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“I Don’t Want Dirty People Holding My Kids”: Analyzing White Mothers’ Perpetuation of Misogynoir in *Born behind Bars* (2017)

*This article examines the A&E docuseries *Born behind Bars* (2017) to explore how misogynoir affects the construction of motherhood in the Leath Unit Prison Nursery Program, one of ten prison nurseries in the United States. These gender-responsive programs intervene in the epidemic of mother-child separation by allowing pregnant incarcerated mothers to live with their babies for a finite period. This article applies misogynoir as a framework to analyze white mothers’ efforts to regulate Donyell, the one Black mother on the unit, whom they label lazy, dirty, and a thief. Using a standard of whiteness and a discourse of maternal criminality, white mothers position themselves as the pinnacle of motherhood despite being incarcerated and, in turn, position Donyell as deviant. Grounding white mothers’ depictions of Donyell as unfit in stereotypical images pathologizing Black motherhood, this article argues that white mothers in *Born behind Bars* perpetuate misogynoir through language to replicate the systemic criminalization of Black motherhood and uphold patriarchal definitions of motherhood that exclude Black mothers.*

Introduction

A&E’s ten-episode docuseries *Born behind Bars* (2017) offers unique access to one of ten prison nursery programs in the United States (US). *Born behind Bars* follows expectant mothers through pregnancy, delivery, and childrearing while serving sentences in the Officer Breann Leath Memorial Maternal & Child Health Unit (Leath Unit Nursery) located in Indiana Women’s Prison. To live in the Leath Unit Nursery, both mothers and nannies complete an application, take part in an interview with the warden and unit staff, and meet eligibility requirements related to health, length of sentence, and conviction type. Located in a wing separate from the general prison population, the

Leath Unit Nursery provides mothers with a safe environment to interact with their babies, staff to guide them with pre and postnatal care, nannies to assist with childrearing, and necessary supplies, such as formula, clothes, and diapers. The Leath Unit Nursery serves to intervene in the US epidemic of maternal incarceration that separates mothers from their children. In 2018, the Advocacy and Research on Reproductive Wellness of Incarcerated People (ARRWIP) reported that four percent of women entering state prisons and three percent of women entering jails were pregnant. Pregnancy behind bars poses health risks to mothers and babies as correctional facilities restrict mothers' access to adequate care, shackle women during childbirth, and separate mothers from their babies shortly after delivery. Prison nurseries offer an alternative to this dehumanizing process by allowing pregnant mothers in prison to live with their babies for a finite period.

Through raw footage, direct and indirect interviews, and narrative exposition, *Born behind Bars* illustrates the realities of performing motherhood behind bars, including balancing childrearing with recovery and rehabilitation. The Leath Unit Nursery allows mothers to remain their babies' primary caretakers, but mothering within prison means mothering practices are still regulated by institutional rules and policies. For instance, mothers must receive approval from the prenatal coordinator for administering any medication to their baby; they must keep their baby's crib free of any items, including blankets, and they are not permitted to allow nannies or other mothers to watch their babies unless they are preapproved by unit staff. We bear witness to the contention this lack of agency causes when mothers are written up for sleeping with their babies instead of placing them in their cribs or for raising their voices towards or around their infants. However, tensions escalate even more when Donyell, a Black mother, is accepted into the nursery program. Donyell is introduced midway through the docuseries when the unit counsellor informs her that she has been accepted into the nursery program and will move from unit seven in the general population to unit five—the baby unit. Donyell responds with a contagious smile and attempts to help the counsellor and the nanny pack her belongings, even though she is thirty-three weeks pregnant. Shortly after Donyell arrives at the Leath Unit Nursery, her white counterparts label her lazy, dirty, and a thief. This imagined narrative demonstrates that her presence as the only Black mother in a nursery occupied by white mothers disrupts their constructed definitions of motherhood. As such, these white mothers use a discourse of maternal criminalization to depict Donyell as noncompliant with unit rules, which threatens to get her removed from the program and separated from her baby.

