activism respond to the legacies of colonial violence to press for some form of collective justice.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, maternal consciousness informs Black women's urgent need to flee from war and displacement or to pursue transnational employment opportunities. Such dislocating events reconfigure both the spatial and cultural meanings of motherhood and the daily practices of mothering.<sup>43</sup> Black women's responses to migratory pressures often entangle them in global circuits through immigration and economic policies that shape mothering activities across borders and the type of maternal activism that women undertake. For example, African mothers who, along with their children, were detained at the Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre in England engaged in "naked politics," removing their clothes to call attention to their plight and to challenge what Imogen Tyler has termed "regimes of citizenship."<sup>44</sup> Tyler interviewed these incarcerated women, one of whom explained that, "I took my clothes off because they treat us like animals. We're claiming asylum, we're not animals."<sup>45</sup> Likewise, in the Niger Delta, women who confronted oil companies such as Chevron/Texaco and Shell Petroleum about militarized violence and environmental destruction threatened to remove their clothes if their demands were not met. This public display, mostly done by elderly or married women and known as the "Curse of Nakedness," is thought to bring harm and shame to men.<sup>46</sup>

Tyler further argues that such maternal protest has the capacity to "materialise the hidden but constitutive grounds of biopolitical governance" that takes place on the racialized reproductive body.<sup>47</sup> Drawing

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42. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Lisa J. Udel, "Revision and Resistance: The Politics of Native Women's Motherwork," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 22, no. 2 (2001): 43–62.
  43. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila, "I'm Here, But I'm There': The Meanings of Latina Transnational Motherhood," *Gender and Society* 11, no. 5 (1997): 548–71; Sarah Horton, "A Mother's Heart Is Weighed Down with Stones: A Phenomenological Approach to the Experience of Transnational Motherhood," *Culture Medicine and Psychiatry* 33, no. 1 (2009): 21–40.
  44. Imogen Tyler, "Naked Protest: The Maternal Politics of Citizenship and Revolt," *Citizenship Studies* 17, no. 2 (2013): 211–26.
  45. Ibid., 211.
  46. Sokari Ekine, "Women's Responses to State Violence in the Niger Delta," *Feminist Africa* 10 (August 2008): 79–80.
  47. Tyler, "Naked Protest," 217.

on Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's theory of "bare life," whereby those detained by the state are isolated and stripped of all legal protections, Tyler posits that the women's naked protest took place in a "biopolitical context in which the bodies of non-citizen pregnant women and mothers have become sites of intensive management, criminalisation and control."<sup>48</sup> The intensive management of Black women, the reconfiguration of motherhood, and women's reduction to "bare life" are integral to the racial practices of the British state and to how gendered violence is enacted in processes that sustain the benefits of globalization for wealthy countries.

Therefore, if their reproductive bodies are enmeshed within the technologies of carcerality and reduced to bare life, it stands to reason that imprisoned African women in Yarl's Wood detention center would use their bodies and the (potential, limited) power accorded to motherhood as a last resort to call attention to their plight, to challenge the necropolitics of the sovereign British state, and, importantly, to keep their children alive. These are some of the lived experiences that shape the epistemological economy of a Black feminist maternal politic in racial states in an increasingly militarized transnational context.<sup>49</sup> How then do bereaved Black mothers of dead children engage in maternal activism to mourn their losses, humanize their children, and articulate political subjectivity? The following section of the paper addresses this question by analyzing how Lucia McBath and Sybrina Fulton channeled their grief over the deaths of their children into political activism. An examination of the narratives of these two mothers is a narrow snapshot of a

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48. Ibid., 216. Giorgio Agamben uses "bare life" to conceptualize the difference between those who are considered fully human within the state because of their participation in political life and those who are excluded because they have no political entitlements. Tyler inverts Agamben's theory to argue that the African women at Yarl's Wood who were stripped of rights and reduced to "bare life" actually claimed life and humanity by baring their maternal bodies thus making the point that they are "naked but alive."
  49. In late modernity, we are witnessing an intensification of militarized approaches to social problems that rely on the deaths of marginalized groups and individuals and to which racializing practices are central. These practices are located in the legacies of colonialism and enslavement. In recent years, we have witnessed the high-profile murders of African American men, such as Eric Garner and Michael Brown, and women such as Sandra Bland, incidents that indicate the legacies of the necropolitical plantation economy in the contemporary US settler state.

