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# *From mourning mothers to revolutionary mothering*

## Abstract

In this article, I critically engage with the literature on Black feminism to follow a notion of public motherhood that exceeds biological reproductive mothering in favour of looking at a conception of motherhood in cultural and linguistic terms, as a political symbol and a framework for thinking about women's power. I oppose a strategic vision of motherhood to privilege the role mothers play at grassroots level. I go beyond the portrayal of Black mothers as victims and irrational subjects to discuss specifically how grief unleashes an activism to change unjust social relations. I foreground the futural dimension of motherhood, using Heidegger's temporality based on care, *Sorge*. Revolutionary mothering is an act of care but also a political re-imagining that overcomes loss and pain by overhauling existing political and social configurations. I discuss mourning as a performative act, following James Baldwin's call to remember the dead and contemplate loss in a public way.

**Keywords:** motherhood, revolutionary mothering, *Sorge*, mourning, Black feminism, grief

## Introduction

In this paper, I move away from motherhood conceived in a biological, reproductive sense in favour of a notion of motherhood that acts as a liberatory, political symbol and a framework for thinking about women's power. Specifically, I delineate how a mother's grief challenges oppressive structures at grassroots level. I regard mourning primarily as a mode of political activism by women whose children or partners have been violently killed in unjust circumstances.[1] Grief unleashes an activism to change unjust social relations.

I begin my paper by providing a general overview of the relevant literature on motherhood in Black and African feminist theory.[2] While critically engaging with African feminism in particular, I follow a notion of "public motherhood" which seeks to think of motherhood in cultural and linguistic terms. I outline the various theoretical accounts that link Black motherhood to a public role in activism, social change, and revolution.

Within the context of the struggle against apartheid, I consider the important role mothers play in so-called "burial societies" at a local level. I oppose this to a more strategic and utilitarian vision of motherhood, referring specifically to depictions of motherhood in the public journals of the African National Congress (ANC).

Staying with the context of South Africa, and using a comparative literature approach, I then look at Antjie Krog's (2002) as well as Njabulo Ndebele's (2013) engagement with a prominent South African mother, Winnie Mandela. Regarding mourning more specifically, I consider the work of Mark Sanders (2007) on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Gillian Rose's (1996) book *Mourning Becomes the Law*.

In the final section, I provide a contemporary analysis of how Black maternal activism challenges existing power configurations. I go on to discuss mourning as a performative act and I look at dance performances based on the

1 For example the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo was an association of women who lost children and grandchildren to the Dirty War, a campaign waged from 1976 to 1983 by Argentina's military dictatorship against suspected left-wing political opponents. In this paper, I do not deal with this case but I do refer to the "Marikana widows", the widows of miners killed by police in 2012 in South Africa, as well as to the "Mothers of the Movement", a group of African American women whose children were unjustly and violently killed.

2 While feminism seeks to redress gender inequality, African feminists often confront overall structural issues affecting women such as socio-economic and class factors which contribute to African women's oppression, economic exploitation, and marginalisation. See Arndt 2001.

experiences of the "Marikana widows" in South Africa. Following up on James Baldwin's (1985: 39) call to "bring out your dead", I show that remembering the dead and contemplating loss in a public way re-configures and re-politicises it.

In addition to the past-present framework, "revolutionary" mothering, triggered by grief and loss, is a future-oriented practice toward freedom and social change.[3] In my paper, I foreground the transformative dimension, relying on Heidegger's futural temporality based on care (*Sorge*). "Revolutionary mothering" is an act of care but also a political re-visioning, a collective project and a set of practices geared towards freedom.

## Theorising motherhood

Generally, African feminist scholars demonstrate a political commitment to problematising the discourses of Western feminism through various theoretical, epistemic and methodological approaches. In this section, I briefly outline various developments in African feminist theory that reimagine motherhood by moving away from representations of it as an oppressive patriarchal institution.[4] Specifically, the work of African feminist scholars questions the work of radical white feminists of the 1970s and 1980s who regard motherhood in a negative light.

It must be emphasised that in the mid-1980s, there was also a range of Western white feminists who developed care ethics, which emerged in large part from analyses associated with mothering. Much has been written about care ethics as a feminist ethic, in relation to motherhood.[5] Although some critics caution against the tendency to construe all care into a mother-child framework, Sara Ruddick (1980) and Virgina Held (1993) use a maternal perspective to expand care ethics as a moral and political theory.[6]

Overall, care ethics privileges relationships and interdependence. It is therefore in tune with African feminism which similarly rejects the individualistic model of human beings that has dominated Western thought.

3 According to Lawson (2018: 716), grief and loss are differently gendered emotions with unique implications for women's activism.

4 Simone de Beauvoir in her ground-breaking book *The Second Sex* (first published in French in 1949 as *Le Deuxième Sexe)* regards maternity as a patriarchal institution that is imposed on women as a psychological and biological destiny to reproduce the species.

5 See LaChance Adams 2014: 15.

6 Ruddick's 1980 article, 'Maternal thinking', is considered the first articulation of a feminine approach to ethics.

Both African feminism and care ethics generally challenge approaches based on abstract, universal principles that apply equally to all, regardless of context. Instead, they consider the power dynamics, inequalities, and the specific needs of vulnerable or marginalised individuals. [7]

It is in this sense that African feminism, working within a post-colonial context, conceives of a positive role for the family and motherhood. In addition, African feminist scholars challenge the view that men and society pressurise women into motherhood. Motherhood is not only a culturally recognised autonomous unit in Africa (Amadiume 2005: 93); it is also charged with a mythological power that gives women authority (Amadiume 1987; 1997).

Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi makes a point of differentiating what she refers to as "womanism" from radical white feminism. In the process, she focuses on the political, cultural and socio-economic experiences of Black/African and the subsequent differences between white women and Black/African women as a social group.[8] Furthermore, according to Ogunyemi, African women exercise political power as biological mothers. Older women especially play central public roles as caretakers.

Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997) similarly outlines the peculiarity of older women's power by referring to certain social and historical contexts in West Africa and by separating wives from mothers. Resorting to the naturalisation of terms, Oyěwùmí argues for a fundamental difference between the African mother and the centrality of the 'wife' in Western feminism.

Lorelle Semley (2012: 602) follows up on Ogunyemi's notion of "public motherhood" as she re-interrogates the concept of "maternalism" which, as Semely specifies, is often divided into three interrelated frameworks – biological, socio-historical and cultural/discursive. While most maternal theories address biological motherhood in a general sense, scholars often define "maternalism" as a specific sociohistorical phenomenon dating to the 19th century in which women used their status as mothers to influence politics and public debate.[9]

7 Care ethics has affinities with moral perspectives such as African ethics as alternatives to Kantian (deontological) and utilitarian (consequentialist) ethics. For a rapprochement between African ethics of Ubuntu and care ethics see Hall, Du Toit and Louw 2013.

8 This may be exclusionary, but not racist according to Arndt (2001: 35).

9 See Snitow 1992; Arendell 2000. For examples of maternalist historiography in the United States and Europe, see Bock and Thane 1991; Koven and Michel 1993; Accampo, Fuchs and Stewart 1995; Ladd-Talyor 1994; Feldstein 2000; Plant 2010.

Semley (2012: 601) points out that her own approach moves away from Oyěwùmí's emphasis on the (perceived) 'naturalness' of African motherhood and Ogunyemi's focus on the caring work of public mothers to concentrate on the metaphor and symbolism of motherhood as the basis of elderly women's authority. For Semley, motherhood is primarily cultural and linguistic, not an *a priori* category imposed by government policies or the media.

In this paper, I follow Semley's dynamic approach and regard maternal activism as a performative act, relying upon comparative literature analysis. I am also interested in how Semley opposes a conception of 'woman' as a 'natural', or 'biological' category, and her focus on a notion of motherhood that operates within specific social, historical contexts, discourses and/or "a stylised repetition of acts".[10] In the process, Semley (2012: 602) analyses how West African mothers, as postmenopausal elders, wield power as "public mothers".

Filomina Chioma Steady (2011), for her part, discusses the leadership qualities inherent to motherhood and Nkiru Nzegwu (2020) writes about how motherhood is deployed as an instrument against state power. Here we see how motherhood is linked to empowerment in a way firmly grounded in and informed by lived experiences.

Overall, African feminism seeks to critique patriarchy in a nuanced way to improve the daily lives of African women via a sense of complementarity or cooperation with men driven by negotiation and compromise. Mikell (1997: 4) for instance endorses the "survivalist", "heterosexual" and "pro-natalist" foundations of African feminism. Black maternal theorists focus on how mothering is emancipatory and life-affirming (Nash 2018: 700). Coleen O'Brien (1994: 147-148) even claims that "[a]n African mother must, by necessity, be an activist". Mothering is reimagined as a site of intense self-transformation, imbued with spiritual and political meaning. As she reviews Cecily Lockett's anthology of South African poetry, O'Brien discusses the participation of mothers specifically in the fight against apartheid. Women such as Winnie Mandela and Albertina Sisulu were pivotal figures of the anti-apartheid movement.

Beyond the 1956 Women's March to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, women in South Africa were also involved in organising grassroots campaigns against the pass laws, which restricted the movement of Black South Africans. The apartheid migrant labour system and how it confined women to the rural

10 Riley 1988; Wallach Scott 1999; Butler 1990.

homelands is thematised in Ndebele's (2003) novel *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*,[11] which offers an explicit fictionalising of the most famous South African "woman in waiting": Winnie Mandela.

It is important to bear in mind that the novel rejects deciphering who she was or passing judgement on her actions by mobilising the perspectives of four ordinary southern Africans (Ndebele 2003: 92). As a public figure, Winnie cannot be understood solely on an individual basis which is why Ndebele uses the concept of the *ibandla* (the Zulu/Xhosa concept for a congregation) which opens a safe place for discussion among the women and sets in motion a process toward self-confrontation and renewal. This resonates with the communal and complementary aspects I foregrounded above that characterise African feminism.

In this context, we can also consider Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (2002). Like Ndebele, Krog refuses the distinction between fact and fiction, yet it may be argued following van Rooyen (2007: 6) that Krog offers her own personal response to the politics surrounding Winnie Mandela during her Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings whereas Ndebele resists the categorical and definitive that emerges in Krog's judgement of Winnie Mandela's 'culpability'. For instance, according to van Rooyen (2007: ii) Krog "denigrates [Winnie] Madikizela-Mandela's refusal to toe the peaceful democratic line".[12] Krog might identify with Winnie Mandela as a woman, but she fails to recognise the racialised trauma to which the latter has been subjected, says van Rooyen (2007: 10).

