“WE CAN SPEAK FOR OURSELVES”: PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND IDEOLOGIES OF BLACK MOTHERS IN AN URBAN COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

BILLYE N. RHODES: “We Can Speak For Ourselves”: Parent Involvement and Ideologies of Black Mothers in an Urban Community
(Under the direction of George W. Noblit)

This dissertation is an ethnographic project that builds on the work of feminist and critical race scholars to examine the race, class and gender politics at play during this historical moment. It is imperative to examine the perceptions that come through the everyday consumption of controlling images that help to “justify U.S. Black women’s oppression” (Hill-Collins, 2004a, p. 47), as well as from dominant discourses of parent involvement, mothering and government literature. We Can Speak is an intervention of self-representation that provides a counternarrative from Black mothers in urban communities of Chicago.

A qualitative methods approach was employed in two rounds of interviews with five women. The first round focused on both their schooling experiences and decisions they make on behalf of their children. The second round was based upon the Mothering framework (Hill-Collins, 2004a), which specifically asked the participants to explore and name the nuances of intergenerational and intercommunal relationships and support systems; family traditions and expectations; agency and activism. The interviews were coded and analyzed as narratives and coupled with the reflexive journaling of my participation as both researcher and othermother. Black feminist epistemology is the theoretical framework that directed this project, fieldwork and interpretation of my findings. This dissertation borrows the tool of counternarratives, a widely understood
component of Critical Race Theory (CRT) which “aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 144).

The narratives reflect three themes that name a specific action with a specific stakeholder: Defining Mother, Preparing Children, Navigating Institution, while a fourth theme, named Other – discusses the complexities of mothers who are further marginalized by class and intragroup expectations. The last chapter explores two questions posed by D. Soyini Madison (2005) that ask the researcher to consider broader meanings for operations of the human condition; how this work makes the greatest contribution to equity, freedom, and justice; and finally offers short prose and a poetic transcription of “we.”

Keywords: advocacy, Black Feminist Thought, Black mothers, Chicago, counternarratives, critical ethnography, parent involvement, schooling, motherwork, urban education
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Black mothers: The first one to love me, the communities she shared me with and all those who have supported this project.
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Introduction

*The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized.* – Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is not a Luxury,” 1977.

Research Problem

This dissertation is an ethnographic project in which I examine Black women’s experiences as mothers in urban communities of Chicago. *We Can Speak* builds on the work of feminist and critical race scholars who have shared the narratives of Freedom School Teachers (Moore, 2009), the activism of Black women in the Chicago tenement housing projects (Moore, 2005), and knowledge production of Black women across identities (Alexander Craft, McNeal, Mwangola & Zabriskie, 2007) – to examine the race, class, and gender politics at play during this historical moment. Since early 2011, an onslaught of reports, campaigns, images and legal cases have culminated in a relentless pursuit to shape public and private perceptions of Black women’s and mother’s identity: the *Life Always* campaign that proclaimed “the most dangerous place for an African American is in the womb” (February 2011); the Psychology Today report that maligned Black women’s beauty and intellect (May 2011); the Fox comedy-drama *Glee* (2009) which broadcast derisive images of an angry Black mother to a national viewership of seven million people (see Figure 3); and the arrests of Kelly Williams

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1 I maintain the use of Black as an inclusive term for those of African descent, living in the United States, who are descendants of the African Diaspora. Some references that are cited use the term African-American or People/Women of Color.
Bolar, Tonya McDowell and Raquel Davis are a poignant sampling. A space has opened “to begin taking seriously the idea that black women’s experiences act as a democratic litmus test for the nation” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 16).

I am discussing perceptions that not only come through the everyday consumption of controlling images that help to “justify U.S. Black women’s oppression” (Hill-Collins, 2004a, p. 47), but also from dominant discourses of parent involvement, mothering and government literature. These discourses that provide a monolithic view of middle-class norms, or paint a deficit-model of working class and single mothers, are taken-for-granted representations that can readily feed public perceptions which are crippling for Black mothers. These representations essentially place Black mothers into two camps: those who are disciplined to agree with the schooling system and those who require a special intervention. Furthermore, images of Black mothers, particularly those in poverty, have been shaped by “paradoxical belief systems” (Cooper & McCoy, 2009, p. 46). When Black mothers have not been depicted as poor, lazy, combative, apathetic, emasculating “women who head culturally deficient families” (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009; Hancock, 2004; Cooper & McCoy, 2009), they are mythical strong Black women (Giddings, 1984; Hill-Collins, 1990/2009) who are revered amongst the masses, both Black and White, for rising above their perpetual circumstances. Therefore, this dissertation is an intervention of self-representation that provides a counternarrative from Black mothers.

**Positionality**

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2 These are explored further in Chapter 2.
One of the initial questions of this project is “how often do we interact with Black mothers and in what context?” As a Black woman, my response is very personal and intimate; this is the only mother I’ve known. I remember learning my alphabet, vocabulary words, poems and speeches with her through songs she would sing during our morning car rides. I remember boarding the big yellow bus at the end of my school day, only to be later deposited at her school for more lessons; my mother was a middle-school Social Studies teacher in a major urban city we called home. The climate of my life in the mid 1980’s was full of promise, mobility and “Black on Black Love”; our community celebrated the first – and only – Black mayor all four years of his tenure; and most families I interacted with were Black and middle class, which didn’t make the Cosbys seem so abstract. The women of these families shared the responsibility of raising me. These mothers met with one another to see if their respective homes were suitable for us to play; that is, if they hadn’t already interacted during PTA meetings or school assemblies. Our mothers openly discussed our value systems and our plans for achievement. We were encouraged to participate in everything from karate, classical piano, Young Engineers Club and the apex of all was school. The first question almost anyone asked me was, “how are your grades?” This was followed with “what high

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3 Black on Black Love Campaign was a major movement in Chicago during the early 1980s. It began when Edward Gardner, founder of Soft Sheen products, placed full-page ads in major media urging community members to combat “Black on Black crime” with “Black on Black Love.” I vividly remember plastering my walls with these placards and bumper stickers as a child.

4 Harold Washington (1922-1987) has been the first and only Black mayor in Chicago’s 175 years of governance. He served four years in this position before dying of a heart attack in his City Hall office. I recall the announcement of his death during the school day over the public announcement system; my teacher abruptly left the room completely grief-stricken.
school are you thinking about… what college?” This community of women were multi-
generation educators, members of HBCU and Ivy League legacies, or returning to school
for job promotions. They are mothers of chief executive officers and small business
owners, astronauts, Broadway thespians, mothers and educators.

Exchanging stories as an adult, I learned of a woman who simply changed
religions to ensure that both her children and grandchildren attended the best school in
the neighborhood – which happened to be Catholic. And another mother, whose child
came home one day, totally bewildered, asking if he is Black (and yes, he is.) She
immediately pulled him from the affluent, predominately White, suburban school he
attended and transferred him to a selective-enrollment, predominately Black school in the
middle of the city. Dr. Mahalia Ann Hines, a child daycare provider, Chicago Public
School (CPS) teacher, principal, and mother of Common (a Grammy-winning,
Hollywood actor, AIDS activist and children’s philanthropist, born and raised on the
South Side of Chicago), recalls her efforts and the legacy she inherited: “Even though
my mother always stressed education and pushed me to succeed, I also received a
separate education in how to survive… You have a door closed in your face? You have
to learn to how to pick the lock or maybe just knock it off the hinges” (Common, 2011, p.
14). Our mothers and grandmothers had a ‘we will do whatever it takes’ attitude when it
came to our care and education. This mirrors countless narratives of Black women,
shadowed by the dominant discourse, all of which clearly state: we do not have to be told
how to raise our children. These are parts of a legacy that thread and interlock our
history as Africans in America.
Significance and Audience

I consciously share the lived experiences of mothers transmitting love to their children – to “poignantly express the need [as an] African-American woman to honor our mothers’ sacrifices by developing self-defined analyses of Black motherhood” (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009, p. 187). The institution of womanhood/mothering is where I was taught discipline, deference, reciprocity and service. These lessons have weaved themselves through every narrative I write. These narratives are seamless. These narratives are invaluable. Yet in the world of rigorous, highly-vetted research, these narratives are deemed invalid. In *The Ethnocentric Basis of Social Science Knowledge Production*, John Stanfield asserts narratives, rather, “this provocative literature tends to be too impressionistic to be of much long-term value. Its shallow substance, promised, and conclusions can be attributed to at least three problems” (1985, p. 387). It is too emotional, lacks intellectual skills and most importantly, lacks institutional support. While I address the latter in the “Openings” chapter of this dissertation, I am grateful for the introduction of Patricia Hill-Collins to my academic body of knowledge so I could better understand the social and intellectual value of both the narratives and the actions of Black mothers.

Before reading *The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought* (1989/1995), I never critically thought of all these women I interacted with as a network of activists. They were simply doing what was necessary for us as children and our community as a whole; this is the work of othermothers – a role as old as our time in America, rooted in our African ways of knowing (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009). Othermothers are women who are concerned with the holistic care of their children, whether by birth or community...
These women are my first examples of field workers and their lived experiences, which they shared with me day in and day out, have always been a concrete criterion for meaning (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009).

I know mothers to be fiercely protective and strict disciplinarians in their children’s lives; this is the other side of the nurturing and ‘whatever-it-takes’ coin and is certainly not limited to Black mothers. Many television shows and movies depict mothers of diverse races/ethnicities as meddlesome, opinionated and controlling – all in the name of ‘knowing what is best’ for their children, regardless of their children’s age, geographic location or marital status. However, this lens does shift when considering the Black mother and understanding this distinction is crucial in how we interact with both her and her children. From a historical perspective, she is raising her children to enter, perform, and gain success within systems that have been designed to destroy them psychologically, intellectually, economically, and physically. Her teachings of survival and cultivation are not translated and characterized as that of a “Tiger Mom.” Instead, she has been publically (mis)translated into quick head snaps and sharp tongues. Her presence and physical appearances are not made just for comedies and heart-felt dramas; the Black Mother has been the target of government policies, law, and education.

In this way, I shift between the uses of mother, woman and othermother throughout the dissertation making the claim that everyone in discussion is concerned for the holistic care of our children and community.

Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother (2011), by Amy Chua, a mother who examines her practices of a traditional, strict, Chinese upbringing in raising her two daughters. While the memoir in large part was intended to be a self-mocking revelation of her techniques, mixed reviews of the book regarded it as a “how-to” guide as well as an exhortation of non-Western values.
literature loaded with the oppressive caricatures of submission, sexuality, and defiance\(^7\).

The same systems for which the Black mother prepares her child appear to work at ‘the root’ by leveling attacks against her. In as much as this project is a tool of affirmation for the work we do as Black mothers, it is also a teaching tool for those who only interact with us through a white patriarchal lens – particularly those we must forge collaborative relationships with in raising our children.