particular type of maternal thinking; it is by no means complete, and it is open to different interpretations, including to the application of different Black feminist explications. How these two mothers, and indeed other bereaved mothers not mentioned here, choose to express their grief as activism is an evolving experience for them, and I anticipate that their narratives in the near and distant future will change as they continue to adjust to, rather than “get over,” the deaths of their children. Such is the nature of grief and suffering. Furthermore, while I acknowledge that bereaved Black mothers take different approaches to activism, it is beyond the scope of this paper to conduct a comparative and contrasting analysis of how they do this.

**PART THREE:****BEREAVED AND POLITICIZED MOTHERS: TWO NARRATIVES***Lucia McBath and Jordan Davis*

“I am still called by the God I serve to walk this out.”<sup>50</sup> These are the words of Lucia McBath, an African American woman whose seventeen-year-old son, Jordan Davis, was shot and killed by Michael Dunn, a white private citizen, on November 23, 2012, at a gas station in Jacksonville, Florida. Her words express a belief in God as a source of strength that many African Americans in particular, and African-descendant people more generally, rely on to sustain them in times of crisis. According to the affidavit outlining the incident, Jordan Davis and three friends were playing loud music in their vehicle, and Davis was “threateningly” disrespectful to Dunn when asked to turn it down. A heated verbal exchange ensued and Dunn, claiming a fear for his life because he thought that Davis had a gun, fired into the vehicle and killed the young man. This incident is an example of the depth of white racial anxieties and the cultural fear of blackness, buttressed by stand-your-ground laws in some American states. For the purposes of this paper I am interested in how Lucia McBath expressed a maternally informed political identity by analyzing how she talked about her son in an article by Ta-Nehisi

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50. Ta-Nehisi Coates, “‘I Am Still Called by the God I Serve to Walk This Out’: A Conversation with Lucia McBath, Mother of Jordan Davis,” *The Atlantic*, February 25, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/02/i-am-still-called-by-the-god-i-serve-to-walk-this-out/284064>.

Coates published in the *Atlantic*; specifically, I will focus on how she attempts to humanize him and on the activism that she has engaged in to change gun laws.

Lucia McBath and Ron Davis, Jordan's father, have publicly discussed how they raised their son to respect the adults with whom he came into contact. Coates writes that, "Jordan Davis was . . . given a series of talks which McBath believes ultimately got him killed."<sup>51</sup> McBath is quoted in the article:

We always encouraged him to be strong. To speak out. . . . We tried to teach him to speak what you feel and think diplomatically. . . . Even in that case with Jordan and the car, I think that he was not as diplomatic as he could be. That does not let Michael Dunn off the hook. . . . But I say to myself as a mother, "I did not teach you and train you to do that. Adults are adults and you are still a child."<sup>52</sup>

In another interview with Coates, McBath recounted how Trayvon Martin's murder brought Stand Your Ground laws to her attention and prompted her to monitor her son more carefully:

I have to humble myself and say that I didn't think about [Stand Your Ground] much. . . . But I spent more time trying to prepare Jordan to be safe. Specifically being a young black male. I monitored what he did and who he was with.<sup>53</sup>

Ostensibly, these were all preemptive attempts to save Jordan's life. As strategic action, these conversations reflect the epistemology of maternal politics, the fact that mothering—especially when it relates to Black boys—can politicize women, and the negotiations Black parents engage in to manage the necropolitics of the racial state and its potentially deadly impact on their children.

In the documentary *The Murder of Emmett Till*, Mamie Till recalls that she had warned Emmett to be aware of the differences in racial

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51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

53. Ta-Nehisi Coates, "In God We Trust—But We Have Put Our Faith in Our Guns," *The Atlantic*, February 3, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/02/in-god-we-trust-but-we-have-put-our-faith-in-our-guns/283534>.

rules in Chicago, Illinois, where he had relatively more autonomy than he would have in Money, Mississippi. She recounts admonishing him to make sure that he did not make eye contact with white people and to get off the sidewalk so that a white person could pass by. But the purposes of these conversations with Black boys and girls are exceptionally challenging when these children are the symbolic manifestation of property in a society haunted by slavery and a decreased necessity for Black labor in a capitalist system.