By multiplying perspectives on Winnie, Ndebele's novel for its part closely details the unique hardships of women who were responsible for child care and the management of households while still resisting the oppressive measures of apartheid. In Ndebele's novel, the term "revolutionary" is thus shown to encompass the everyday, non-violent, experiential and processual in the footsteps of what Saidiya Hartman (2019) calls "revolution in a minor key". This is also articulated in the following paragraph by the South African feminist scholar Zoë Wicomb (1990: 47-48):

11 We must bear in mind the rich ambivalence of the original English version of the title of Ndebele's book because a "cry" can be read both as a "weeping" or a "war cry". This emphasises the theme of ambivalence, a delicate strength, which is also central to my view of motherhood.

12 Van Rooyen (2007) examines the figure of Winnie Mandela in Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (2002), and Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003).

> many [women] are drawn into the conflict as mothers defending their homes and their children. This politicization of women's domestic role is indeed a departure from the Euro-feminist view of motherhood as a condition of passivity and confinement but, whilst recognizing such difference, I can think of no reason why black patriarchy should not be challenged alongside the fight against apartheid.

Wicomb rightly recognises that motherhood is always a product of particular socio-economic, political, historical and cultural formations. She looks at the complexities of motherhood as experienced and practised by women beyond any idealisation of African motherhood. Gender roles need to be discussed within the context of processes such as racism, neocolonialism, cultural imperialism, socio-economic exclusion and exploitation, gerontocracy, religious fundamentalism as well as unjust, dictatorial/ corrupt systems.

In this sense, post-apartheid South African feminism has moved more generally towards economic justice. Many women in post-apartheid South Africa, particularly those in rural areas or working-class communities, continue to face significant economic hardships also associated with high levels of single motherhood.[13]

Feminist movements actively advocate for equal pay, land rights, and access to resources. There is significant activism around domestic violence and sexual rights.[14] For instance, the work of feminist scholars like Louise du Toit (2009) and Pumla Gqola (2015) analyse how colonialisation and apartheid continue to shape South African women's lives by normalising sexual violence against women and generally undermining female sexual subjectivity. Their work also seeks to oppose these developments by proposing solutions towards recognising the dignity of South African women.[15] In the next section, I consider the potential of "revolutionary mothering" by looking at the concept of mothering as a philosophical concept.

## Towards revolutionary mothering

The previous section ended with an outline of women's role in the struggle against apartheid and in this spirit, the anthology entitled *Revolutionary*

13 See Gumede 2023.

14 For an overview see the research by Mathews et al. (2024).

15 See Louise du Toit's (2023) chapter contribution in the book *Human Dignity in an African Context*.

*Mothering: Love on the Front Lines* (Gumbs et al. 2016) conceptualises mothering as a revolutionary act. The anthology uses various styles and genres to explore mothering practices and experiences. In this section, I deal more directly with the concept of mothering and care as philosophical concepts.

In her opening essay, Gumbs (2016: 21) makes a point of distinguishing "motherhood" from "mothering", the former being a static "status granted by patriarchy to white middle-class women". Gumbs thereby seeks to express her central concept in verbs – for instance by verbal substantivisation (making nouns 'verb-like' by adding the suffixes: '-tion' and -'ing') or by attributing them a verb-like meaning (Schiølin 2012: 776). This problematisation of nouns resonates with Martin Heidegger's own battle with fixed or pre-determined essences in building his terminology.[16] Although Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962) might consign the mother's gift of birth to insignificance (Günther 2012: 99), in my view, Gumbs's notion of mothering (even though she does not mention Heidegger) recalls the latter's notion of "care".

I do not have the space here to elaborate on this central Heideggerian notion and its wider significance as the temporal structure[17] in which "Dasein" or the situated human being finds itself in. Instead, I will limit myself here to Heidegger's important contrast between positive and negative modes of caring for others which is found in section 26 of *Being and Time*.

A negative form of care that Heidegger identifies is one that "takes over" and even "takes away care from the other" (Heidegger 1963: 122). In Heidegger's dynamic terminology, this mode of solicitude is designated as a "leaping in" for the other (*einspringen*). For instance, a possessive parent who "leaps in" and makes major decisions for their children. In this way, the other is reduced to a thing and denied his or her freedom to choose and make commitments. Hence Heidegger critiques a form of care that reduces the other's sense of autonomy (*Die 'Sorge abnehmende Fürsorge'* Heidegger 1963: 122).

16 "The essence of *Dasein* lies in its existence" (Heidegger 1962: 67). This means that Dasein's nature, or essence, cannot be described before its lived existence and involvement in projects and possibilities. *Dasein* is presented with two types of possibility that can apply only to its mode of being. *Dasein* can make a choice regarding its relation to its being so it can be true to what it is, and the possibilities which uniquely belong to it. Alternatively, it can choose to evade its true self and ignore or forget those distinguishing possibilities.

17 Care is the fundamental meaning of *Dasein's* being-in-the-world. It signifies an essential concern for, and involvement in, the world. As one who is both natal and mortal, *Dasein* exists as a finite being in the tension of the "between", which Heidegger calls care.

In contrast with this mode of "caring-for" that seeks to dominate, there is positive way of "caring-for" that "leaps ahead" of the other (*ihm vorausspringt*) in order to offer and disclose possibilities that enable the person to take over his or her own care in the future and proceed to self-realisation or in Heidegger's terminology "authenticity". This disclosure of authentic possibilities enables a person "to become transparent to himself in his care and to become free for it" (Heidegger 1963: 122). Whereas the mode of "leaping-in" for someone sees him or her as something which must be guided and manipulated, the way of "leaping ahead" and revealing possibilities respects his or her integrity as a person with his or her own potentialities and autonomy.