**Context**

The common factor for the women in this project is Chicago – where they were either raised or are currently raising children enrolled in the same elementary school. In February 2012, the city mayor – Rahm Emanuel – made the decision to close 17 underperforming elementary and secondary schools with a plan to redistribute resources, teachers, and of course our children. This move has been characterized as education apartheid because it disproportionally affects Black families and teachers (Rossi, 2012). Decisions such as these precipitated into the brutal death of Derrion Albert (1993-2009), which was captured on YouTube and summoned U. S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to declare the tragedy a “wake up call for the country” (Martinez, 2009). In this case, as mandated by the recent regulations of CPS, a low-performing high school was closed and its students were squeezed into another in the same neighborhood – doubling class sizes and mixing histories of long-standing untreated violence and hostility. It was the proverbial recipe for disaster. Annette Holt, mother of Blair Holt, who was killed two years prior noted, "someone said [Derrion] was in the wrong place at the wrong time. No, he wasn't. He was in the right place. He was coming from school" (Martinez, 2009). This

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\(^7\) These are elaborated upon in Chapter 1 and 2.
is what I hear, feel, see and know when parents say, “CPS is not an option.” Additionally, we know the war is not just amongst our children, but this war includes the mayor, the Local School Councils, the Teachers’ Union, the school faculties/staff, administrators on Clark Street, community organizations and every family concerned with the well-being of their children when they send them to school.

**The Journey of This Project**

The summer of 2011, I was granted the opportunity to work in Chicago for a 10-week Education fellowship. I was assigned to South Side Charter Elementary School (SSCES\(^8\)) which services students grades K-8. Several SSCES parents remarked that the neighborhood school (CPS) was “not an option” as many were closed or closing due to low-performance. The expressed goal for many of these parents is to graduate their children into one of the highly competitive, selective-enrollment schools in the city. Chicago is a city rich with all the politics of a mayor-controlled school system and historically segregated housing which in large parts determines the schooling experiences and sociocultural messages that are generated for generations. During this time at SSCES, I fielded many calls from parents and others who simply showed up to the main office, desperate to enroll their child stating: “*They labeled my child a behavior problem at his old school but when he got to the new school and started making A’s and B’s again the violence after school was too much so I need him to be here.*” “*I don’t care how long the waiting list is, my child belongs here. God will make a way.*” “*I will go to hell and back for my children. I will hold myself and this school accountable for their success.*”

As one parent was leaving with her new enrollment package, her kindergarten son turned

\(^8\) All names of school, faculty, staff, parents, and programs are noted with pseudonyms.
around to me and said, “I’m going to wear a cap and gown from this school,” smiled and ran out of the door. It is then heartbreaking to know that between the lottery and residential redistricting that there is not always a “choice.”

SSCES boasts an art-infused program that attracts many families from across the city in addition to the open-enrollment policy; therefore, there is a waiting list for each grade. From my understanding, before most parents saw a curriculum or met their first teacher, they were invested in SSCES, certainly as one of the major stakeholders in the school. I’d worked in the Chicago school system for nearly 10 years and had a strong working relationship with parents. This is why I was selected for this project – to develop a Parent University\(^9\), which is a theoretical space for parents to foster involvement with their children’s school and their overall learning experience. The events and incentives I developed would incorporate school parents, various city resources, as well as the faculty and staff. During my first week, the school’s Family Coordinator had previously teamed up with several parents to engage a discussion about school satisfaction and to create a plan of action for the upcoming school year. This would be a major springboard for both the Parent University and the parent involvement program, The Beacons, which at one-time boasted a roster of 50 parents.

Only about five of us had gathered in a resource classroom for our first Saturday morning meeting when Deja arrived. When I first saw her, I thought she was one of

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\(^9\) Parent Universities are designed as a theoretical space to instigate parent involvement. Ideally, the school works closely with the parents to establish a “credit system”, awarding credits for various activities (e.g. lunchroom duty, class mom, trip chaperone). The parents with substantial amounts of credits are recognized at various school ceremonies and may be awarded with items donated by community sponsors. The Parent University has grown popular across the country in various communities; there are some that have a physical space for parents that serve as a library and technology resource center.
those parents who made you want to walk in the opposite direction upon approach. She was out of breath when she reached the doorway and her unkempt hair was barely tucked under a baseball cap. She sat her McDonald’s bag at the meeting table and began to complain about her ongoing job search. I looked away dismissing the conversation she was pressing with other parents who were obviously more familiar with her. As the meeting picked up, these parents began a fervent exchange about the goals for their children. The general nature of this meeting was to discuss how to extend and build more resources to develop a fertile network for the parents and the school. I took copious notes of their responses to questions such as “what makes a successful school?” and “what can we do now?” Over and over, I heard the words, consistency, accountability, communication, trust and transparency. What took me back the most was when Deja pulled reports and articles from her bag addressing teacher retention, student success and so forth. She brought literature to underscore current challenges in the classroom, the school at-large and how the parents present could organize themselves to be more involved. Her goals for this meeting were aligned with the budding organization’s guiding principles. With three biological children and othermother to her sister’s children, she has a major stake in the school.

I felt ashamed for how I initially judged her. I thought she was there only to complain. I thought she was there to tell us how bad the teachers were. I thought she was there to explain to us that her child wasn’t a problem, the school was. I thought this because I translated her rushed appearance and relaxed tongue as unmotivated and confrontational. I recognized her as the archetypal Black mother for whom many pre-service teachers are warned. As a “good researcher” and community member, I didn’t
even realize I was coming in with such a strong bias. Additionally, the way this program was initially framed – to teach and incentivize the parents – did not allow me to actually see her and ultimately, them.

Before developing the University, my textbook research offered fill-in charts and tables of “Homework Time”, “Classroom Duties” and laundry lists of things parents can do to promote academic success. I found everything in my research on “getting parents more involved”, except the actual perspectives and voices of the parents. My time with the mothers in this community was transformative. I’d been “beating the street” by going to meetings at the alderwoman’s office, several neighborhood restaurants, professional development workshops and felt the hope of parents when I received their new-student enrollment packets. In 10 weeks, I was able to co-create a year-long calendar of events for the parents; however, the University and Beacons were disbanded after the first three months. Because of the energy I experienced with those mothers, I was heartbroken and felt as though I had failed them in some way. I immediately wanted to know what happened; I constructed research questions from a place of hurt and was ready to point a lot of fingers. In many ways, this project initially sought to answer a problem I thought I already understood. As I began to engage with the mothers, I realized that I still had much to learn about them. To focus on the issues of the school would not only position the administration as an enemy, which was not my intent – nor was it true, but would also further marginalize these mothers’ needs and goals for their children, which had been my primary focus. I slowly realized that the nuanced perspectives of these mothers was rich in its own right and the school was not the point of departure, but the mothers could stand and speak on their own.
Research Questions

So what is the trade off for bringing Black mothers to the Ivory Tower? They’ve been to this stage before, as crackheads, welfare queens, mammies and castrating matriarchs (Davis, 1993). It is then important for me to examine the ways in which these women have been positioned across categories of gender, race and class, as well as categories of their nomination. My research fails if a space is not created which allows them to ask questions and to use this project to their own ends.

We (my participants and self) are writing Black mothers – and ultimately Black women – into the literature via our lived experiences. This is a space where we shift the light to “pursue our magic and make it realized.” (Lorde, 1977/2007). I define “we” through the lens of Sofia Villenas (1996) who writes from the perspective of the colonized and the colonizer, challenging researchers of color to control their multiplicity of identity, history of complicity and mark their own points of marginalization (p. 91). Critical ethnographer and mother Renée Craft Alexander notes, “Black women have not been waiting to be called. We are simply inviting people into a conversation that is already taking place. We are – and have been – on the front lines” (personal communication, 2011). Black women’s work has pushed itself through various disciplines dating to the early 19th century. The articulations of Sojourner Truth (b. 1797), Maria Miller Stewart (b. 1803), Anna Julia Cooper (b. 1859), who were in the ‘field’ before and alongside Elizabeth Cady Stanton and W.E.B. DuBois 10, are critical intersectional contributions, which have too long existed in shadows. As Barbara Omolade (1994) wrote of being “a product of an intellectual tradition which until twenty-

10 Foremost leaders in feminist and Black thought.
five years ago did not exist within the academy” (p. ix), the excavation of Black women and mother’s theory and praxis have been documented through slavery to our current Hiphop/technology generation in major anthologies, legal briefs, special edition journals, fiction, and song (see Tomorrow’s Tomorrow (1971); Ain’t I a Woman (1981); All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave (1982); In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens (1983); When and Where I Enter (1984); Their Highest Potential (1996); How Long, How Long (2000); Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow (2009)). This work simply and directly asks, “are you paying attention?”

The goals of this dissertation are to further a dialogue that questions how Black women come to understand their relationship to education, the role of schooling and to contribute to the growing literature and practices of motherwork from their homes and respective communities. I am particularly interested in further exploration of how Black women develop ways of knowing regarding teaching, activism, race, and womanhood. I will also give consideration to how these women’s narratives can potentially impact in-school relationships. This dissertation which will offer a rich perspective of Black women as mothers, othermothers, and daughters in 21st century Chicago, has four central questions:

(1) What perspectives are present in the narratives of Black mothers?
(2) What does it look like when Black mothers advocate?
(3) How do these Black mothers’ understandings of parent involvement speak to the dominant discourse?
(4) How are the narratives of Black women different/similar to one another?

Methods

My fieldwork for this project began in the summer of 2010. To examine the ideologies and impact of the women I interacted with, I sent a recruitment notification to
ten women who were active members of The Beacons. Five of them agreed to be interviewed\textsuperscript{11}. All of them had served in key positions for the organization. A qualitative methods approach was employed in two rounds of interviews with the women: the first round focused on their schooling experiences and decisions they make on behalf of their children. The second round was based upon the Mothering framework (Hill-Collins, 2004a), which specifically asked the participants to explore and name the nuances of intergenerational and intercommunal relationships and support systems; family traditions and expectations; agency and activism. The interviews were coded and analyzed as narratives and coupled with the reflexive journaling of my participation as both a researcher and an othermother. Black feminist epistemology is the theoretical framework that has directed this project, fieldwork and interpretation of findings.

**Black Feminist Theory**

Black feminist theory (BFT) has its roots in standpoint theory: a feminist materialism that enables us to expand the Marxian critique of capitalism to include all of human activity, especially the activity of women (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009; Hartsock, 1983). According to Black feminist theorist and activist Pearl Cleage (1994), feminism is “the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities – intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual, and economic (p. 28). Employing Black feminism provides support for examining how issues affecting Black women in the U.S. are part of women’s global emancipation struggles (Davis, 1989; Hill-Collins, 1990/2009; Moore, 2009). Therefore, BFT is critical

\textsuperscript{11} See Appendix I.
to this project as it values the intellectual and active contributions of Black women and values Black mothers.