Coates writes that McBath thinks that “what happened to Jordan in Jacksonville might not have happened in Atlanta [where he was from] where black people enjoyed some level of prestige and influence.... That this ultimately played into why he was killed.”<sup>54</sup> From this perspective, McBath evokes the tensions between the racial organization of space and the articulation of rights while suggesting that class takes on a bigger importance in Atlanta, Georgia, whereas race more prominently marks the body in Jacksonville, Florida. In the article, McBath speaks about her son’s life as an upper-middle-class kid who, Coates reports “lived in a three-story home in a cul-de-sac. That most of the children there had two parents. That original owners still lived in the development.... That Jordan Davis had access to all the other activities that every other kid in the neighborhood did, that he had not been deprived by divorce.”<sup>55</sup>

I argue that, in her interviews with Coates, Lucia McBath expresses herself as a bereaved, politicized maternal subject who still believes in the “American Dream” and the promise of the American ideal, in large part, because of few options to do otherwise. She claims motherhood as a way to challenge problematic tropes about Black mothers, she speaks against the discursive representation of the single Black mother who is thought to raise irresponsible children, and she describes her son as a young man with a bright future. It was important for McBath to reclaim her son as a typical American middle-class teenager in the context of discourses that seek to justify the deaths of young Black men for real or fabricated acts of crime. As a result of the murder of her son, Lucia McBath became a spokesperson for Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America and

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54. Coates, “I Am Still Called.”

55. Ibid.

an advocate for repealing Stand Your Ground laws, thus extending her private expression of maternal grief into political activism.

*Sybrina Fulton and Trayvon Martin*

In her painfully beautiful letter of support to the Brown family, whose eighteen-year-old Black son, Michael Brown, was killed by a white police officer on August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, Sybrina Fulton wrote,

Honor your son and his life, not the circumstances of his alleged transgressions. I have always said that Trayvon was not perfect. But no one can ever convince me that my son deserved to be stalked and murdered. No one can convince you that Michael deserved to be executed.<sup>56</sup>

That Trayvon was “stalked and murdered” and Michael was “executed” points to sharp descriptive differences between some bereaved Black mothers and state representatives in how each characterizes the deaths of Black children and youths in these deadly encounters. This is most evident in the fact that the criminal justice system released George Zimmerman, the man charged with the murder of Trayvon Martin, and Darren Wilson, the police officer accused of killing Michael Brown, both of whose actions were deemed to be legally justifiable.

By insisting that Michael Brown’s life should be honored, Fulton criticizes the mobilization of state apparatuses to scandalize Black men by publicly constructing them as “thugs.” Recognizing these discrediting actions as part of a public narrative to which bereaved Black families of murdered children must respond, Fulton’s criticism is an expression of oppositional knowledge located in a Black feminist standpoint. Specifically, the history of racial injustice in the United States fashions a different material and epistemological reality for Black women from which to assess and resist dominant knowledge forms.<sup>57</sup> Trayvon Martin was murdered because George Zimmerman racially profiled him, believing that he did not belong on private property in a gated community; Michael Brown was killed by a police officer who worked in a department where racial hostility was openly expressed as a form

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56. Sybrina Fulton, “Trayvon Martin’s Mom: ‘If They Refuse to Hear Us, We Will Make Them Feel Us,’” *Time*, August 19, 2014, <http://time.com/3136685/trayvon-sybrina-fulton-ferguson/>.

57. Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within.”

of camaraderie among civil service workers in Ferguson, Missouri, and where these workers, including the police, preyed on Black citizens to raise money for the city.<sup>58</sup> These are the narratives that frame a critically informed understanding of why these young men are dead.