The white mothers' treatment of Donyell signals the work of Moya Bailey, who coined the term "misogynoir" in 2008 to "describe the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience, particularly in US visual and digital

culture” (1). The concept of misogynoir is helpful when conceptualizing the white mothers’ bias towards Donyell because it explains why these mothers, who are also stigmatized as bad mothers due to their incarceration, feel empowered to deny Donyell the right to motherhood. Using misogynoir as a framework to analyze the narratives white mothers construct about Donyell, this article connects white mothers’ discourses of maternal criminalization to pathologies of Black motherhood. In doing so, this article argues that white mothers in *Born behind Bars* perpetuate misogynoir through language to replicate the systemic criminalization of Black motherhood and uphold patriarchal definitions of motherhood that exclude Black mothers. Identifying how white mothers use misogynoiristic images to redeem themselves as mothers and regulate a Black mother contributes to feminist scholarship tracing the use of misogynoir to justify violence against Black women.

Misogynoir

Donyell’s experience in the nursery cannot be interpreted without recognizing the intersection of her race and gender. Various oppressions associated with different identities, such as race and gender, work together to produce injustice, making it necessary to situate intersectionality as a focal point, especially within the context of a prison nursery. Reducing this analysis to Donyell’s gender would fail to acknowledge that white mothers target Donyell because she is Black, and solely centring Donyell’s Blackness would ignore white mothers’ intention to discredit Donyell as a mother. The discrimination Donyell faces is a result of her intersectional identity as a Black-incarcerated mother. By patriarchal mothering standards, incarceration is seen as a violation of a woman’s gender roles, as women are supposed to be pure and obedient (Granja et al.; Marlow). This violation is exacerbated for mothers, as they are responsible for raising the nation’s children and should never risk compromising their role as their children’s primary caretakers. Incarceration then carries a stigma of shame for mothers, but the weight of this stigma varies. Because patriarchal notions of motherhood are predicated on whiteness, Black incarcerated mothers like Donyell are subjected to severe scrutiny for violating both gender and racial codes of motherhood.

The castigation white mothers subject Donyell to is grounded in misogynoir. Clarifying that misogynoir is not just the racism or the misogyny Black women encounter, Bailey explains, “Misogynoir describes the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization” (1). Misogynoir stems from and is still heavily motivated by antebellum constructions of the Black woman as “animalistic, strong, and insatiable” (Bailey 2). During slavery, according to Camille Wilson

Cooper and Shuntay Z. McCoy, whites “capitalized on the intersectionality of African American women’s oppression and their racial, class-based, and gendered identities to depict them as pathological and thus justify their dominations” (49). Depictions of the Black woman as the Mammy, for instance, constructed Black women as fat, asexual bodies meant for service, whereas depictions of the Black women as the hypersexual Jezebel portrayed Black women as lascivious and immoral. These constructions of Black women were used to juxtapose them against white women, who were perceived in contrast as docile, feminine, and domestic, and justify sexual violence against Black women.

Using negative constructions of Black women to justify violence against them is what makes misogynoir dangerous. Bailey warns of misogynoiristic archetypes of Black women as the Jezebel, Mammy, Sapphire, strong Black woman, and Welfare Queen “help maintain white supremacy by offering tacit approval of the disparate treatment that Black women negotiate in society” (2). These negative perceptions of Black women have been used in policy reform, the healthcare system, and the media to portray Black women as responsible for the impoverished circumstances they occupy. Going beyond manufacturing a negative outlook of Black women, these images, Bailey explains, “materially impact the lives of Black women by justifying poor treatment throughout all areas of society and throughout US history” (2). For instance, Kimberly C. Harper declares the Welfare Queen trope was used to sterilize Black women during the 1960s by portraying Black women as having uncontrollable sexual desires that would result in multiple children the government would have to support financially. The government used this image to “force Black women who received government assistance into compulsory sterilization programs that were initially started by eugenics or using birth control like the intrauterine device (IUD), Depo-provera, or Norplant” (Harper 35).

Although misogynoir is a contemporary term, feminist scholars have documented the institutional unmothering of Black mothers, such as the selling of mothers’ children during slavery, forced sterilization, and mother-child separation during incarceration (Harper; Nash; Roberts). The process of unmothering Black mothers at the peer level, however, is underexplored. The perpetuation of misogynoir through popular media, including social media, television, and movies, signals the need to investigate how these images influence peer interactions, especially among incarcerated mothers (Bailey). The first step to practicing motherhood behind bars is reconstructing one’s identity as a mother (Enos). Incarcerated mothers do this by drawing from images of idealized mothers often circulated in the media (Enos; Granja et al.; Marlow). These images promote dominant ideologies of mothering, like intensive mothering, reserved for white, married, heterosexual women who

have the resources and privilege to put their children’s needs above their own. In opposition, images of bad mothers are associated with Black, single, and poor matriarchs who fail to provide for their children. Applying misogynoir as a framework reveals how these images influence white mothers’ understanding of motherhood.