For a Black woman to claim the identity of ‘feminist’ in light of the ‘housewives’ concerns’ explored in Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is a strategic, revolutionary shift of lens to explore the issues that have been affecting masses of women, such as economic survival and racial discrimination (hooks, 1981). Black feminist Linda La Rue (1970/1995) ardently asserts that “attempt[s] to analogize black oppression with the plight of the American white woman has the validity of comparing the neck of a hanging man with the hands of an amateur mountain climber with rope burns” (p. 164). There has been a community urgency to break from the patriarchal press of White ‘sisters’ and Black ‘brothers’, which is not set in direct opposition to either, but to acknowledge the entire body of feminist praxis – not just that done in “waves”.

Whereas Friedan grew up never knowing a woman “who used her mind, played her own part in the world, and also loved, and had children” (p. 68), Black feminism affirms a lineage that concretely chronicles Black women’s steadfast intellectual, spiritual and physical participation in *every* facet of the Black liberation struggle.

**Black women and mothers’ identity.** The theme of identity is a tightrope walk for mothers to plant positive self-affirmations for their children in the midst of protecting them from a society where they are systematically cut down. While in the womb, Black children are inherently subjected to the persistent and controlling images of their mothers. Challenging these images is a staple of Black feminism. Hill-Collins writes, “portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mamas helps justify U.S. Black women’s oppression” (2004a, p. 47). Images of Black
motherhood are aligned with stereotypes of Jezebel, Sapphire and Mammy – the accepted depictions of chattel-slave women that have sustained American post-colonial behaviors. While all images are deliberately antithetical to the beauty and grace of the Victorian White woman, they have distinct roles.

The Jezebel is a sexual deviate and breeder of the slave master’s children. Her sexual relationships with the men of the plantation are never viewed as rape – for she is a temptress. Sapphire is rough, domineering and emasculating – your all-purpose belligerent Black bitch. Mammy, in contrast to both, is asexual, afeminine, virtuous and conformable. She is responsible for the inner-workings of two households (the Master’s and her own) and tends to the slave master’s children with great care. In reality, many Mammy’s were not only the sexual property of the slave master, but were responsible for breast-feeding the children of the house – assuming responsibilities of the ‘delicate’ White mistress. Such work denied her the opportunity to wholly care for her own children. Mammy is regarded by dominant society as close to traditional womanhood as a Black woman can come: pious, pure, submissive and domestic (read: non-threatening).

Of the three images, Mammy is the most persistent. An advertisement for a 1910 vocational school in Athens, Georgia stated its mission to “train the Negro in the arts and industries that made the ‘old Black Mammy’ valuable and worthy… where men and women learn to work, how to work, and to love their work” (Roberts, 1997, p. 13). Her caricature – an overweight, jubilant and ‘Crayola’ black woman, was produced as early as 1889 with the manufacture of Aunt Jemima pancakes – which is still an active image in 2012 – and was converted into a celluloid image by Hollywood productions in 1915 (Dates & Barlow, 1993). This is the long-standing, upright image to which a Black
mother should aspire and any variation deems her sub-deviant. (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009, 2004a; Austin, 2003) It is here we locate the contemporary creation and perpetuation of Welfare Queen (WQ), Crack Mother (CM)\textsuperscript{12}, and Teenage-Baby-Mama (TBM) (i.e., lazy, reckless and promiscuous), of which any Black woman can be a combination of the two or three.

It is largely assumed that Black mothers purposely have children to create a larger government-issued income (i.e. WQ) which feeds into their lack of motivation and intelligence. Now, passed down through genetics and practice is an increased rate of unwed mothers.

There is a widespread belief that poor black women who raise children alone in socially and economically isolated enclaves encourage teenage pregnancy by example, subsidize it through informal friendship and extended family networks, and justify it by prizing motherhood, devaluing marriage, and condoning welfare dependency (Austin, 2003, p. 303).

While there has been a dramatic increase among single White mothers since 1965 (Roberts, 1997), it is persistently “viewed as a Black cultural trait that is creeping into white homes… White childbearing is generally thought to be a beneficial activity; it brings personal joy and allows the nation to flourish. Black reproduction, on the other hand, is treated as a form of degeneracy” (p. 9). The media has turned its proverbial blade into this fact: Hollywood issued its Oscar-nominated film Precious, (which granted the Black mother character – who was so violent that Bette Davis would’ve cringed – the award of Best-Supporting Actress,) promoting the quintessential “Bad Black Mother (BBM)” (Hill-Collins, 2004b), who was young, unwed, obese, illiterate,

\textsuperscript{12} “Welfare Queen,” a trope of Former President Ronald Reagan, was first used during his 1976 presidential campaign in reference to a woman on the South Side of Chicago (Douglas & Michaels, 2004).
sexually abused and is later revealed to have contracted HIV. In the same season, Bristol Palin, daughter of GOP Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin, was brought to light as a courageous, teenage single-mother asserting her pro-choice rights and has since reportedly garnered over a quarter of a million dollars as a spokesperson for young adult unplanned pregnancies. Bristol Palin’s child was never called illegitimate. Nevertheless, both images were celebrated for their respective reasons. The former is posed to remind us that Black unwed mothers are “carrying on like modern-day Jezebels when they should be acting like good revisionist Mammies” (Austin, 2003, p. 305).

These psychological identities can only appear less threatening when compared to the physical detriment and criminalization of Black mothers who are crack users. This drug that was introduced to the Black community in the early 1980s, has stimulated the rapid and rabid effect of community deterioration in 10 years almost akin to 100 years of the African Holocaust. It is not easy to argue against the issue that Black mothers and injurious drug use is a concern of child rights at best and a form of genocide at worst; however, to use child rights as a scapegoat to punish poor, Black women should be considered proportionately vile. It is not just that these women are drug users, but crack users and of special note are the legal manipulations which have ensured the prosecution of Black women and their reproductive rights, often deterring addicts from counseling and treatment services due to the sure threat of incarceration or determinate division from their other children (Roberts, 1997, p. 167). Targeting this form of drug use, as opposed to alcohol and/or prescription drugs which also affect fetuses at markedly high rates, exposes the issue of class and race. This is reminiscent of Oscar Lewis’ work on the “culture of poverty” (which has been rebottled and sold to pre-service teachers and
professional development seminars via Ruby Payne) that lists cultural traits of the poor to be “lazy, fatalistic, hedonistic, violent, distrustful, people living in common law unions, as well as in dysfunctional, female-centered, authoritarian families who are chronically unemployed and rarely participate in local civic activities, vote, or trust the police and political leaders” (Foley, 1997, p. 115) This sweeping indictment of “the poor” makes it easy to launch “War”. It appears that the aim is to punish and prohibit the reproductive rights of Black women who have not made the best of their precarious situations while keeping a tight fist on treatment and rehabilitation, which should also be in the best interest of the child’s health, not just the jail sentences and abductions.

These images and issues illuminate the critical need for Black Feminism as it asserts that the work of Black mothers has been about more than “dishpan hands” (La Rue, 1970/1995, p. 164.) The historical characterizations of the Black woman position her as combative, apathetic and emasculating – especially in her own home. The reality is that home leadership has been narrowly defined by who earns the (larger) paycheck, while it not emphasized that major family decisions are often a shared responsibility despite financial income. In fact, Black mothers have often been penalized by the government for securing legal relationships with their partners, thereby bloating the statistics of single and female-headed households. Additionally, Black mothers have actually been accused of suffocating their sons and daughters while they have worked beyond capacity to protect their children from a society that has brutally/fatally penalized young Black boys and girls for asserting their manhood or demoralizing their sexuality, without the protection or service of the law. While care and personal responsibility have been staples of motherhood, it is crucial to view the work of Black mothers in a context
that is situated in their lived experiences and through personal dialogue (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009).

The most prominent lenses created to examine the lives of Black women are Black Feminist Thought (BFT) (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009); Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989); Womanism (Walker, 1983); and Critical Race Feminism (Wing, 1997/2003). The potency of these lenses is far greater than their splitting hairs; each lens projects Black women as agents of change and creators of knowledge. This is evidenced in the overlapping works contributed by Black women who blur disciplines to submit a collective experience. However, for the frame of this project, BFT is most beneficial to define and explore the varied positions and perspectives of Black mothers. BFT is connected to a lineage that examines the work of Black women through slavery, to suffrage, to civil rights and family rights which is important as the work life of Black women predates the feminist movement that houses much of the literature on motherhood. The work of Patricia Hill-Collins (1990/2009) is most poignant as she posits four tenets of BFT that are central for both theory and method: (1) lived experience is the concrete criterion for meaning (2) dialogue should be used in assessing knowledge claims (3) the ethic of caring (4) the ethic of personal responsibility. All of these tenets directly inform the work of Black mothers.

Motherwork

Patricia Hill-Collins (1990/2009) posits that there has been a collective reluctance of U.S. Black women to contribute to critical analyses of Black motherhood because of the persistent discourse posed by feminism, with limited effectiveness due to “the combination of its perceived Whiteness and antifamily politics” (p. 190). This is why it
is critical to understand the varied discourse on motherhood; early feminist work – particularly through the 1980’s – held a limited critique of motherhood that ignored complexities of race and class and organized family life into two spheres: public and private, i.e., separation of work and home.

Motherwork (Hill-Collins, 2004a) is then presented as a challenge to these separate spheres. This framework is grounded in Black women’s agency and concerned with social problems such as: child care for U.S. Black mothers; education opportunities for Black children; the prison pipeline for Black men; and the disproportionate numbers of Black children in foster care. Hill-Collins uses the term motherwork which “can be done on behalf of one’s own biological children, or for the children of one’s own racial ethnic community, or to preserve the earth for those children who are yet unborn” (2004a, p. 48). In earlier writing she explores five types of motherwork. This includes: 1. *Women-Centered Networks (WCN)* which are described as a community of mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, cousins [or neighbors] responsible for taking care of the children. Because of the historical value of WCN, many of these women grow to gain “a reputation for never turning away a needy child” (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009, p. 198) 2. *Mothers and Daughters* describes the ways mothers communicate love in an environment that calls for their protection and survival. 3. *Community Othermothers and Political Activism* describes “mothering of the mind” which demands education to be used in a socially responsible way. 4. *Motherhood as a Symbol of Power* explores issues of class, the dumbing down of Black women’s work and the work of community women who are “nameless in scholarly texts, yet everyone in their neighborhoods knows their names” (1990/2009, p. 208). 5. *The View from the Inside* describes mothering as a
“fundamentally contradictory institution” (1990/2009, p. 211) and shares the narratives of Black mothers.