As critical theory, Black feminism articulates knowledge that criticizes the management of populations through terror and life-ending technologies to tell a counternarrative about neoliberalism, and it situates anti-Black racism in the framework of interlocking oppressions located in capitalism. As such, the analyses of the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, and other Black men and women, are informed by the shared, lived experiences of a history of racial violence and by the manifestations of racial formation in the United States. Expressing a maternal counterepistemology to racial terror, Sybrina Fulton lodges a Black feminist critique of the rush to represent Black youth as dangerous by insisting on speaking about them as sons of loving parents and families, much like Mamie Till did when she forced the world to reckon with images of her son's brutalized body. If, as Jacques Rancière argues, "politics ought to be defined on its own terms, as a mode of... practice by a specific kind of subject deriving from a particular form of reason," then the embodied and personalized representation of dead young men as valued sons of loving mothers (and fathers) opens up a different type of democratic possibility contoured by maternal affect.<sup>59</sup> In other words, Rancière points us to the contextual logic of politics, and this logic, for the purposes of this article, is evident in the actions of women who seek justice for their dead children.

In expressing her vision of political mobilization to challenge the murders of Black children, Fulton writes, "If they [lawmakers and leaders] refuse to hear us, we will make them feel us... feeling us means feeling our pain; imagining our plight as parents of slain children."<sup>60</sup> Arguably, Fulton expresses an affective maternal politic informed by the embodiment of pain and the potential that, extended outward, this

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58. Conor Friedersdorf, "Ferguson's Conspiracy against Black Citizens," *The Atlantic*, March 5, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2015/03/ferguson-as-a-criminal-conspiracy-against-its-black-residents-michael-brown-department-of-justice-report/386887>.
59. Jacques Rancière, Davide Panagia, and Rachel Bowlby, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Theory and Event* 5, no. 3 (2001): Thesis 1.
60. Fulton, "Trayvon Martin's Mom."

expression can lead to just laws emanating from the state in collaboration with Black civil society. In so doing, her statement dialogues with Rancière's view that "politics cannot be defined on the basis of any pre-existing subject"<sup>61</sup> but rather unfolds in a relationship between the contradictory terms that define the subject and those who rule her. Indeed, Black women live with the tensions between their desire for justice and the apparatuses of the racial state that encroach on their daily existence. Moreover, parents' affective relationship with their children in life and in death brings about a particular type of relational and political subjectivity that motivates them to act in the world to change the contradictory terms by which they are governed in the US racial state. And these politically conscious subjects press for some form of justice from those who hold legal power but who know nothing about the pain of mourning a dead Black child in the hope that they will act to change the structural-legal framework that sustains anti-Black racial violence.

That maternal politics extends beyond the biological to include a social understanding of motherhood is evident in Fulton's vision: "I will support you and your efforts to seek justice for your Michael and the countless other Michaels and Trayvons. Sean Bell. Hadiya Pendleton. The Aurora shooting victims. The list is too numerous to adequately mention them all."<sup>62</sup> By calling out the names of the dead, Fulton evokes a Black feminist framing of the shared concerns of Black women, the needs of their communities, and the broader society. Indeed, both Lucia McBath (Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America) and Sybrina Fulton (Trayvon Martin Foundation) have extended their political activities to change gun laws (among other demands) in an effort to transform a militarized culture and reduce the number of gun-related murders in the United States.

#### PART FOUR: CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, I have argued that maternal politics informed by bereavement is expressed through the lessons from profound pain caused by the death of a beloved child. I have also discussed maternal politics as a counternarrative to the view that political legitimacy is only possible

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61. Rancière, Panagia, and Bowlby, "Ten Theses on Politics": Thesis 1.

62. Fulton, "Trayvon Martin's Mom."

by engaging practices that validate the prescribed performance of citizenship. In reality, maternal politics shaped by bereavement expands on what is described as the “democratic imagination,” a concept that is “fabricate[d] from our experiences in civic life along with those in other domains such as work, family, and neighborhood. We use the democratic imagination to tell us when and why to get involved in politics, how to do so, and when and how to stay away.”<sup>63</sup> From this perspective, I have addressed the ways in which the public expression of private grief shapes a particular type of democratic imagination that responds to injustice. And I have argued that maternal activism, informed by a Black feminist epistemology, is relational rather than individualized by pointing to Fulton’s letter to the Brown family, and to both Fulton’s and McBath’s involvement in respective organizations established to address gun violence as an urgent social problem.