The Unmothering of Black Mothers

Black women have historically been held to a standard of whiteness that almost guarantees them to be socially, and often legally, labelled as bad mothers. Whiteness became the pinnacle of motherhood in the early nineteenth century when white women became the cult of true womanhood and eventually motherhood. According to Harper, the qualities associated with true womanhood included “four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (1). Forced to be breeders and raped for white men’s sexual pleasure, enslaved Black women were unable to claim piety or purity like white women who were said to only engage in sex for reproductive purposes. Additionally, these virtues derived from white women’s affordance to solely dedicate their time and efforts to raising moral children. These affordances were made possible in large part due to the domestic labour provided by enslaved Black women, which included cooking, cleaning, and wet nursing white children (Harper). This labour and chattel slavery’s forced separation of enslaved mothers and children prohibited Black mothers from dedicating the same time and means to rear their children.

While Black mothers have resisted notions of deviance by either choosing not to engage in patriarchal mothering ideals or creating their mothering practices, the label of the good mother remains reserved for heterosexual, middle-to-upper-class, wed white women. Likewise, acceptable mothering practices continue to prioritize resources and activities white mothers have access to. The dominant ideology of motherhood requires mothers to serve as their children’s primary caretakers, which includes nurturing them, educating them, and tending to their every need 24/7 (Hays). This idea of proper childrearing requires excessive amounts of time and money that Black women are not likely to have the leisure of offering. Black mothers are more likely than white mothers to have to work outside of the home and tend to earn lower wages than their white counterparts. Despite documented disadvantages preventing mothers from providing their children with the same care that white mothers do, the social construction of Black mothers as hypersexual, lazy, and having loose morals has “deemed them agents of their own misfortune” (“Deadbeat Dads & Welfare Queens” 237).

Stigmatizing Black mothers as unfit, these pathologized stereotypes have triggered public resentment towards Black mothers and regarded them as

undeserving of help. For example, Ann Cammett explains that the merging of race and welfare created “the Welfare Queen and Deadbeat Dad, the metaphorical villains of welfare programs” (“Deadbeat Dads & Welfare Queens” 233). Cammett goes on to say that despite most welfare recipients being white, conservative policymakers’ use of this metaphorical language “served to denigrate poor parents and call into question their worthiness...” (“Deadbeat Dads & Welfare Queens” 239). The Welfare Queen portrays Black mothers as sexually irresponsible women who have more children than they were willing to work to financially provide for. Rather than being perceived as utilizing a system that was supposedly created to offset inequalities, Black mothers are viewed as greedy crooks who commit fraud against government agencies and in turn steal resources from the people who actually deserve them. This racialized notion that Black mothers are unworthy of assistance and care is also present in other public programming.

Comparing the crack epidemic and the opioid crisis, Bailey illustrates how white mothers using drugs are perceived as victims who need resources, whereas Black mothers are viewed as criminals who do not deserve to be mothers. Bailey explains that in the 1990s, an organization named CRACK (Children Requiring a Caring Community) responded to the crisis by offering “\$200 to women of color using crack cocaine if they agreed to long-term or permanent birth control” (8). In contrast, in 2010, during the opioid crisis, white users were not criminalized nor offered sterilization as a solution. Instead, the opioid crisis was treated as a public health problem rather than an individual issue. While substance use is believed to contradict maternal roles because it prioritizes self-interest and puts children’s health at risk, Black mothers receive more scrutiny because they are already assumed to be bad mothers (Garcia-Hallett and Begum). For Black mothers, substance use is conflated with child abuse, whereas for white mothers, substance use is considered a sickness impeding their ability to mother. The consequence for Black mothers’ substance use is unmothering, whereas the solution for white mothers is community support. Not only are Black mothers more likely than white mothers to have children removed from their homes, but they are also charged with child abuse and neglect at higher rates and receive longer sentences (Roberts).