**Forward**

This chapter has provided an introduction to the research problem, significance, the journey of the project, methods and epistemology. Chapter 2 explores the dominant discourses that focus on Black mothers. I specifically discuss the literature on parent involvement, government reform, popular media and briefly introduce the perspectives of the women who have participated in this project as a means of “speaking back.” Chapter 3 provides the methods for this dissertation. In Chapter 4, the women speak. Chapter 5 provides an interpretation and analysis of the narratives according to four themes and reflexive journaling. Chapter 6 will conclude by addressing the implications of these Black mothers’ lived/shared experiences.
Who Says What About Black Women

*If Black women do not speak for themselves, other people will do it for us badly.*
– Barbara Christian, 1985

Figure 1: Postcard from early 1900’s. Bottom caption reads, “Just a Nigger”. Charleston, S.C.\

Our First Stage: Scientific Discourse

Cornel West (1982/2003) asserts, “the notion that [B]lack people are human beings is a relatively new discovery in the modern West” (p. 298) (See Figure 1). While the construction of race in America is seen as both permeable and problematic, it has had a substantial impact on law and policy; educational research and practice; and self-

actualization. From a ‘bottom up’ perspective, this has been absolutely true – and detrimental – for Black women, particularly when we consider body rights and motherhood. The most salient of these experiences is that of Saartjie (Sara) Baartman, or the Venus Hottentot (c.1789-1815). This Khoi/South African woman was exhibitioned throughout Europe, branded as “other”, and exoticized for her large buttocks and elongated labia (See Figure 2). One hundred seventy years after Baartman’s untimely death, cultural and literary historian Sander Gilman (1985) wrote an article that recapitulated Baartman to prominence and created a theoretical upsurge in analyses of race and gender. In Which Bodies Matter?, sociologist Zine Magubane (2001) makes the claim that any scholar wishing to advance an argument on gender and colonialism, gender and science, or gender and race must, it seems, quote Sander Gilman who concluded:

The antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty is embodied in the Black, and the essential Black, the lowest rung on the great chain of being, is the Hottentot. The physical appearance of the Hottentot is, indeed, the central nineteenth-century icon for sexual difference between the European and the Black (Gilman, 1985, p. 231).

Magubane notes this regressive direction of gender and race research which fails to take into consideration the colonial practices that in fact enslaved Baartman, paraded her as a European freakshow exhibit, and dissected her body during the Romantic Period – which ironically enough, is a time that has been deemed a reaction against scientific rationalization.

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14 Her remains were examined, placed on display in Musée de l'Homme (Paris) until 1974 and were not returned to her birthhome for proper burial until May 6, 2002.
“La Belle Hottentot” is a 19th century French print depicting a London exhibition of European observers remarking on this Khoi woman's body: "Oh! God Damn what roast beef!" and "Ah! how comical is nature."\textsuperscript{15}

Baartman is our earliest example of an intersectional approach in race-gender research, which departs from a “single-axis framework” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 30). Whereas Black women have been regarded as either too much like women, or too much like Blacks, the heterogeneity of their experiences has been collapsed and absorbed by either group. Black mothers hold an even more precarious position between the two assumed binaries and are thereby regarded as too hard to define or easily erasable. It is imperative that all analyses of Black mothers take intersectionality into account to sufficiently address the particularities of their subordination and to confront the reinscription of white supremacy.

**Government Discourse**

\textsuperscript{15} Image retrieved March 22, 2011, from http://english.emory.edu/Bahri/Hott.html
Initial analyses of Black mothers were largely conducted by men. A primary example of this work is by D. P. Moynihan, commissioned by Former President Johnson during his “War on Poverty.” In the 1965 United States Labor Department report, *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*, Moynihan narrows the problem of American society to the Negro family, specifically the mother. Citing the “Black Matriarch” as a byproduct of slavery which “in all its forms sharply lowered the need for achievement in slaves,” he states, “the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole…” Adding insult to injury, there were aspects of the report that were endorsed by the Black patriarchal class of the time such as M.L. King, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young (Giddings, 1984).

In *When and Where I Enter* (1984), Paula Giddings discusses the major theme of the report, which emphasizes the male’s psychological and physiological need to “strut” and the reception of the report, which all but said, “just make Black men the lords of their own castles and everything will be all right” (p. 328). However, this would necessitate that Black women slow down, “become less achievement-oriented, give up much of their independence. By remaining assertive, they were ruining the family and so ruining the race” (p. 328, 329). These deficit-model analyses of Black families honed in on Black mothers creating controlling images that have undergirded studies which critique welfare reform, reproductive legislation, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and education policies. These analyses were publically recycled and stood alone until the growth of modern Black feminism in the 1970’s (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009).
In another critique of the “Black Matriarch,” sociologist Robert Staples (1981/1970) asserts:

the financial value set on slave children and the rewards given to successful motherhood in cash, kind, and promotion from field slave to house slave gave an especially high status to the mother, a status which the father could only enjoy if placed in a position akin to that of a stud animal, this leading to a breaking of family ties and the degradation of family life still further… The black family’s desire to remain together was subordinated to the economic interests of the slave-holding class. Only the mother-child bond continually resisted the disruptive effect of economic interest… (p. 28).

The separation of work and home are luxuries that had not been afforded the Black mother as she worked seamlessly through the master’s house, the fields, and her own family home, from ‘can see to can’t see.’ What can be learned from slavery is that Black women were involuntarily brought to this country to both work and nurture. And whereas the female saw promotion through motherhood, this so-called access opened the door for both sexual exploitation and the responsibility of heading her household. To be clear, the issue is not one of a female-headed household, it is challenging the assumptions imbedded in a society that “expects and rewards male leadership,” (Staples, p. 31) which has been constructed through a single-axis, whitestream lens. This is the lens that informed the Moynihan Report and fostered the idea of the patriarchal need to “strut” and thereby “provide.” To then identify the Black mother as a “matriarch” in this context – a label that has been defaulted to her by the cruelty of her “master” – is in fact “a classical example of what Malcolm X called making the victim the criminal.” (Staples, p. 26) The challenge for Black mothers is then twofold: to work against the norm which asserts a universal search for “personal autonomy… as the human guiding quest” (p. 48) and to use her energy for the building and rebuilding of community relationships.
Historically, education has been understood to be one of the most powerful tools in citizenship and social mobility. Unfortunately, when Black mothers are actually named in Educational discourse, it is often through the deficit-based lens of poverty. Educational sociology literature propagated by the Moynihan Report, promotes a culture of poverty, (Lewis, 1959) often preparing pre-service teachers to enter urban school environments in full-metal jackets, with missionary-like zeal. Charles Murray’s book, Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980 (1984) is a significant text that reports the federal efforts and statistical analysis of education for Blacks after Brown v. Board of Education, reaching into wider society effects. In Part II, Being Poor, Being Black, Charles Murray reaffirms, “we are using blacks as our proxy for …the poor and disadvantaged” (p. 116) and writes that many 1960s youth were functionally illiterate, without social capital and were surviving through an “explosion” of criminal activity – most notably, urban Blacks. Inserting graphs, national census data, and other research findings (the same as his co-authored work in The Bell Curve (1994) which sought to provide empirical evidence of the intellectual inferiority of Blacks and minorities), Murray continues in a discussion of The Family asserting the social detriment of illegitimate births and the fertility of Black females – particularly teenagers. It is important that teenagers are emphasized because they are often single parents, with limited education and resources, giving birth to moderately healthy children (using low-birth weight as an indicator of physical and mental risk problems,) who are born into federal dependency. Using the next generation as a mark of progression, “being poor and Black” in Murray’s multi-level analyses appears to provide several impenetrable
arguments, where despite “however much [the poor and disadvantaged mothers] may love [their children]” (p. 129), they are statistical detriments to American society.

This suggested lens is imperative in understanding how researchers and teachers, as well as the parents and children themselves, enter urban schools. Ruby Payne has taken this lens as an opportunity to provide *A Framework: Understanding and working with students and adults from Poverty* (1995). This book, currently in its 4th edition, is marketed as a “must-read for educators, employers, policymakers, service providers,” having sold nearly one million copies, and has catapulted Payne into an international expert consultant on “the poverty mindset” and education. Her career began by having informal discussions with other educators regarding her opinions on poverty and discipline. After several conversations that blossomed into formal presentations, she was encouraged to write a book on her observations. Her primary source at this time had been her husband of 22 years who experienced situational poverty for a brief period as a child. She then notes, that her marriage, combined with her teaching experiences, provided her with 24 years of data on poverty (Payne, p. 2). I briefly highlight Payne’s background and credentials to illuminate her influence and what passes as “expert opinion.”

The introduction of her book lists 18 decontextualized statistical data of poverty, specifically noting the deficits of “minority children.” The first chapter presents seven fictional case studies, each overrun with drug, sexual, spousal, child abuse; gang violence; welfare dependency; financial irresponsibility; illiteracy; second-language acquisition; church dependency; prostitution; incarceration; mental health concerns; single-parenting; abandonment; and the threat of homelessness. This list is exhausting;
however, I write each one of the 16 deficits to provide the same sense of dramatization
Payne employs to manipulate stereotypes and vilifying pictures of the “other,” right down
to the name choices. Her scenarios set the tone for the framework that intentionally
overwhelm the reader, while they also provide a sense of relief (“whew, that’s not me,”)
in the hopes of perhaps leveraging – not what is recognized as privilege – but an
obligation to save these people from themselves. The work of Ruby Payne is not simply
an indictment of “poor” parenting but makes Mothers of Color the target of her emotional
and unsubstantiated assumptions and assaults.

School Discourse

Parent Involvement discourse appears to ignore the narratives of Black mothers as
it relates to the expectations for their children, their networks of support outside of the
“nuclear” family, and most importantly how the mothers themselves define involvement.
“These maternal figures – be they biological mothers, grandmothers, or fictive kin
mothers – are all mothers who are highly revered women [in African-American culture]
seen not only as the bearer and nurturers of children, but the bearers of culture, faith and
resiliency” (Cooper & McCoy, 2009). However, dominant narratives often position
Black mothers as chronically impoverished subjects that need to be taught parenting
(McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999), or they are collapsed into the parent involvement discourse
that “tends to favor White, middle class parents” (Fields-Smith, 2007, p. 167), rendering
invisible the complexities of Black motherwork. Therefore, the issue does not squarely
lie with parent involvement as much as it does with how we understand mothering.
Griffin and Smith (2005) discuss parent involvement through the lens of “mothering,”
posing that the dominant discourse of parental involvement has “subordinated mothers’
experiential understanding of their children to the generalities constructed [by] child psychologists and psychiatrists, social workers and educators, and authors in the popular press and television” (p. 36). We are made to understand that mothers are not regarded as informed enough to speak for the development of their own children and participation in their education must be mediated by “experts.”