Nel Noddings's (1984) work draws much more directly than Heidegger's from a maternal perspective to conceptualise caring relationships as basic to human existence and consciousness. According to Noddings, the two parties in a caring relationship – the "one-caring" and the "cared-for" – have certain obligations to care reciprocally and meet the other morally, although not in the same way. In tune with Heidegger's positive mode of "leaping ahead", Noddings (1984) characterises caring as an act of "engrossment" whereby the carer accepts the cared-for on their terms, resists imposing their own views or projecting themselves on to the cared-for (which would be equivalent to Heidegger's "leaping-in"). For Noddings, ethical action springs from the human affective response that is a natural caring sentiment, and the memory of being cared-for that in turn, leads to an ideal self. Noddings rejects universal principles that seek to prescribe action and judgement, and she argues that care must always be contextual.

Drucilla Cornell (1992: 13) is not primarily known for care ethics in the same way that theorists such as Nel Noddings, Carol Gilligan, and Virginia Held are, but Cornell's work does intersect with themes of care, ethics, and justice that are important to consider for my theme of mothering. Cornell also warns against attempts in the name of care to control the Other (what Heidegger would call "leaping in" for the Other) as dangerous for ethical reasons. Care should rather imply a play of nearness and distance; a relationship in which participation is not a declaration of mastery.

In light of the "double-edged" potential of care, and in the spirit of a care that is open-minded, non-domineering and "futural" ("leaps-ahead" rather than "leaping in") I now return to the contribution by Gumbs in the anthology on *Revolutionary Mothering*. Gumbs does not refer to Heidegger but in the spirit

of the latter's futural mode of care as a "leaping ahead", Gumbs regards "m/othering" as a "practice of creating, nurturing, affirming, and supporting life." In tune with a future-oriented, relational ontology, Gumbs (2016: 22) defines mothering as "a possible action" (2016: 21). She calls for a notion of mothering that "answer[s] death with utopian futurity".

I follow the importance Gumbs places on moving away from "motherhood" as a role imposed by patriarchy to focus on a notion of "revolutionary mothering" that refers to acts of care that involve but also exceed reproductive mothering. According to this view, "revolutionary mothering" is a subject position that focuses on human flourishing, but is also a political symbol. As a political position, revolutionary mothering is a set of future-oriented practices, as well as a practice of freedom.

Mothering is a collective, political project as much as a set of practices geared towards freedom, or as Gumbs (2016: 31) puts it, "an alternative building practice of valuing ourselves and each other and creating the world we deserve". "Revolutionary mothering" is a political-reimagining (a "leaping forth", in Heidegger's words) that includes and certainly exceeds biological reproductive mothering. Gumbs's anthology as a whole thus mobilises a broad conception of 'mothering', even though the authors root themselves in subjective positions and experiences, specifically regarding the daily, excessive violence Black women face. Revolutionary mothering is presented as a subject position, a political position, a symbol and a metaphor, and an embodied experience.

In the next section, I return to the South African context and focus on the mother figure in the struggle against apartheid. I discuss and problematise the Black revolutionary 'mother' figure by showing how it has been mobilised by organisations for larger, systematic political purposes. I oppose the strategic image of revolutionary motherhood (i.e. ANC rhetoric) to consider instead the important role mothers played via so-called "burial societies" at grassroots level.

## Revolutionary motherhood in the apartheid struggle

In light of the previous section's discussion of mothering and the call for an ambivalent, context-aware notion of motherhood, I lean on Cherryl Walker (1995: 421), who encourages an exploration of motherhood that is open

to a variety of female identities and perspectives. Walker foregrounds the importance of shared interracial meanings and cultural influences and warns against attributing progressive, radical, emancipatory constructions of motherhood solely to Black women (Walker 1995: 421).

Walker refers for instance to a study by Gaitskell and Unterhalter (1989) which looks at the different approaches to motherhood in Afrikaner nationalism and the African National Congress (ANC). In the former, motherhood is displayed as home-centred and passive, whereas in the latter, motherhood is conceptualised as an empowering politically active force (Gaitskell and Unterhalter 1989: 75). I agree with Cherryl Walker's (1995: 423) conclusion that promoting such dichotomies by identifying one camp as progressive and liberatory (the ANC discourse as opposed to the Afrikaner nationalist one) is not helpful when it comes to conceptual and historical rigour.

With regards specifically to representations of revolutionary Black motherhood in the ANC during the struggle, Kim Miller (2009: 69) considers the changing relationship between motherhood, ANC political objectives, and women's political realities. Miller's analysis of the pictorial rhetoric of the ANC foregrounds an image published in 1968 in the ANC public journal *Sechaba* which depicts a mother carrying a child as well as a spear, in a direct reference to Umkhonto We Sizwe (MK), the military wing of the ANC (as the "spear of the nation").

Miller points out that this display of women's power clashes with the reality of ANC women as well as official ANC and especially MK policy at the time because not only were women excluded from active combat they were also subjected to much control and scrutiny (e.g. prohibitions against pregnancy and exile should they fall pregnant).[18] In the 1970s and 1980s, women in the ANC steadily gained more influence which they used to enhance gender equality and democracy. During this time, women's membership in the ANC increased significantly, primarily through their involvement in the Women's Section (Hassim 2004: 438; Miller 2009: 73).