The phenomenon of government agencies removing children from Black and brown mothers has become so pervasive it has earned the name “Jane Crow” (Clifford and Silver-Greenberg). Stephanie Clifford and Jessica Silver-Greenberg share testimonies from Black and brown mothers describing how they were punished for mothering decisions they made due to a lack of resources, such as access to childcare and adequate food supplies. Instead of supporting these mothers with community-based services, mothers who leave their children unattended to work or use a friend’s address to enroll their

children in top-performing schools, for example, are separated from their children. Dorothy Roberts supports Jane Crow testimonies with evidence showing Black children are overrepresented in the US child welfare system: “Even though they represent only 15 percent of the nation’s children, black children currently compose about 30 percent of the nation’s foster care population” (1484). Roberts explains that child removal in Black communities is the result of hypersurveillance motivated by narratives—that is, “the sexually licentious Jezebel, the family demolishing Matriarch, the devious Welfare Queen, the depraved pregnant crack addict”—that paint a “picture of a dangerous motherhood that must be regulated and punished” (1492).

Janet Garcia-Hallet and Poppy Begum note that although policymakers often circulate these narratives, it takes agents of control to enforce them. Both Roberts and Garcia-Hallet’s and Begum’s work demonstrates that social workers have been prominent in “reinforcing systems of social and penal control” (20). For example, Roberts reported that caseworkers “frequently described African American parents in case files with terms such as ‘hostile,’ ‘aggressive,’ ‘angry,’ ‘loud,’ ‘incorrigible,’ and ‘cognitively delayed’ without acknowledging the context or providing any justification for these labels” (1486). Garcia-Hallet and Begum attribute this compliance to social work practices being rooted in carceral logics, which according to Garcia-Hallet and Begum “idealize penal interventions to punish individuals labelled as offenders” (19). Operating under carceral logic, case workers view Black mothers as a danger to their children and undeserving of help. Fostering more than a social dislike for Black women, these stereotypes justify political violence against Black women, putting them in danger and leading to their overcriminalization. This imagining of Black mothers as a threat to public safety justifies the disproportionate rates of incarceration among Black mothers.

During incarceration, mothers continue to be surveilled and punished by other agents of control like correctional officers and fellow mothers. During visitation, correctional officers limit the amount of physical interaction mothers can have with their children and restrict their roles as mothers by acting as the authority for both them and their children. This surveillance is intensified in prison nursery programs where mothers and their children are under the constant supervision of correctional officers. In these spaces, fellow mothers also act as agents of control by criticizing each other’s mothering practices or interfering with each other’s mothering methods by reporting them to correctional officers (Haney). While existing research demonstrates that these sources of surveillance behind bars regulate motherhood and promote hegemonic mothering practices (Haney; JWells; Marlow; Sufrin), there has not yet been a focus on the role race plays in motivating or structuring this surveillance. In what follows, I demonstrate how white mothers use a

standard of whiteness to position themselves as mothers and Donyell as other. Through a discourse of maternal criminality, these mothers attempt to align Donyell with a criminal ethos to label her untrustworthy and unfit.

“There’s a Thief on the Unit”: Using a Criminal Ethos to Unmother

When asked how she feels about moving to the “baby unit,” Donyell tells producers, “There was a lot of stress on me ‘cause if I didn’t get in this program, I didn’t know, like, who, off the back, I was gonna [sic] send my baby home to. I don’t have no more stress to worry about, other than being nervous about having a baby in prison” (“That B*tch Ate my Cake”). Donyell also confesses that she was scared when she found out she was pregnant because at two months old her first baby’s lungs collapsed due to a lack of development. Worried the same thing would happen, Donyell was relieved when the off-site doctor declared her and her baby healthy. Shortly after arriving at the Leath Unit Nursey, Donyell is welcomed by Jeannie, another pregnant mother whom Donyell lived with on the intake unit when they entered the prison, and Maranda, one of the unit nannies. Maranda reassures Donyell that “We’re gonna [sic] make you feel at home here.... And we all pretty much help each other out and, you know, for the most part, we’re all cool” (“That B*tch Ate my Cake”). While Maranda offers hospitality on behalf of the unit, Donyell’s presence is not well received by the other mothers.