Aligned with this purpose, Joyce Epstein (2009) has created a widely-accepted framework, originally designed in 1997 and is currently in its third edition. *School, Family and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*, defines six types of opportunities for parental involvement: (1) assisting with child rearing skills, (2) school communication with the parent, (3) volunteer opportunities for the parents, (4) home-based learning for the parents, (5) involving the parents in school decision-making, and (6) involving parents in school-community collaboration. Epstein notes that this is a substantial shift from her earlier work which only emphasized basic obligations, one-way communication, school/home involvement, this framework still operates on the assumption that mothers have to be taught or made to be involved. These “types of opportunities” have a “top-down” approach, which posits the school, teachers and administrators, as the primary capital holders. There are specific goals for the teachers that list an “increased diversity and use of communication,” and “understanding of families’ backgrounds, cultures…” (p. 18). Goals for the parents are listed as “self-confidence about ability to work in school and with children, or to take steps to improve own education; awareness of child as learner; interactions with teachers and eased communications with school and teachers” (p. 18). These opportunities for involvement are not the major point of contention as much as the fact that while these opportunities
list specific goals for the benefit of the schools and the students, they do not cite opportunities for parent leadership and for the parents to leverage the resources they bring. The handbook quotes “research” (without specific citations) stating, “affluent communities tend to have more positive family involvement, on average, unless schools and teachers in economically distressed communities work to build positive partnerships with their students’ families” (p. 12). The “expected results” for teachers and parents are clear markers that Epstein writes for a community of “others” – people that “need” to be taught appropriate school culture and parenting skills. This framework and discourse alludes to the societal construction of moral responsibilities women have to their children, which haphazardly draws a major tension with parent involvement that is largely defined by school and state requirements (Griffin & Smith, 2005).

**Mothering Discourse**

It is important to note the pivotal roles of not just parents in education, but *mothers*. A great deal of feminist theorizing about motherhood posed a “dichotomous split” (p. 46), assigning gender roles that divided the family into an “archetypal white, middle-class nuclear family,” (p. 46) where the men/fathers exerted power over women/mothers in both the labor market and the home. Recall this discourse organizes family life into two spheres: public and private. Patricia Hill-Collins (2004a) stresses that the public sphere emphasized economy and politics (i.e. work). The private sphere emphasized family and household responsibilities (i.e. home). Ultimately, the fathers are drawn as “workers” and mothers as “affectionate nurter[ers]” (p. 47), and the whole success of society hinged upon the adult male who achieved autonomy through this
construction. Therefore, it has theoretically been the responsibility of the mother to ensure the development of the child.

However, it is not just *any* mother that could ‘do the job.’ This particular organization of family grants the mother the role of also ensuring “their children could reproduce the class status of their parents,” (Griffin & Smith, 2005, p. 24) using the public school system as the primary vehicle. This exercise of social and cultural capital allows for the entrance of males into higher education institutions; this reproduction of class then also becomes tied to academic achievement. To create more complexity, Black mothers must make effort to emulate this class reproduction, with hairline access to class mobility; address overt and systematic racism; and adhere to pressing needs of childcare, transportation and cultural mismatching, and inadequate school environments. Thusly, Black mothers must understand what are the “appropriate” behaviors for school engagement (Fields-Smith, 2007).

The National Congress of Mothers (NCM) was founded in 1897 and it was directly concerned “with schools, with further parenting influences in them, and with promoting and supporting the establishment of local parent-teacher associations (PTAs)” (Griffin & Smith, 2005, p. 23). This group had a major influence in U.S. social change until the *Red Scare* of the 1920s, and their focus became limited to schooling (Ladd-Taylor, 1997; Griffin & Smith, 2005). While the NCM continued its focus of representing local PTAs, it *excluded* the PTAs of Black women (Walker, 2000; Griffin & Smith, 2005). In 1926, Black PTAs were organized into the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers (NCCPT) (Grant, 1998; Griffin & Smith, 2005). Their
concerns not only met the needs inside of the schools but also “confronted” racism and segregation barriers (Dickson, 1998; Higginbotham, 1985; Griffin & Smith, 2005).

Controlling Images

Figure 3: Popular media image of Black mother.¹⁶

In the past two years, an onslaught of reports and campaigns have been launched in a relentless pursuit to shape public and private perceptions of Black women’s and mother’s identity. An economy report issued March 9, 2010, by Insight Center for Community Economic Development stated that single Black women, who are 40% of Black female population, have a median wealth of five dollars; this works to emphasize a poverty culture. Additionally, married or cohabitating Black women scarcely earn 18% of the salary of married White women (Grant, 2010). Shifting from money to health, reports have notoriously tied Black women to the rising HIV/AIDS epidemic; again in

March of 2010, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported a spike in herpes – a virus that makes the body more susceptible to HIV/AIDS – and that 48% of Black women are infected\(^\text{17}\) (CDC, 2010). Noting that not only are diseases ravaging Black women’s bodies but external appearance leave much to be desired. Satoshi Kanazawa, a well-noted researcher and blogger with Psychology Today posted the article “Why Black Women Are Less Physically Attractive Than Other Women” on May 15, 2011\(^\text{18}\), statistically claiming that Black women are the most unattractive, physically and intellectually, compared to European, Asian and Native American women. With these statistics and reports, it is not implausible to understand why Black women are not equipped to build suitable family structures and communities. The first installment of the CNN series, Black in America: The Black Woman and Family (2008), sparked a litany of roundtable discussions, none more shameful than, Black Marriage Negotiations (2010) – a viral video (reminiscent of the Shahrazad Ali 1989 manifesto, The Blackman’s Guide to Understanding the Blackwoman,) overrun with the idea that Black women cannot successfully mate with Black men, thereby dismantling the Black family. Reality television, taking its cue from the ‘experts’, has banked on this spectacle with the sensationalizing of Real Housewives of Atlanta [RHOA] (2008), Basketball Wives (2010), Love and Hiphop (2011), and the Celebrity Apprentice fiasco (fueled by one-time presidential-hopeful Donald Trump) between Nene Leakes (of RHOA) and Star Jones (of The View) in March 2011.

\(^{17}\) This result is from a sample of 893 Black women. It is not clear that the study only tested for antibodies to the virus (noting exposure, not necessarily infection), which rendered a public misinterpretation of the data (Crute, 2010).

\(^{18}\) The article was removed within the same week.
What is most soul-piercing, is the anti-abortion campaign that has recently targeted Black women. In February 2011, a major-traffic area in the SoHo neighborhood of Manhattan, New York stood a billboard featuring a 6-year old Black girl, under a caption that read, “the most dangerous place for an African American is in the womb” (See Figure 4). Another U.S. billboard of the Texas-based group, “Life Always” read: “Black Children are an Endangered Species: Too Many Abortions.” Members of the same group have noted the New York message was a Black History Month commemoration (Holloway, 2011). It is clear that for every Michelle Obama, Sesame Street “I love my hair” segment, or Black Girls Rock awards ceremony, a feverish witch-hunt style retrenchment of the Black women’s character has ensued.

![SoHo billboard](http://www.theroot.com/views/re-ppnyc-statement-abortion-billboard-targeting-african-americans-nyc)

**Figure 4: SoHo billboard**

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19 In this viral video (also created in October, 2010) a puppet with an afro sings a love song to her hair. Joey Mazzarino, head writer of Sesame Street, penned the segment as a celebration/encouragement for his 5-year Black daughter who began to admire the long, blonde hair of her dolls. As of February 1, 2012, the video has had over 3.3 million views.

20 Black Girls Rock! Inc. celebrated their 4th year in October 2010, with an awards celebration hosted by Black Entertainment Television.

While these reports may state facts to raise awareness and pose calls-for-action, each and every stroke of these examples blatantly work to compose a painful portrait: We are to be reminded/told that we are broke, diseased, ugly and dumb, emasculating, unprofessional and not just bad mothers, but murderers. These controlling images are crucial blows to how we are perceived by others. They also impact how we relate and practice with one another, which is critical in understanding that who we are as Black women is primarily shaped by women – our mothers and othermothers. As illustrated in a 1972 study by sociologist Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, the achievement of professional Black women “had little to do with advantage but a great deal to do with the attitudes of each woman’s family, her sense of self-worth, the role of her mother, and her superior’s perception of her” (Giddings, 1984, p. 332). Of the many lenses used to examine Black women and mothers (e.g., scientific research, government policy, media) our lived experiences have been masked by stereotypes, ill-will and self-serving benevolence. “Full utilization of the economic, political, and social resources that black women represent cannot depend on the demand of a society insincerely committed to an ethic of integration and equal opportunity” (Austin, 2003, p. 301).

“The Most Dangerous Place…”: Black Mothers’ Rights

In 2011, the law publically intervened in unimaginable ways to devalue and divide the relationship between Black mothers and children. Raquel Davis, of Marietta, Georgia, suffered an incredible loss when her 4-year son was struck and killed in an unmarked intersection by a motorist who had two previous hit-and-runs on his driving record, and his system revealed an overdose of prescription drugs. After serving six months of a five-year sentence, he was released and the county began prosecuting Davis
for jaywalking and vehicular manslaughter (while she does not even own a car). Held in custody, thereby separated from her two other children, facing a three-year conviction, she was found guilty and sentenced to a year of probation, community service and additional leniency in the form a new trial. For Davis, it was not her marital status or drugs in her system that made her a criminal, but her son’s hand slipping from hers while crossing the street.

Earlier this same year, Kelly Williams-Bolar (Ohio) enrolled her two daughters into a highly competitive school that they were ineligible to attend because they lived in another district. After the district discovered the reported address of the girls, which was the home of their father who in fact did live in the district, Williams-Bolar was jailed for 10 days and sentenced to a three year probation for falsifying documents and was required to pay $30,000 in back tuition. “The Copley-Fairlawn District, school officials said she was cheating because her daughters received a quality education without paying taxes to fund it… Those dollars need to stay home with our students” (Chang & Williams, 2011).

Three months later Tonya McDowell (Connecticut) was arrested for lying about her permanent address “so that her 6-year old son could attend a school outside the district of the minivan in which they were living” (Andrews, 2011). Charged with grand larceny for allegedly stealing $15,686 from Norwalk schools, she is facing the possibility of a 20-year conviction. The city mayor Richard Moccia stated, “This is an ex con, and somehow the city of Norwalk is made into the ogre in this. She has a checkered past at best” (Andrews, 2011). Perhaps Mayor Moccia, but what about our children?
The current talk in education revolves around school choice as a band-aid measure for school failure. This has been promoted with films such as the aptly titled, *Waiting for Superman*, and the frenziedly scalable success of community and charter schools across the country. “This fits a pattern of Black parents seeking increased accountability, opportunity, choice, and voice within their children’s schools, which they have done since the advent of schooling” (Cooper, 2005). However, what is the choice when many of the public, urban neighborhood schools look much like the prisons children will be pipelined to and the alternative is to pick a number? As evidenced throughout this review, blaming the victim and criminalization of Black mothers is not at all new. Additionally, the cases of Williams-Bolar and McDowell are two contemporary examples of a rich history which dispels long held myths that Black people – particularly low income mothers – do not care about the education of their children; while at the same time, the ‘whatever it takes’ attitude is fast-becoming a punishable offense.