Educational materials by the ANC's Women's Section, such as the *Voice of Women*, called upon Black women to redefine themselves as political actors. Its logo across the top of the letterhead picked up (in a slightly diluted form)

18 Hassim (2004) shows that for most of the 20th century, the women in the ANC were second-class members.

the earlier image published in *Sechaba* in 1968 of a woman holding a weapon with a baby tied on to her back in the traditional African manner (Miller 2009: 73). Miller argues that the ANC's Women's Section used the "familiar image of militarised motherhood" in order "to reassure the dominant leadership of their ability and willingness to be both fighters and mothers" (Miller 2009: 73). The aim was to demonstrate dedication to ending apartheid to gain more power within the struggle and after it (Miller 2009: 73-74).

According to Gertrude Fester (1998: 8), the Women's Section's "motherist appeal" made it "the most instrumental [organization] in changing the gender politics and power in the country". Based on the publication of previous material in *Sechaba*, *Voice of Women* used the iconography of militarised-motherhood because they knew the male-dominated ANC leadership would accept it. The visual rhetoric of motherhood was also used to encourage women who were not yet politicised to mobilise themselves in the struggle against apartheid by joining the ANC.

Miller (1993: 75) also claims that the Women's Section worked "strategically within traditional ideology to justify untraditional public militancy". Overall, Miller effectively shows the glorification of militarised motherhood in various ANC materials during the liberation struggle and how motherhood functioned as a political motivator within the resistance discourse.

Judith Stevenson (2011) fills an important gap in the literature as it moves away from motherhood as the afore-discussed "mega identity" to turn towards individual women's daily lives and their political actions at grassroots level. Her article focuses on the Tswane women of Munsieville during the township revolts against the apartheid government in the 1980s and finds one working-class woman, Nkapi Mokowe, particularly representative of how women's political activism involved an intricate grappling with and integration of overlapping constructions of motherhood. Examining mothering from a culturally and historically specific lens, Stevenson argues that Black women were shaped by traditional cultural patterns and ideologies that viewed them as having authoritative political roles in society and they saw themselves as purposeful political agents. Concurrently, the Christian patriarchal discourse sought to relegate them to the private domestic sphere.

The attempt of missionisation and colonisation to position women solely within the family was not successful and by the mid-20th century, so-called "burial societies", which were comprised of mothers initially from prayer groups

organised by missionaries, became sites of political resistance (Stevenson 2011: 137). Stevenson goes on to show that the patriarchal nature of Christianity was further challenged by the appearance of Black Feminist Theology/Feminist Contextual Theology on the political scene during the 1980s.

These multiple discourses and ideologies of woman- and motherhood were all intertwined during the 1980s, and Black women increasingly challenged imposed gender roles to promote the struggle against the apartheid government. According to Stevenson, Black women identified a space wherein they were able to (re)claim (traditional) roles as leaders and political actors.

In this section I contrasted the transformative role of grassroots activism to the "official", strategic and institutional mobilisation of "revolutionary motherhood". In the process, I provided a short and general discussion of revolutionary motherhood within the context of the struggle against apartheid. A certain glorification of militarised motherhood in various ANC materials contrasted starkly with the circumstances on the ground for women operating within a largely male-dominated political organisation. On the other hand, grassroots activism moved away from motherhood as a "mega identity" by grappling with and adjusting various constructions of motherhood that contradicted each other.

In the next section, I move toward a more conceptual and literary discussion of the transformative effect of mourning. I end by making a rapprochement between Sophocles's *Antigone* and mourning motherhood in a South African context by leaning on the work of Mark Sanders and Gillian Rose.

## Beyond grief: performative motherhood

In the previous section, I dealt with the struggle against apartheid in relation to a certain strategic and official vision of revolutionary motherhood (ANC rhetoric), which I problematised by looking at the important role mothers played in challenging oppressive structures via so-called "burial societies" at a grassroots level.

In this section I regard mourning as a performative act, following up on James Baldwin's (1985: 39) call to "bring out your dead", which in my view means remembering the dead and contemplating loss in a public way. Such mourning attempts to reconfigure and re-politicise loss, while confronting vulnerability and intimacy. Performative mourning also affirms mourning as a

way to reimagine Black humanity and community. I introduce a framework that intertwines the past, present and future, building up on feminist scholar Erica S Lawson's (2018) article 'Bereaved Black mothers and maternal activism in the racial state'.

Before I specifically attend to my theme of bereaved Black motherhood and activism as well as Lawson's article, I consider the critical scholarship on Black death ranging from fiction to the theorisation on necropolitics.[19] Baldwin (1985: 39) for his part, consistently included the notion of Black death in his literary works. It is important to bear in mind that for Baldwin, death does not only refer to biological demise. It also involves experiences and encounters that threaten the identity and coherence of the self. Love, eroticism, death and change require the individual to put him or herself at risk, to be open to all those forces that challenge our sense of control.[20]

For Baldwin, our attitude towards death is at the centre of our failure to genuinely confront race. The "problem of race" is, for Baldwin, connected to our fears and desires, how we conceive of ourselves and history, as well as how we deal with the social struggles. Baldwin suggests that there might be something about being human, about the desire to protect and preserve our identity, that prevents us from responding to pain, anxiety, loss, and death.

In her work, feminist scholar Grace K Hong (2008) follows Baldwin's call to "bring out your dead", which for Hong also means identifying the context in which death occurs as a form of critique. To "bring out your dead" is to acknowledge the hidden and forgotten. It is to remember that life is protected according to a certain racial and gender hierarchy (Hong 2008: 97). "To bring out your dead" foregrounds the importance of these deaths. It is to say that these deaths are not accidental but systemic and structural. "To bring out your dead" is a challenge and defiance, not an institutional commemoration. It does not simply accept mortality and decline, but it opens the possibility of a life-affirming struggle. Baldwin and Hong attribute an important political role to mourners, because they bring attention to systemic and structural death.