Donyell is almost immediately othered when white mothers accuse her of being a thief. During a community meeting, the unit counsellor announces that Sydney Rose’s radio is missing from her room. Reminding all residents not to leave their belongings unattended and not to take things that do not belong to them, the unit counsellor is careful not to make any accusations. In an interview with producers, however, Taylor, a mother on the unit, speculates Donyell took the radio because there are “a lot of girls over here that have lived with her over there [in the general population], and they said that she’s a thief and that she’s real loud and obnoxious” (“That B*tch Ate my Cake”). Other white mothers and nannies support this accusation by concluding that since nothing has gone missing until Donyell arrives at the unit, it must be her. Even though Taylor contradicts this evidence by later admitting that another mother got kicked off the unit for being a thief, the collective maintains that Donyell is the thief. The unproven consensus that Donyell stole the radio bears an uncanny resemblance to the misogynoiristic Welfare Queen narrative. Cammett declares, “In the modern era, the most stigmatizing construct of black mothering remains the “Welfare Queen...,” as the trope confirms “implicit biases about black women’s poor mothering, inherent sexual excesses, and overall laziness” (367). Painted as manipulators who commit welfare fraud because they are too lazy to work, the Welfare Queen trope constructs a

criminal ethos for Black mothers.

Like the Welfare Queen, Donyell is presumed a criminal based on her race, and this presumption is used to justify the accusations of theft. In the same way that politicians manufactured a framework to situate poor Black mothers as “the source of ‘working’ Americans’ economic anxieties” in the 1980s, white mothers have framed Donyell as inherently untrustworthy and overindulgent (Cammatt, “Welfare Queens Redux” 368). Interestingly, this same criminal ethos is associated with people behind bars, which should make every mother a potential suspect. Yet in an environment only occupied by individuals convicted of a crime, only Donyell is perceived as a criminal. Lindal Buchanan’s *The Woman/Mother* continuum illustrates how white mothers can diminish Donyell’s ethos as a mother while preserving their own. Borrowing Richard Weaver’s notion of god and devil terms, Buchanan maintains that the mother operates as a god term connoting positive associations, including children, morality, self-sacrificing, the reproductive body, and the private sphere (8). In contrast, the woman operates as the devil term invoking negative attributes such as childlessness, materialism, the sensual/sexual body, and the public sphere (Buchanan 8). Considering how Black women have historically been juxtaposed against white women, Harper argues that the devil term woman can be synonymous with Black mothers. Since the institution of motherhood is predicated on the experiences of white women, Black mothers are automatically perceived in opposition. This dichotomy allows white mothers in *Born behind Bars* to align themselves with god terms and associate Donyell with the devil’s terms, despite all of them being convicted of crimes. In collectively labelling Donyell the unit thief, mothers separate themselves from a criminal ethos and establish a hierarchy where white mothers are ethical, and Donyell is unethical.

Just as the Welfare Queen is suspected of collecting excessive amounts of funding from the government, draining taxpayers of their hard-earned money, Donyell is suspected of stealing an item that a white mother worked hard for. Validating her suspicions, Taylor reasons, “You hear a lot of stuff about people, but when you have people over here that’s lived with her and seen her, you know, steal and do scandalous stuff, you know, everybody gets kind of worried” (“That B*tch Ate my Cake”). However, Jeannie, who previously lived with Donyell, says she does not think Donyell took the radio. Even after unit officers search every resident’s room and cannot locate the radio, Taylor tells producers that she will be watching Donyell. The surveillance Taylor promises replicates the surveillance that neoliberalism subjects Black mothers to (Cammatt, “Welfare Queens Redux”). Roberts explains that “this state intrusion is typically viewed as necessary to protect maltreated children from parental harm” (1484). Roberts goes on to clarify that “The need for this intervention is usually linked to poverty, racial injustice, and the state’s

approach to caregiving,” not the mothers’ inability to care for their children (1484). Because the Welfare Queen trope situates Black mothers as dishonest and untrustworthy, they are perceived to be unequipped to care for their children and are consequently subject to intense surveillance and supervision from agents of control like child protective services.

Acting as an agent of control, Sydney Rose searches Donyell’s room for the radio. Failing to locate the radio in Donyell’s room, Sydney Rose insists she must have “sold it on the yard” (“That B*tch Ate my Cake”). Entering another resident’s room is against unit rules and is punishable by a write-up. Although there is proof that Sydney Rose violated unit rules—she confesses to Jeannie—Sydney Rose’s criminality is excused, unlike Donyell who is baselessly labelled a thief. Characterizing Donyell as “loud and obnoxious,” albeit false, also serves to substantiate white mothers’ accusations against Donyell. Through the lens of the camera, Donyell is portrayed as quiet, shy, and borderline lethargic. In one scene, Ms. Cunningham visits Donyell in her room and advises her “Don’t just find yourself laying around” because Donyell spends a lot of her time sleeping. Through the lens of the white mothers, Donyell, in contrast, is simply unruly. The contradiction in representation shows that white mothers determine Donyell’s character not by her behaviour but by pathologies of Black motherhood. Doing so allows them to take on the position of the state and declare Donyell a threat to the unit. Although these early allegations do not directly condemn Donyell’s mothering abilities, they help to later situate her as unfit.