**We Speak**

While the five women who participated in this project are mothers within the same school, they are not a monolithic group. They represent a range of expectations and needs that have been developed over generations and cultural norms with significant commonalities and goals. When they were asked to define “mother”, the responses included: protector, educator, nutritionist, power, champion, strong. Their responses often reflected the examples of their own homes, what they longed for, or myths they work to uphold and each woman explored these definitions according to their lived experiences. They cite everyday practices without referencing one theorist or law. Much of the literature reviewed in this project was foreign to them and while some became
visibly emotional when discussing the court cases and media images, each one of them was clear about her position. Sonia tells me, “I don't take it personally. My focus is more on [my son’s] development.” For Maya, this very clearly means planning a system of accountability and open communication between herself, her daughter, her daughter’s teachers and the school administrators. “You have my cell phone, my email, my work number, but we’ve all spent time together and you know what kind of kid she is. You have her for 6 hours. Do what you have to do, then come to me.” None of these mothers claim to have read a handbook – although Maya says it would be impossible to write a completely effective one anyway. They have made the best of every resource available to them, even when it means performing so-called miracles or simply admitting, “I don’t know.” They do not all agree on the same choices and methods; however, they all work from a place of familiar. Maya says, “girl as a mom – baby your gut will talk – you will know.” These mothers are the first lines of defense for their children and they consult with a number of family, community and school members when raising what they regard as their number one gift and responsibility.
Methods

If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” – Lilla Watson

(Aboriginal activist group, Queensland, 1970s)

In this project I am aware that I am not a (birth) mother. This distinction seemed important to make so the women I worked with understood I had not positioned myself as a ‘parent expert.’ In our first Saturday morning meeting I greeted them as a child of the South Side of Chicago, a daughter of CPS teachers, a community activist and a graduate student. I gave them the space to approach me as they saw fit. Some related to me as a researcher – Sonia asking me point blank – “I want to know what you are reading”; some related to me as another warm body in action; and others related to me as a sister and a daughter. I would not come in and sympathetically nod because these women did not need judgmental affirmation nor did they need to be fixed. However, I did relate as a woman who wants to support our children. This afforded me an intimate space of collecting data even when there were no pencils or recorders present. Considering the charge of Madison (2005), I reflexively asked, so who am I to tell their stories? I am their comrade and an othermother.

I believe many of the mothers I met at SSCES saw me as a marker of success. Not only am I a product of CPS and a child of a ‘whatever it takes’ mother, I am a
Sankofa\textsuperscript{22} bird: a woman who remembers and returns. I am a Black woman, claiming my identity as a feminist researcher – an activist – while learning how to be the Mother(s) I have participated with my entire life (Villenas, 1996). Toward the end of our first meeting, I candidly admitted to them, “I know who you are but I don’t see you women in my research,” Light bulbs burst in my brain as I continued, “I think I want to do my dissertation here.” The room exploded in celebration. I told them I would pray about it and confer with my advisor, but there was something in those moments too powerful for words. And they knew it. One of the mothers – Maya – assured me without question: “oh, you’ll be back.” I am a comrade, an othermother, and a daughter – writing my story of their story. We are all coparticipants in this project.

“I know who you are but…”

When I met these women, I immediately saw the gap between the mothers I knew growing up and the mothers I read through the dominant discourse. While I had been taught by my family to critically examine who I am as a Black person, and later as a Black woman, I had yet to examine the complexities of class. There were certain things I took for granted – that regardless of where anyone lived or worked, I believed there were just certain things Black people did across every family that had nothing to do with money. Some of these universal truths and actions were: being sure to come in the house before the street lights came on; standing in long lines at the Catholic charity for blocks of cheese and milk; referring to everyone as Ms., Mr., or Aunt and Uncle – even if they weren’t blood related; a weekend filled with Soul Train on Saturdays; church on

\textsuperscript{22}This Adinkra symbol – most prevalent in West Africa – shows a bird looking backward with the egg of the future in her beak, constantly checking as she moves into the future.
Sundays; and mothers who either showed up at school or got in your face at home. Across all of the homes I was raised, these were constants. Therefore, the “crack mother” and the “Welfare Queen” were foreign to me. I first regarded their media images (see Losing Isaiah, Boyz in the Hood) as 2-dimensinal caricatures or anomalies that existed in a benign subculture.

However, as I began to read education literature regarding the achievement gap, most of it pointed to families of color and the lack of parent involvement. In fact, a child who is considered “at-risk for school failure” (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) is defined in terms of demographic or historical characteristics associated with an increased likelihood of adverse outcomes. A March 2006 report of the National Center for Educational Statistics outlines three at-risk categories: status, academic and behavior. These categories include being a minority; coming from a low-income home (noting that nearly 76% of Black children living in large metropolitan areas, live in neighborhoods that have higher poverty rates than those found in the urban neighborhoods of the poorest White children) (Law and Policy Group, Inc., 2008); come from a home where English is not the primary language; and/or fail to develop a sense that schooling is important to future life success. These findings clearly echo the Moynihan Report and subsequent work. “Closing” the achievement gap has become a major priority of the American Education agenda as noted by the US Secretary of Education: “The achievement gap is unacceptable. Education is the civil rights issue of our generation. It is the only way to make good on the American promise of equality” (Duncan, 2010). This statement is driven alongside over 31,400 journal articles highlighted by Google Scholar with “at-
risk” as the buzzphrase for change. Therefore, it is essential to understand the relationship with these efforts and Black families/mothers.

The need for parent involvement has been acknowledged as federal funding has been allocated for family-engaging activities. The Department of Education has proposed to increase these funds and the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965, 2011) has opened to review of the existing parent-involvement provisions (Chang & Williams, 2011). However, “traditional research on parental involvement neglects the ways in which parental engagement is a social practice, sustained through active participation and dialogue in a social world” (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004, p. 6). Therefore, the push for parent involvement is more indicative of what the school needs to perform as opposed to advancing the needs of the families. In this way, I saw my role in developing the Parent University as an opportunity to develop holistic measures and activities that would incorporate the parents, students, community, teachers and school staff as equally participating stakeholders.

**Black Feminist Thought.** In addition to my research of the parent involvement literature, I looked more closely at what Black Feminist Thought had to say about Mothering. Employing a feminist methodology was/is critical because of its commitment to social justice. A feminist method in social research works to dismantle power structures and recognizes that women experience oppression and exploitation based on race, class, and sexual orientation much differently than others (Reinharz, 1992). “Involving much more than simply the counseling of existing social science source, the placing of ideas and experiences of women of color in the center of analysis requires invoking a different epistemology.” (Hill-Collins, 2004a, p. 49) My experiences in this
research have brought me to the realization that doing fieldwork is always personal so I take particular care in examination of positionality. “We must distinguish between what has been said about subordinated groups in the dominant discourse, and what such groups might say about themselves if given the opportunity” (Hill-Collins, 2004a, p. 49). I then had to ask, how often do individuals interact with Black mothers and in what context? I had to remember my own stories and open myself to those I had not heard/listened to.

Black Feminist Thought provided a lens for me to learn from these women.

This historical time is critical not only because our children are “at risk,” but the dominant discourse would have us to believe that there is only a specific type of woman that is allowed to speak. The market is full of books by both women and men who are proud of their ‘Mama’; however, the same market is a bit thin on work of Black mothers offering any advice or wisdom in raising children/families. Black mothers are promoted in ‘out of the ordinary’ success stories such as Mama Rock’s Rules: Ten Lessons for Raising a Household of Successful Children (2009) by Rose Rock, who not only raised Chris Rock (SNL Alum, first solo Black male host of the Academy Awards, and the most frequent male celebrity on The Oprah Winfrey Show), one of her ten biological children as well as 17 foster children. We can also count former CBS news anchor and breast cancer survivor/spokesperson, Rene Syler who penned Good Enough Mother two years prior. There is nothing inherently “magical” about what these women tell us – Rock simply shares what she learned from her mother regarding love, autonomy, honesty and discipline, and Syler shares what she has learned from her mistakes. However, these

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23 The Magical Negro is an archetypical mass media image of a Black person dramatically employed to teach, support, and serendipitously transform American White society.
works do mark the expansion of a vital canon and acknowledge the importance of Black mothers having a stage to speak and to be affirmed. Certainly these are not new stories; however, these sessions made clear to me the necessity for visibility in traditionally marginalized spaces. It is then imperative during this time that we not only elevate the perspectives of those who have been rewarded by mainstream media, but even (if not especially) those mothers who cross our paths everyday. If their stories are not told now, while Black mothers are criminalized and vilified, we will build our archives upon the myths of scientific research and the lives of people who will always seemingly be out of our reach.

These voices of Black women, written as narratives, or rather as narratives counter to the dominant discourse discussed in Chapter 2, peel back the masks that seek to “conceal their humanity,” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001 p. 42). This dissertation borrows the tool of counternarratives, a widely understood component of Critical Race Theory (CRT) which “aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (p. 144). This fits well with BFT as both a theory and a method because “unlike some academic disciplines CRT contains an activist dimension” (p. 3). CRT is an outgrowth of critical legal studies, radical feminism and conventional civil rights thought. It dates back to the mid-70’s and builds on the work of scholars such as the late Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman and Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw is credited for coining the term “intersectionality” upon the publication of two groundbreaking articles that sought to provide a place to theorize about the law’s inability to make visible women’s experience of discrimination through race, class and gender (1989). In this vein, I use counternarratives to provide a dual lens to question who
benefits from the dominant stories and how Black mothers can benefit from their own. Black feminist, writer, and mother Audre Lorde writes, “as we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us” (p. 36, 1977/2007). In a larger sense, we seek to understand that the issues of race and subordination of Black mothers is not simply the problem of Black mothers, but is endemic in how we function and prepare our children to function in society.

**Qualitative Methods**

In an effort to construct a counternarrative to Black mothers, a qualitative research methodology was required for this project. Qualitative research typically centers on relatively small samples selected purposefully to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon in depth (Patton, 2001). This method seeks to understand the social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved, to contextualize issues in theory (particularly sociocultural theory) and sometimes to transform or change social conditions (Glesne, 2006, p. 4). I have selected an ethnographic approach to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of Black mothers in an urban community of Chicago.