Sadly, as this paper unfolded, the list of bereaved Black mothers grew, Donald Trump became the president of the United States, and the trial of Michael T. Slager, the police officer who shot and killed Walter Scott, a fifty-year-old African American man, while he was running away, resulted in a mistrial. After hearing the news of the mistrial, Walter Scott’s mother, Judy Scott, declared that, “I’m not sad, and I want you to know why I’m not sad, because Jesus is on the inside, and I know that Justice will be served.”<sup>64</sup> Trump’s rise to power unleashed a spate of racial, xenophobic, and misogynistic hatred across the country. In particular, his political authority has lent legitimacy to anti-Black racism, evident in the behaviors of white nationalists who feel empowered. What new challenges this poses to the Mothers of the Movement, other bereaved mothers who are not publicly active, and the Black Lives Matter Movement remains to be seen. During the presidential campaign, the Mothers of the Movement threw their support behind Secretary Hillary Clinton and spoke at the Democratic National Convention in July 2016. Stating, “We’re with her,” the women agreed that Clinton was best positioned to pass laws and make policies to address gun-related violence and to halt

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63. Andrew J. Perrin, *Citizen Speak: The Democratic Imagination in American Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 227.

64. Alan Blinder, “Mistrial for South Carolina Officer Who Shot Walter Scott,” *New York Times*, December 5, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/05/us/walter-scott-michael-slager-north-charleston.html>.

the mass incarceration of African Americans and Latinos.<sup>65</sup> Speaking at the convention, Lucia McBath stated, “Not only did [Hillary Clinton] listen to our problems, she invited us to become a part of the solution, and that’s what we’re going to do.”<sup>66</sup>

There are, of course, limits to maternal politics shaped by grief, not the least of which is the complexity of advocating for justice while managing the intensity of emotional pain. However, politicized bereaved Black mothers challenge standardized police practices that can lead to deaths, intervene to shape laws and public policy to address violence, and reclaim the dignity of their dead and dehumanized children.<sup>67</sup> As much as they have raised public awareness about violence, whether or not their activism will result in changed laws and policies that lead to a sustained reduction in extralegal killings remains to be seen, especially in an increasingly hostile racial and political climate. Yet, these hostilities and the horrors of anti-Black violence that result may further strengthen the resolve of politically active Black mothers. Indeed, Sybrina Fulton has named herself “an unwilling participant in this Movement” but vows to continue commemorating her son and fighting for the one that is still alive, “So that this heartbroken club stops growing.”<sup>68</sup>

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65. That the women took the stage at the Convention on the same evening that former President Bill Clinton did is an irony not to be overlooked. In 1994, during his presidency, with Hillary Clinton’s support, Bill Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act that sent large numbers of African Americans and other racialized groups to prison. The bill expanded the prison industrial complex and included a “three strikes” mandatory life sentence for repeat offenders.
  66. Quoted in Will Drabold, “Meet the Mothers of the Movement,” *Time Magazine*, July 26, 2016, <http://time.com/4424704/dnc-mothers-movement-transcript-speech-video>.
  67. Christopher Brennan, “‘We Aren’t Going to Continue Burying Our Babies’: Mothers of Minority Men Killed by Police March Through Washington DC,” *Daily Mail*, May 9, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3075043/We-aren-t-going-continue-burying-babies-Mothers-minority-men-killed-police-march-Washington-DC.html>.
  68. Sophia Tesfaye, “I Am an Unwilling Participant in This Movement”: Mothers of the Movement Deliver Powerful Testimonies at DNC,” *Salon*, July 27, 2016, [http://www.salon.com/2016/07/27/i\\_am\\_an\\_unwilling\\_participant\\_in\\_this\\_movement\\_mothers\\_of\\_the\\_movement\\_deliver\\_powerful\\_testimonies\\_at\\_dnc](http://www.salon.com/2016/07/27/i_am_an_unwilling_participant_in_this_movement_mothers_of_the_movement_deliver_powerful_testimonies_at_dnc).