19 On this topic see also Smith 2015 and Mbembe 2003.

20 These themes resonate with the philosopher Georges Bataille. Both Bataille and Baldwin contend that becoming a human social being requires insulating ourselves against death and chaos. See Winters 2017.

Following up on Baldwin and Hong, Manoucheka Celeste (2018) looks at the "image" of the "wailing black woman" and finds it scattered across the international, fictional and nonfictional mediascape. Celeste's analysis discusses the presence of Black women in historical and contemporary news coverage. She builds on the histories of Black women, and specifically, women in mourning. In the process, Celeste (2018: 115) attempts to show how a mother's grief serves a liberatory role, something that is overlooked in much fictional media material where Black women are portrayed merely as victims or as irrational subjects, overwhelmed by their emotions.

Celeste closely follows Lawson (2018) who also argues that for some Black mothers, grief over the violent and unexpected death of their child unleashes an activism towards social change. Lawson looks specifically at the "Mothers of the Movement", a group of African American women whose children have been unjustifiably and violently killed. For some bereaved Black mothers, the transformative possibilities of maternal politics driven by grief emerge from the everyday impact of structural racial violence.

According to Lawson (2018: 715), Black women's maternal grief is a public feeling insofar as "political identities are implicit within structures of feeling, sensibilities, [and] everyday forms of cultural expression and affiliation".[21] For Lawson, the trauma of Black mothers and their motivations for resistance are historically grounded in plantation slavery, which denied Black people any rights to organise themselves politically and develop self-worth.

Lawson's paper oscillates between the present and the past to argue that Black women's grief is embedded within the particular experience of losing a child, but also in the violent racial practices against Black people in general. Lawson provides a contemporary analysis of how Black maternal activism challenges violence against Black children, both dead and living, and she also seeks to address the historical dimensions of Black motherhood in the racial state. Lawson says that "[d]eath itself and the multidimensional meanings attributed to it, shaped social relations in the plantation such that life and death were deeply intertwined with motherhood" (Lawson 2018: 721).

The above quote thematises the limitations of Black life in relation to death. Within the economy of slavery, Black slaves were trapped in a living-death, and their existence was only justified as a labour force (Lawson 2018: 720).

21 See Cvetkovich 2007.

Armed with a specifically feminist lens, Lawson looks at the implications for Black mothers whose value lies merely in their ability to reproduce slavery through childbearing. In this context, women do not give birth to human beings but to commodities and property (Spillers 1987: 80; Baptist 2014: 33-34). Here, property relations take precedence, and mothers are seen as producers of isolated objects (Spillers 1987: 74-80). Black motherhood is shaped by this historical legacy of slavery where people are stripped of any freedom, autonomy, and a sense of belonging and family ties (Rodriguez 2016: 62).

Although Black motherhood has changed since the abolition of slavery, Black women's bodies still serve as a contentious battleground for the state, says Lawson (2018: 721). A certain "mortuary politics" persists as the racial state continues to "manage" Black mothers and their children (Lawson 2018: 721).[22] Policing plays an integral role and for Lawson the "carceral state" is comparable to chattel slavery (Lawson 2018: 722).[23] Following up on "mortuary politics", in the next section, I return to the South African context with reference to the example of the Marikana widows.

## The Marikana widows

In this section, I look at the representations of the experiences of mourning motherhood from a performance and visual arts perspective. I build upon the article by Sofie de Smet and Marieke Breyne (2016) which discusses the dismantling of the dominant, mediatised discourse of commemoration of the so-called "Marikana killings" by foregrounding the widows of the 34 Lonmin miners killed by South African police in 2012 in Marikana.

The authors emphasise that public commemorations of events are often characterised by a "monumental" style of reflection on these losses, which drowns out critical modes of questioning with rituals of spectacular public grief. The South African government's rhetoric of the Marikana "massacre" for instance portrayed the Marikana event as an act of nature without a responsible actor. Violence was unquestionably present on both sides, but the strikers at Marikana were portrayed as an unruly force.

22 Lawson here draws on Vincent Brown's (2008) notion of "mortuary politics".

23 Lawson is quoting Assata Shakur, for whom "the affective, economic, racial, and gender politics of chattel slavery returned under a neoliberal-carceral state" (see Dillon 2012).

An example of counter-critique not mentioned by the above-mentioned authors is the artwork by Cape Town artist Ayanda Mabulu, whose painting entitled "Black Man's Cry" was removed from the FNB Johannesburg Art Fair in 2013 for its commentary on the Marikana Massacre.[24] In a further painting entitled "Marikana Widows", Mabulu also specifically foregrounds the hardships that women face as the painting reproduces certain motifs from Picasso's anti-war statement *Guernica* (1937) with a dramatic, fragmented, collage-based photographic reporting style.[25]

Very much like Mabulu's painting, which thematises the plights surrounding motherhood, the dance performances *Mari and Kana* and *Iqhiya Emnyama (The Black Cloth)* presented in 2015 in Cape Town place the daily life struggle of women in South Africa centre-stage as they confront the ongoing inhumanity and socioeconomic inequality in post-apartheid South Africa. De Smet and Breyne (2016) show how these dance performances offer a counter-narrative and critique to the commemoration produced by the government of the Marikana killings as it converts mourning from a private to a public act. The widows openly grieve the deaths of their husbands and express the overall lack of support for their plight.[26] In this sense, they are comparable to the Greek heroine Antigone and her public mourning for her brother Polyneices. [27]

24 This was done by the event organiser and director of the fair so as to avoid offending the art fair sponsors including the Department of Trade and Industry as well as the Gauteng provincial government. But when the photographer David Goldblatt requested that his exhibition be removed from the art fair walls the event organiser and director of the fair allowed the return of Mabulu's painting (Krouse 2013).

