

Aftershock Review

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Eislet, P., & Lee, T.L. (Producer and Director). (2022). *Aftershock*. [Motion picture].

United States: Hulu

“When Black mothers die, there is a ripple effect, and yes the death is the earthquake, but the shit afterward is overwhelming”- Shawnee Benton-Gipson (*Aftershock*, 2022).

Aftershock puts faces to the Black maternal mortality morbidity epidemic. Feminism has a complicated relationship with motherhood; however, through historicizing, summarizing, and humanizing Black maternal mortality morbidity, this film serves as a pedagogical tool to discuss matricentric feminism. In this essay, I will discuss how *Aftershock* can be used to discuss matricentric feminism, mothering and motherhood, and matricentric feminism versus maternalism.

The plot is simple but powerful, as it peels back the layers and makes visible the effects of disparate healthcare for Black mothers. The film focuses on two mothers, Shamony Gipson and Amber Rose Isaac, who both tragically died from preventable pregnancy and childbirth complications. Their stories are told from the families they left behind, mainly their male partners and mothers. The two fathers connect and form a bond over their shared grief and, along with Shamony’s mother, Shawnee Benton-Gipson, not only create a community of families with similar experiences but take an activist approach to change policy. *Aftershock* humanizes the epidemic, calls out the systems at work that contribute to it, and highlights the activism at work to dismantle it. O’Reilly and Bizzini (2009) suggest a common feature of matrifocal narratives is that they "begin with the mother in her own right, from her own perspective" (p.

10). As a pedagogical tool, *Aftershock* is an excellent example of a matrifocal narrative, as the filmmakers take great care to show the mothers their own rights and perspectives.

O'Reilly (2019) states, "Matricentric feminism seeks to make motherhood the business of feminism by positioning mothers' needs and concerns as the starting point for a theory and politics on and for women's empowerment" (p.14). As a pedagogical tool, the film provides examples of how models affect outcomes through a matricentric feminist lens. In the film, Helena Grant, a midwife, discusses the medical technocratic patriarchal model. This model explicitly seeks to disempower pregnant mothers in favor of efficiency, capacity, and scale. In this context, the idea of taking back birth is not an essentialist argument about identity, but about power.

The film touches on the discomfort even feminist scholars have about discussing agency as it relates to mothering. There is a moment where, Bruce, Amber's partner meets with medical students at Harvard University about Amber's death. You can see the discomfort on their faces as he details Amber's story and the medical neglect that led to her death. The exchange deconstructs the layers of racism, gender essentialism, and class politics that work to maintain an oppressive healthcare system that disproportionately kills Black and Brown mothers. It is here matricentric feminism shines as a way to truly see how this epidemic was constructed and is maintained within the institution of motherhood.

Aftershock highlights the experiences of Black mothers within the institution of motherhood. O'Reilly (2019) makes the distinction that "motherhood as an institution is a male-defined site of oppression" whereas "women's own experiences of mothering can be a source of power" (p.22). The origins of gynecology discussed in the film elucidate this point, especially as it relates to white male interest in the reproductive activity of enslaved Black women. In the film,

we see a Black mother in Oklahoma being herded through hospital care while discussing her fears of birthing while Black. She compares a Black woman having a baby to being a Black man at a traffic stop, saying, “You really have to pay attention every step of the way”. She is well aware of the failures of motherhood as an institution, and, ultimately, she decides to deliver at a birthing center, an out-of-pocket expense, but, as shown in the film, an empowering experience.

The film adopts the definition that mothers are individuals who engage in motherwork (Collins, 1994). The primary voices telling the story are men; however, they are amplifying not only their deceased partners’ stories but the stories of so many others who had similar experiences. The men in the film actively seek to understand and advocate for mothers while engaging in motherwork. Although the line between matricentricism and maternalism at times feels paper thin (O’Reilly, 2019, p. 16), *Aftershock* makes clear the racist and maternalist notion that Black mothers do not have the skills or intelligence to be good mothers and make sound decisions regarding their labor and delivery. This is the throughline through the narratives in the film: the women felt something was wrong but were ignored until it was too late. They had the intelligence to seek medical attention only to be disregarded because of their identity.

The film could be used in a variety of gender and women’s studies courses, but more importantly provides a media object to discuss how matricentric feminism is both inside and out of larger feminisms and why that distinction is important. Topics that could be integrated into a course through viewing the film include matrifocal narratives, maternalism versus matricentricism, and the concept of motherwork. Educators can use the film to provide a tangible example of those topics to better understand not only matricentric feminism but feminisms as a whole.

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