I take my lead from qualitative inquiry, with respect to critical and post-critical ethnography because of my politics on issues of positionality, subjectivity, voice and advocacy. D. Soyini Madison (2011) defines critical ethnography as social justice and risk coupled with truth and translation. Much like the reciprocal relationship between parents and teachers, she asks that the same take place between the researchers and
participants with a major focus on the reflexivity of the researcher. In *Critical Ethnography* (2005), Madison poses five questions for reflexive consideration:

1. How do we reflect upon and evaluate our own purpose, intentions, and frames of analysis as researchers?
2. How do we predict consequences or evaluate our own potential to do harm?
3. How do we create and maintain a dialogue of collaboration in our research projects between ourselves and Others?
4. How is the specificity of the local story relevant to the broader meanings and operations of the human condition?
5. How – in what location or through what intervention – will your work make the greatest contribution to equity, freedom, and justice?

By these principles and the very act of writing, researching and living exposes the fact that writing ethnography teaches the researcher as much about herself as it does about her participants and their environment (Goodall, 2000).

**Interviews**

The participants of this project are the mothers I worked with in the parent organization of SSCES, The Beacons, during the 2010 Summer. While the initial roster lists over 50 women, I worked closely with the executive board and committee members of the group, which was a network of approximately 15. For this project, I worked with five. These women range in age, class, geography, occupation, number/gender/ages of children, schooling experiences and marital status. Both sets of interviews were conducted between October 2011 and February 2012. For the first round I returned to Chicago and conducted 1-1.5-hour interviews with three of these mothers, while a fourth interview was conducted over the phone. These women who had already expressed a commitment to this project and produced a fair range of experiences, particularly regarding their relationships with the school. Their knowledge, experience, and expertise

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24 See Appendix II for initial interview guide.
allowed me to “learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of my research” (Glesne, 2006, p. 34) and I developed an interview guide that gave space for more nuances in their roles as women, mothers and advocates for their children. The process of contacting and collecting information from the mothers was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Each mother selected a time of day and location that was most comfortable and accommodating for them. For the second round of interviews, two of the previous mothers from the initial project participated in addition to one more. These interviews ranged in length from 1 to 2 hours and were guided by open-ended questions that were structured according to the five types of motherwork. (Hill-Collins, 2004a):

(1) Women Centered Networks
(2) Mothers and Daughters
(3) Community Othermothers and Political Activism
(4) Motherhood as a Symbol of Power
(5) The View from the Inside

Coding

Coding was an essential part of my data analysis that allowed me to identify salient themes and patterns. According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996), “in practice, coding can be thought of as a range of approaches that aid the organization, retrieval, and interpretation of data” (p. 27). The three approaches to coding that I employed in this dissertation were in vivo coding, sociologically constructed coding, and open coding. The initial approach I employed during data analysis was open coding. Open coding is identified as an ‘open’ process because it “allow[ed] me to engage in exploration of my data without making any prior assumptions about what I might discover” (Kerlin, 2000).

See Appendix III for second interview guide.
After employing open coding, I moved to more selective approaches, in vivo coding and sociologically constructed coding. In vivo coding “refers to the codes that derive from the terms and the language used by social actors in the field, or in the course of the interviews (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 32).” In vivo coding allowed me to inductively engage with the participant’s narrative. On the other hand, sociologically constructed coding allowed me “to identify themes, patterns, events, and actions that are of my interest and that provide a means of organizing data sets (p. 32).” Because I am invested in this research, my positionality is evident in my data analysis as I have identified themes and patterns that reflect my own lived experiences (Moore, 2009).

I conducted three sets of interpretations from the data. First, I arranged the transcripts according to schooling narratives in a thematic and chronological order: their own, their children, expectations for the future. From here, several codes were generated such as “living in Chicago,” “what my mother did,” “being vocal,” “embarrassment.” After these patterns were revealed, the data was analyzed again, creating new patterns and I was able to develop common subheadings. From this emerged four themes: “Defining Mother,” “Preparing Children,” “Navigating Institutions,” and “Other”. There are two dominant narratives, three that complement, complicate and enhance the other narratives (all of which are shared in Chapter 4) and the narrative of an imagined “Other” that is examined in Chapter 5. They are all ordered by the dates interviewed with the two dominant narratives presented first.

**Narratives**

The interviews were analyzed as narratives. I used narrative to introduce and represent the stories these women shared with me regarding their experiences as mother,
daughter, teacher, student and advocate. Narrative inquiry is one way we make meaning from our experiences. More than method or theory, narrative inquiry is about understanding stories. I contend that narratives provide understanding of experience (MacIntyre, 1984), welcome contradictions that emerge in the narration and representation of stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and allow readers to honor the particular (Noblit, 1999).

This form also provides a respite from the “death dance of dependence” (Grande, 2004, p. 2) upon the master’s tools (Lorde, 1977/2007). Hill-Collins (2004a) writes, personal narratives, autobiographical statements, poetry, fiction, and other personalized statements have all been used by women of color to express self-defined standpoints on mothering and motherhood. Such knowledge reflects the authentic standpoint of subordinated groups. Therefore, placing these sources in the center and supplementing them with statistics, historical material, and other knowledge produced to justify the interests of ruling elites should create new themes and angles of vision. (p. 49)

According to Coffey and Atkinson (1996), “narratives have rather specific, distinct structures with formal and identifiable properties (p. 57).” Therefore, I used a formal narrative analysis to code, analysis, structure, and interpret my data. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) refer to William Labov’s (1982) sociolinguistic approach as a method to interpreting a story. In my research, I used Labov’s sociolinguistic approach, specifically the evaluation model, to identify how the participant tells their story the way they do: how the participant gives the events that recount shape; how the participant makes a point; how the participant ‘packages’ the narrated events and their reaction to them, and how the participant articulates their narrative with the audience or audiences that hear them (p.58).

There are certainly rhythms apparent in the way each woman speaks. At any point of tension or light heartedness, there is a lot of laughter, pauses for self-reflection or
assessment and quite a few “mmhms” from me. These are most noted in places where they shifted their tone or train of thought. Additionally, I kept the narratives in first person to maintain the sense that they are speaking for themselves to a direct audience.

**Poetry**

This project is about how each woman stories herself. In this spirit, I have received each of these women as poets and I retell *our* stories as gifts of “…true knowledge and therefore, lasting action…” (Lorde, p.37, 1977/2007). Again, Audre Lorde tells us, “for women… poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change…” (p. 37, 1977/2007). Just as action is the gift of Black Feminist Thought, poetry is the gift of language. Therefore, as a woman and an artist, the inclusion of poetry in this project is just as important as the theoretical framework and analysis.

The emergence of poetry within the research process is connected not only to the overall increase in arts-based practices but also to broader epistemological and theoretical insights such as those posed by postmodern and poststructural theory. Feminist and other politically motivated research may be interested in the political possibilities of poetry as well as its ability to “stay true” to the speech patterns of interview respondents. (Leavy, 2009, p. 64-65)

In the final chapter, I offer a brief poetic transcription of the mothers’ narratives. Qualitative researcher Corrine Glesne writes, “poetic transcription blurs the accepted boundaries between art and science [by] exploring the shapes of inter-subjectivity, and examining issues of power and authority, including that of researcher/author” (p. 204). This form of writing has not been used throughout the dissertation; however, I provide a rationale here for its use to set precedent for interpretations in future projects.
The pseudonyms of the mothers in this dissertation are all names of contemporary Black female poets whose performances range from presidential inaugurations to the Apollo stage in Harlem, New York: Maya Angelou, Sonia Sanchez, Carolyn M. Rodgers, Nikki Giovanni, Jill Scott and Deja K. Taylor. While the children were not interviewed for this dissertation, they were certainly part of the conversations. Their pseudonyms are names of African ethnic groups (daughters) and emperors (sons).

Validity

In *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*, Glesne (2006) states that validity is an issue we should consider “during research design as well in the midst of data collection” (p. 35). She lists several verification procedures one can employ to address the issue of research validity. The procedure I used is member checking. Glesne (2006) describes member checking as “sharing interview transcripts, analytical thoughts, and/or drafts of the final report with research participants to make sure you are representing them and their ideas accurately” (p. 36). Member checking has helped me verify the trustworthiness of my data collection and analysis. After the first round of interviews with the mothers, a couple of them corresponded with me through email and phone to share moments they’d forgotten to talk about. This was an opportunity to recall what we had already discussed so they could offer room for clarification as well as carry the conversations further. In other cases, I offered to share my interview notes with the mothers, to which Maya said, “no honey! I’ve seen your notes. I’m sure you captured me as thoroughly as possible. I don’t need to read all of that.” Lastly, I am in constant communication with a few of these women because they want to share accomplishments.

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26 See Appendix IV.
of their children, in addition to open access through social media and the need to vent as Black women about the heightened awareness of our images and lifestyles in everyday media. The latter has afforded me the opportunity to communicate with them regarding current issues, allowing us to revisit and “check” our previous discussions.

**Reciprocity**

A moment that has never left me is from an American Educational Studies Association (AESA) conference I attended as a new graduate student. Bettina Love was presenting research from her dissertation, which is an ethnographic project of high school students’ ideas of gender, race, sexuality, and education that have been informed by rap music. For me, her concluding punchline was, “these girls gave me a PhD; I had to ask myself, what am I giving them?” I entered these women’s space performing different roles (researcher, employee, daughter, othermother) and asked that they provide me with the performance of mother. As the space grew and transformed around us, we became coparticipants and I would be asked to give as much as I received. In fact, about five minutes into my interview with Nikki, she actually paused the conversation and said, “I’m gonna take notes.”

I risked my standing with the administration of the school – learning how and when to share information that affected them as parents while they风险ed not only their own vulnerability but that of their children as well. They first trusted me as secretary for the meetings and then trusted me to take notes of their lives. Our conversations were filled with “mama stories,” references to academic journal articles, current news, relationships with men, and updates on the children we take care of. On more than one occasion one of the mothers would say to me, “it’s crazy that no one’s ever asked me
these things before... I’ve never had a conversation like this before.” I would then convey my appreciation by thanking them for better preparing me to be a mother.

Because the mothers and I were actively creating community, I looked to *The Quilt* (Alexander Craft et al., 2007) as a reflexive guide while reviewing my analysis of the transcripts. In this article, sister/artist/activist/othermother/scholars Renée Alexander Craft, Meida McNeal, Mshaï S. Mwangola provide a collective list they call: “Tenets of a Twenty-First Century Feminist Ethnography”27 (pp. 79-80). It is reminiscent of what Alice Walker (1983) defines as being “involved in work her soul must have” (p. 241). This asked me to examine my positionality as an inside/outsider and a raced/gendered body/agent capable of healing, harming, and transcendence. It also required that I continued to tend to the space after this specific project has concluded.