25 The widows also produced visual artwork consisting of eight body map drawings, and nine hand drawings which were on display in 2015 at the Institute for Reconciliation and Social Justice at the Free State University's Bloemfontein campus. The idea for the paintings came from the Khulumani Support Group, which introduced the widows to the regenerative power of art and storytelling. The exhibition was part of the University's Lecture Series on Trauma, Memory and Representations of the Past. The theme of the discussion, "Speaking Wounds: voices of Marikana widows through art and narrative", included panel members from the Khulumani Support Group, led by its national director, Dr Marjorie Jobson. For more on the organisation see http://www.khulumani.net. Some paintings are reproduced in the *Rhodes Journalism Review*, vol. 33, August 2013. Available at: https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/EJC141564. [accessed on 19 January 2025].

26 See Alexander 2013.

27 The drama of *Antigone* begins the day after the end of the civil war between Eteocles and Polyneices. Polyneices led a foreign force to attack Thebes. The attackers were defeated and, in the conflict, the brothers Eteocles and Polyneices killed each other. Creon, the ruler of Thebes, decrees that no fallen enemy of the city shall be mourned and given the customary burial rites. It is Antigone's duty, however, as Polyneices and Eteocles's sister, to look after their burial and perform the proper rites.

Without ignoring the temporal, cultural and geographical differences between Sophocles's *Antigone* and the South African context, in his chapter "Hearing Women" Mark Sanders (2007: 66), parallels those Black women who could not bury their dead during apartheid to Sophocles's Antigone who questions Creon's "law" *(nomos)* prohibiting her from burying Polyneices.[28] For Antigone, Creon's law *(nomos)* seeks to "override the gods/the great unwritten, unshakable traditions *[nomima]"* (Sophocles 2009: 155).

According to Sanders (2007: 66), Antigone thereby demands that custom and tradition not be equated with the law; we should not see law as one with custom, unified in the sphere of what Hegel (1977: 267; 1970: 329) calls "the human law" *(das menschliche Gesetz):* "the *known* law, and the prevailing custom" *(das bekannte Gesetz und die vorhandene Sitte).* As opposed to the law *(nomos),* Antigone refers to the word "nomima" for "traditions". The tradition or custom that Antigone cites to defend her action against Creon's hubris is not relative to historical worlds and does not change with them, as it is "trans-historical" (Winkler 2018: 76).[29] Appealing to "custom" (*nomima*) says Sanders (2007: 61) as Antigone does, means "negotiating a split within the customary" which is itself beyond any pure opposition between law and custom, because "law itself generates the customary in the form of a system of customary law that contaminates any reclamatory invocation of custom" (Sanders 2007: 61).

Sanders revises Hegel's assumption that law and custom necessarily coexist within the realm of "the ethical order" or "ethical life" *(the customary*

28 In his book *Ambiguities of Witnessing,* Mark Sanders (2007) explores the relation between law and literature in testimony to crimes committed during apartheid before South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The book closely analyses individual testimonies by conducting a theoretical investigation of forgiveness, mourning and reparations. I am specifically interested in how Sanders rereads Hegel's analysis of Sophocles's *Antigone* with women who testified before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

29 In his book *A Philosophy of Finitude*, Winkler (2018: 72-77) looks at Heidegger's reading of *Antigone* in his 1942 *Der Ister* lecture. For Winkler (2018: 73), the conflict between Antigone and Creon is not the conflict between the divine and human law, as Hegel (1977: 266) claims. Antigone says that the law that governs her action transcends the upper and lower gods, Zeus and Justice. In one respect, her law issues from beyond the divine sphere. On the other hand, it is part of the "unwritten, immutable laws of the gods" (Sophocles 2009: 155). According to Winkler, Heidegger's reading of *Antigone* suggests that there is no belonging to being that does not simultaneously lead to the collapse of the human being, because belonging involves a transgression and exceeding of limits (Winkler 2018: 73). In my conception of mourning motherhood, I follow this ambivalent, double-edged notion of being along with its inner transformative drive.

*or Sittlichkeit)* and his failure to contemplate the possibility of "custom" not being reconcilable with law as actualised in the state. [30] Antigone for her part "render[s] apparent the disjuncture and conflation of custom and law" (Sanders 2007: 61). For Sanders (2007: 66), the unwritten "custom" or *nomima* to which Antigone appeals outlines duties toward the dead. To respond before *nomima* as Antigone does, is to respond before the dead and in his analysis Sanders regards the "responsibility that the living assume before the non-living" as a "precondition for justice" following Derrida (1994: xix) in *Spectres of Marx* (Sanders 2007: 66). [31]

This parallels the analysis of Gillian Rose (1996) who in her book *Mourning Becomes the Law* also looks at the transformative effect of mourning: whether termed "divine" or "human", so-called "illegal" acts of tending to the dead are acts of justice, against the current will of the city. In the process, a mourning woman such as Antigone reinvents the political life of the community. In addition to Antigone, Rose (1996: 23-25) discusses the painting by Nicolas Poussin called *Gathering the Ashes of Phocion* painted in 1648. [32] The act of Phocion's wife "gathering the ashes" of her husband, as depicted in Poussin's painting, is a protest against arbitrary power; it must be differentiated from a protest against power and law as such, says Rose (1996: 35). Phocion's wife and Antigone do not represent women breaking the law of the city, and causing the collapse of the political community. Rather they are cases in which mourning "becomes the law" because their acts of mourning "rearrange the boundaries of the soul", which permits one to start the process of living without those who have departed (Rose 1996: 35).