“You Don’t Need to Be Holding Other People’s Babies”: Using Narratives of Neglect to Unmother

Mothers’ use of whiteness as a standard is apparent in how they frame Donyell as incompetent. At thirty-eight weeks pregnant, Donyell tells unit officer Ms. John that she has not been feeling well all day. Ms. John asserts, “So why are you waiting until just now to say something about it? You can’t do that. We’ve got to get you off this unit and make sure that you’re okay” (“Mommies Can Conquer the World”). When Sydney Rose asks Jeannie why Donyell is going to the hospital, Jeannie recounts these events, adding, “She never acts like... like nothing’s wrong. I don’t know how she’ll be... I mean she has all of us to help her, but...” (“Mommies Can Conquer the World”). Because Donyell’s reaction to what Jeannie diagnosed as contractions was not suitable, Jeannie deduces that Donyell may not be able to properly care for her baby. Sydney Rose endorses this concern by affirming that Jeannie will make a good nanny because she has multiple children. Sydney Rose’s reassurance that Jeannie can help Donyell because she has more children than Donyell implies that Donyell does not inherently know how to be a mother; and that Jeannie is a better

mother than Donyell. Although Jeannie is separated from all her children, her assumed mothering ability is nonetheless what Donyell is compared to.

After giving birth to baby Jamila, perceptions of Donyell escalate from incompetent to negligent. Sitting at a round table in the community area, Jeannie, Taylor, and a few other white mothers criticize Donyell’s approach to motherhood. One mother alleges, “She never changes her [Jamila’s] diaper,” after which Taylor cosigns, “I don’t want dirty people touching my kids. If you’re not cleaning yourself, you don’t need to be holding other people’s babies” (“Mommies Can Conquer the World”). Taylor and Amie—a woman who applied to be a nanny—contextualize these complaints via selfie cam footage where they explain that “the one mom that’s colored on the unit was having some issues with hygienic stuff” (“Mommies Can Conquer the World”). Rooted in the misogynoiristic image of Black women as impure, white mothers’ chorus of complaints focuses on cleanliness. “Dirty” in the context of Black motherhood is synonymous with negligent, which Taylor confirms when she cautions that Donyell should not be touching other people’s babies. The forced labour and rape Black women endured during slavery constructed an ethos of Black women as unclean and impious. Unable to demonstrate piety and purity, enslaved Black women could not claim to offer the same “virtues of nurture and emotional care that White women extended to their families” (Harper 5). Contemporary images like the Welfare Queen, the Matriarch, and the Teen Mom too paint Black mothers as a “stain” on society because they either cannot or choose not to provide their children with the financial, emotional, and physical resources white mothers do.

Depicted as negligent, Donyell is again positioned as a threat; in the same way, white mothers suspected she could not be trusted around their belongings, they caution that she cannot be trusted around their babies. White mothers, in contrast, are not labelled as a threat even when they are unable to meet patriarchal mothering requirements. For instance, Taylor’s twins were prohibited from entering the Leath Unit Nursery due to health issues requiring frequent doctor’s visits. Similarly, Jeannie’s son was only on the unit a short time before he started having breathing complications, which required him to be sent back to the hospital. In both cases, guardianship of the babies was transferred over to caretakers because they needed intensive care that could not be provided by onsite medical staff. Neither of these mothers blamed themselves nor each other. Rather they blamed the Leath Unit Nursery for getting their hopes up and then denying them the opportunity to build a bond with their babies in the same way previous incarcerations robbed them from getting to know their other children. Despite being separated from their children, Taylor and Jeannie’s whiteness ensures that they remain symbols of good mothering. Juxtaposed against these mothers, Donyell is subjected to maternal blame simply on account of her believed ability to pose harm to her baby and others.

Weaponizing misogynoir against Donyell, white mothers portray her as unfit for and undeserving of motherhood. After Amie clarifies that Donyell is dirty because she was not showering, Taylor insists that since Donyell does not take care of her hygiene she no longer has to clean up on the unit like “all of us white people do” (“Mommies Can Conquer the World”). Grounding their logic in longstanding racist stereotypes of Black people being unclean, lazy, and not smart, Taylor and Amie posture Donyell as an institutional burden the same way politicians painted Black mothers as a drain on the system (Bailey 9). Refuting accusations of favouritism, Ms. Knight, the unit prenatal care coordinator, states that other mothers’ feelings that Donyell gets special treatment because she is Black are unwarranted and shares her belief that Donyell is being targeted by other mothers. Taylor and Amie, however, are adamant that they are required to do more than Donyell is. Their feelings reinforce the patriarchal notion that white mothers deserve to be mothers and that Black mothers need to earn the right to be. Garcia-Hallett and Begum explain that social constructions of motherhood expect Black mothers to fulfill “intensive mothering” practices (Hays) like white mothers but without the community-based resources to do so.

Upholding the privilege and hierarchy of patriarchal definitions of motherhood, Taylor and Amie expect Donyell to navigate motherhood without the assistance of resources, unlike white mothers who get to rely on each other and nannies. The inequity that patriarchal definitions of motherhood create makes Black mothers both hypervisible and invisible. Because misogynoir portrays Black women as deviant, they are viewed as needing to be regulated and are therefore subjected to constant surveillance and scrutiny. For that same reason, they are also viewed as undeserving of resources and ignored when needing help. Black mothers are expected to fulfill intensive mothering practices to redeem themselves, and when they fail to do so, they are blamed for their inability to properly mother rather than social inequities and systemic barriers. This failure is used to justify taking resources away from Black mothers and giving them to mothers who deserve them. By overpolicing Black mothers to criminalize their mothering practices but not using the same level of state intervention to provide them with support and resources, misogynoir rationalizes the omission of Black mothers (Bailey). Omitting Black mothers allows white mothers to maintain superiority, which is what white mothers in *Born behind Bars* aimed to do when they used a discourse of criminality to portray Donyell as an unfit mother.

Conclusion

Misogynoiristic images rooted in the legacies of slavery justify the criminalization of Black motherhood. Operating under patriarchal definitions

of motherhood, white mothers in *Born behind Bars* draw from these images to depict Donyell as lazy, dirty, and a thief to omit her from motherhood. Concerning Wilson Cooper and McCoy’s call to embrace Afronormative perspectives that acknowledge Black mothers’ strengths, this article concludes by acknowledging Donyell’s effort to resist the aforementioned omission. Wilson Cooper and McCoy explain, “Afronormative perspectives do not exalt the value, organization and function of any ethnic group over another; hence, they do not rely on the oppositional dichotomies of good us/bad others that fuel bigotry and separatist politics” (52). When producers ask Donyell about the rumours regarding her hygiene, Donyell responds, “The drama part, I didn’t hear anything about me ‘cause I stay to myself, but, you know, that’s just what women do. They gossip. But I’m gonna [sic] try to keep it cool and simple, you know, so I don’t have to deal with those things and be one of those people that would have to lose my baby here” (“Mommies Can Conquer the World”). Aware that white mothers’ accusations of her being a thief and not properly taking care of herself or her baby could get her removed from the unit, Donyell chooses not to engage with these mothers or their gossip. Unit officer Ms. Leath confirms that white mothers target Donyell because they feel like she is “not gonna [sic] stand up for herself” (“Mommies Can Conquer the World”). While Ms. Leath equates Donyell’s unresponsiveness as “not standing up for herself,” it should be interpreted as shadow boxing.

In terms of motherwork, shadowboxing refers to the practice of Black mothers simultaneously conforming to and rebelling against dominant ideologies for the betterment of themselves and their children (Wilson Cooper and McCoy). Black mothers are forced to continuously navigate the conflict between their identity and sociocultural norms. Wilson Cooper and McCoy explain that operating in this marginal space “compels them [Black women] to box in the shadows of dominant powerholders’ view” (53). Shadowboxers resist attempts to regulate them and reclaim space, resources, and rights for their networks. Donyell staying to herself exemplifies shadowboxing in that her spending more alone time with her baby complies with patriarchal notions that mothers are the best caretakers for their children and should devote their undivided attention to their children. By strategically embracing the mothering ideals intended to exclude her from motherhood, Donyell aligns herself with god terms associated with mother, like protection, empathy, and self-sacrificing and resists white mothers’ attempts to associate her with devil terms like immorality, hysteria, and extreme emotion (Buchanan). Framing Donyell’s compliance as resistance credits her motherwork and counters white mothers’ attempts to unmother her.

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