30 "If Africa has anything to teach Hegel and Hegelians, the lesson will come from the peculiar place of custom in colonial and postcolonial African modernity" says Sanders (2007: 68) as Hegel does not imagine a realm of the "customary", of *Sittlichkeit*, being a zone of civic and geographic marginalisation.

31 In his rereading of Hegel's Antigone, Sanders (2007: 73) refers to Derrida's (1994: xix) preconditions for "justice" in *Spectres of Marx*: "[t]he appeal for proper funeral rites does two things: first, it hearkens to an appeal of the other in the other – the other of the law in the law; second, responding to the call of this other-from the place of the deceased-can be read as an instance of responsibility before the dead" (Sanders 2007: 73).

32 Poussin's source for the painting is Plutarch's *Life of Phocion* which tells the story of Phocion, an Athenian general and statesman, who was sentenced to death for treason. Phocion's burial was subsequently forbidden and his body burnt. Poussin depicts the wife of Phocion gathering Phocion's ashes because if they are left unattended to, his soul will find no rest. Unable to bury the ashes in the tomb of his fathers, Phocion's wife buries them by the hearth at her home, dedicating them to the household gods (Rose 1996: 23-25).

Rose (1996: 35) says that:

> [w]hen completed, mourning returns the soul to the city, renewed and reinvigorated for participation, ready to take on the difficulties and injustices of the existing city. The mourner returns to negotiate and challenge the changing inner and outer boundaries of the soul and of the city.

Transferred to the performances depicting the Marikana widows, *Mari and Kana* and *Iqhiya Emnyama* show how the widows revise their own cultural identity, thereby transforming both the "inner and outer boundaries of the soul and of the city" (Rose 1996: 35). This is urgently needed because, on a worldwide scale, widows endure financial precarity due to unequal inheritance, land, and property rights (UN Division for the Advancement of Women 2001). The widow is stigmatised for allegedly possessing negative spirits and for embodying the cause of her own husband's death. Hence, via her "liminal status" a widow faces highly restrictive customs and rituals, including house arrest, harsh dress codes, and degrading methods of eating (Ramphele 1996: 100).

In his fieldwork, Matsobane Manala (2015: 1) scrutinises the treatment of South African widows especially in the light of the *Ubuntu* principles of community, and emphasises the "uncaring, disrespectful, discriminatory, impolite and unjust" nature of these customs. Manala analyses the isolation and anxiety widows experience due to the stigmatisation attached to widowhood and restrictive customs imposed by society such as being barred from public events. Manala concludes that widowhood in Africa is an "extremely difficult and problematic stage in women's lives" (Manala 2015: 4).

The performances *Mari and Kana* and *Iqhiya Emnyama* mobilise important symbols of mourning that refer to the daily life of a woman inhabiting the South African (Xhosa) culture. Mourning women are portrayed in the context of customs while also displaying a rupture within these customs, questioning their legitimacy. Within the custom, widows are unable to share their grief publicly during their mourning period as they cannot go out and converse openly in public. They feel like outcasts in their community in the name of cultural beliefs. In the performances, the black clothes and headscarves are demonstratively discarded as they define the female performers as widows. The domestic space to which a widow is condemned during her mourning period is foregrounded

as the performers pose silently in photographic style to highlight their isolation and mute existence. This performative display of mourning thus adheres to Baldwin's call to "bring out the dead" and challenges the injustice that widows are subjected to by articulating their precarious social arrangements.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I discuss a sense of revolutionary mothering that is embedded in a specific socio-economic context. It refuses any essentialist, naturalising categories and is built on the social roles, practices and meanings attributed to motherhood in society. Maternal politics in my view reflects women's complex and contradictory positions in society. Some mothers may use their maternal status to further nationalist projects by advocating pro-military or pro-natalist policies. But a certain "revolutionary mothering" on the other hand opposes any official or strategic vision by moving away from an idealised "mega identity" in order to turn towards individual women's daily lives and their political actions at grassroots level. To this end, my article revolves around a discussion of Black grieving mothers and how they turn into activists to mourn their losses, humanise their children, and articulate a new political subjectivity.

I focus on the transformative possibilities of maternal activism. I show how maternal politics is amplified by grief that also stems from the everyday impacts of structural racial violence. In this respect, I lean on Lawson's view that maternal grief must be seen as a public rather than a private expression of pain. A re-politicisation of grief serves to "bring out the dead" (in Baldwin's sense) and can subsequently be conceived as a life-affirming act.

Societies and cultures try to determine which people matter and how they must be valued; whose lives and deaths are to be remembered, acknowledged or recorded. I emphasise that mourning is not simply a personal process that deals with loss. It is a condition of our existence and therefore intimately linked to mothering, intimacy, caring and the transformative potential of being.

My reading of mourning suggests that even while living amid injustice and the shadow of death the practice of mourning is a force that confronts the paralysing totality of fear, dehumanisation, and death. By proceeding beyond churches and other official places for remembering the dead, maternal activism forges another space for transforming existing unjust social conditions and hierarchies.

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