**Reflexive Journal**

Journaling throughout this process was absolutely necessary to capture both the shifts in my perspectives as well as the mothers’ and the relationships we have created throughout this process. During the initial step of this project – where I was contracted to develop the Parent University – I was additionally selected as a blogger for my fellowship organization. Through an assignment of about two blog entries per week, they were interested in knowing more about the personal and professional experiences of the Fellows who held various positions throughout the country. As one of the few Black people in the fellowship, who worked directly in a school with parents and community partners, I was very conscious of how I would publically blog about my work, the relationships and more importantly myself throughout the 10-week process. I used the

27 See Appendix V.
blog – this first reflexive journal – to write about how my presence transformed the space of the school and challenged my assumptions as both an insider and outsider.

When the fellowship concluded, I continued this journal privately. I was able to write more about the women themselves – how I saw them in their beauty and in their flaws. I wrote about how many times I felt like I was in the way. I wrote about how angry I was about some of the administration decisions that were made. I wrote about times I felt like “The Spook Who Sat By the Door.” I wrote about the discomfort of these women trusting me with personal experiences that I knew I would choose, shape and present to a public audience. I wrote about how much Maya reminded me of so many women I’d grown up with and how Nikki reminded me of a big sister I totally would have looked up to. I wrote about being an othermother – an organic role I assumed having worked in various school and community institutions for over ten years – where my children referred to me as Shangazi. I also wrote about my own mother – a lot.

**Giving Voice**

In 2011, I attended a session of AESA entitled: “Culturally Responsive Research Approaches: Distinctive Means of Infusing Silenced Voices.” After the panelists, Donna Deyhle, Thandeka Chapman, and David Stovall spoke, a burning question regarding my participants thrust my hand in the air. I shared that I was working on a project with women whose lives are familiar to me as my own and my concern was carrying the

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28 *The Spook Who Sat By the Door* (1969/1989) is a work of fiction by Sam Greenlee that describes a Black male who utilizes his skills and training as a government agent to develop young men on the South Side of Chicago as “Freedom Fighters.”

29 This is the Swahili term for “aunt.”
responsibility of transmitting their voices ethically and authentically because I am taking them into a new space. “I can’t say that I am giving these women voices – they can speak for themselves.” Dr. Stovall interrupted me with, “that’s it right there. *These women can speak for themselves.* You are just sharing the conversation.”

**Limitations**

I was brought to SSCES on a paid contract for a specific assignment. This was my initial engagement. I performed as a daughter and othermother to leverage the power dynamics and to be in a position where I could *learn*. However, despite my best face, in many ways I was tied to the administration as well as to an outside institution. Then, for the purposes of this project, I returned with yet another institutional affiliation, the University, and asked these women to fit into my boxes (e.g. deadlines, IRB, theoretical frameworks.) I was aware that when the recorder went on and pencil was in my hand, we were shifting our relationships and boundaries. I tried to be as transparent as possible with each mother about my position and purpose. However, they ultimately made a decision about which performance they choose for my academic audience. We danced according to the previous/growing intimacies we shared with one another; I pushed and pulled in a space of familiarity. Yet again, I was in a position to *learn*. Just as everyone else, I entered a conversation that started long before I arrived. These mothers had a discourse, literature, frameworks, familial theories and fruitful networks; it was imperative that I took my lead from them.
The Mothers

Maya

*In our first meeting, Maya introduced herself as the “cheer mom.”* Her daughter’s many activities and accomplishments took precedent in every conversation. Everything she said was matter-of-fact and she spoke with a smile either on her face or in her voice. She did not talk about her job specifically but made it clear that her schedule was tight and not to be played with. She kept her calendar in hand, noting when and where she was available to meet or volunteered to take on leadership positions. She often vocalized her commitment not only to her child but also to the success of the school.

Maya reminded me most of my own mother. She was older when she gave birth to her only child – Mursi – and has raised her with a wisdom she admits she would not have had in her 20s or 30s. She believes raising her child is truly a gift and responsibility of God that she does not take lightly. She states in no uncertain terms that her child is her priority and that she will make whatever sacrifices necessary to ensure her success. In addition to her faith, she has made the choice to raise her daughter in the same community that she grew up in – with the very same community mother that raised her. Although this is an area that has been known for high gang and drug activity, she places great value in the fact that her daughter is able to live in the same building with her sisters, nieces and nephews.

I interacted with Maya several times throughout my work at the school. She was always very encouraging and whenever I was present, she relinquished her role as
secretary. When I apologized for “being a researcher,” she told me to be proud of what I did and that I made her job easier. I felt like I knew quite a bit about her before our first interview, but in the comforts of her home, the first thing she opened up to me about was her relationship with God and the importance of His guidance in raising her daughter. This set the tone for our time together and made me feel more like I was with my own family. Both interviews for this dissertation lasted over 3.5 hours and took place in her home, after work. Mursi was always present – either asking for permission to do something or to catch me up on what was happening in her life.

Growing up. My mom was married to my dad yet she was a single mom and she raised three kids essentially by herself with the community. Like, my grandfather’s sister would help my mom because being in public school was not ideal at that time for us, especially in this neighborhood because I grew up on 51st and Wabash (she points toward the window, out to the neighborhood) and the Blackstone Rangers and all of that were prominent back when I was in school. We were in public school initially – on State Street and I saw a guy get killed and went home and told my mom that. She just could not take it anymore and my great-aunt, that considered my mom her favorite niece, made the decision. She was extremely active in St. Columbus Patronage, she was Catholic and we were Baptist, but she offered my mom assistance with tuition and back then tuition was extremely affordable. Back then patronage was extremely huge and very, very profitable for our community because it was a community taking care of community – that is what patronage was. If your kid or your family needed something and I had a business – if you could help me, I helped you. And so back then in the 60s and the 70s that is what kept the Black Catholic schools going and the community flourishing because it was about the
communities. The neighborhood restaurant and grocery store employed the teenage boys. They did stock, they did gas stations and wasn’t nobody on the street and when you were on the street it was playtime and you could ride your bikes. I mean I never rode my bike just in the neighborhood. Living on 51st and Wabash we could go to McCormick Place or we would ride to Evanston during the day! We did not have to stay in the neighborhood as long as you were in before the street lights came on. Now, so, my aunt helped my mom put us in Catholic school. And that changed our lives because my mom was emphatic that we were not going to be neighborhood kids – there was really not a whole lot wrong with it, but what was going on back in the 60s and 70s, you know. [I] grew up on the wrong side of the tracks but my mother gave us the education on the other side. You know, and because of that – that is why I push. I tried Catholic school for Mursi. And actually St. Columbus wanted me to put her in there, but I was like yall are too expensive. They were like, well if you come do community (her voice trails) ugh….I am not Catholic! I suffered through grammar school and high school doing everything that I had to do – because you had community service with Catholic school – I mean with the Girl Scouts – I was a Girl Scout for 10 years at St. Columbus. Charm school, cheerleading, all of that came through the parish.

And when we cheered they did not know how to judge Black cheerleaders. Yeah! (She responds to my raised eyebrows.) And said it. And we beat [other teams] hands down but we were not recognized because they did not know how to judge us because we weren’t doing this (she stiffens her arms and claps very methodically) and we weren’t doing that. You know. And we were (her arms begin to move comfortably), we had

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30 Evanston, a city North of Chicago, is approximately 20 miles from the area in which Maya grew up.
rhythm and style. There was flow to our cheers. There wasn’t anything ghetto, but it was flow. We were doing what we naturally knew how to do. We cheered like they cheered but we had rhythm when we did and the first time we heard [we couldn’t win], we went back to St. Columbus and we all sat in the gym because we were emphatic: we were not cheering again. We were not going to deal with that. And it was the mama’s and the daddy’s that said, “oh yeah, you are going to cheer” or “oh we are going back, and you are going to keep going back until they learn how to judge you!”

So that broke our barriers. I was not raised Black or White – I was raised that this is a multicultural world. You better learn how to deal with it from grammar school because our parents pushed us out there, our parents exposed us. Girl Scouts – there weren’t no Black girls in Girl Scouts! I won Miss Girl Scout 1976 and we went to Washington and Philadelphia and at that time in 1976, Helen G. Ford was the first Black Ms. America. Her mom worked with my mom at Provident Hospital. The old Provident Hospital that all of us worked at. All of my family and I had a chance to meet her. She same to the ceremony where I was crowned and I told everybody that I was her little sister and then they did a big thing for the city and the state with Girl Scouts of America at the amphitheater where they recognized me and she let me wear her crown and her sash. Yep….yep…yep…yep… yep! So I mean – all of that – why shouldn’t I? That is why I do everything that I do for Mursi. So my life – because of what my mother taught me – is coming full circle with my daughter. She dances, she cheers, and all I do is expose.

**Becoming mother.** I was about 18 when the doctor said I would probably never have kids. And the things I did to my life in my late teens and my 20s helped fuel that,
you know. And one day I made a decision that my life was gonna change. I met God for myself personally and he said: you want to live? (She nods her head.) He said, alright. Well I am going to put some things in front of you and it is going to be up to you, but I gotcha. Move forward, I gotcha. I placed everything that you need in front of you. And when I changed my life and went to the doctor, everything that they had been telling me my whole life was gone. And I because I had lived so many years thinking I could never have kids, I still was in denial. I did not believe it and I continued to live my life like I could not have kids but in the crevices of my soul I said, “but Lord, I so want one” and I would ask Him and question: when?! When my sister had her three kids and all my cousins and everybody and then one day it was, ooops! I was hooking up with a friend for old times sake – that makes it bad – and [Mursi] asked me about that by the way. She outright came and said “so how did you end up doin it with my daddy?”

Yes ma’am. Yes she did! I said what do you mean? She was like, do it. And I asked her, what are you talking about? I said, if you gonna ask a big girl question, ask it the right way. So she said, what made you have sex with my daddy? Girl, you could have bought me for a penny! Woo! So being who I am, I told her the truth (she lowers her voice almost as if she is trying to whisper) because I have seen her react to when her father has not given her the whole truth so I don’t need her alienated from me for not telling her the truth. I felt she was mature enough to handle it. Not all of it but then, that conversation went from laughing to crying because she thought her daddy did not want her to just realizing that just because a person has a baby doesn’t mean they are ready. I was ready. He wasn’t. You know, being a mommy was really easy to me so I um, and also my friend had put the whammy on me (she is laughing hard!) She said, you gon get
pregnant! She had seven kids you know, and so my period was late. So the test, I was 37, 36 because I had her when I was 37. I could not even pee on the thing right and it just turned! Girl, I took my mama to the doctor with me and they laughed at me because I had my mama with me at 36 years old – I sure did! The blood test was instantaneous. Girl, I went home and put on maternity clothes! Baby, I owned it from the time that test came back – yes I did! And my pregnancy was, oh it was beautiful. And my favorite song when I was pregnant was “Some Enchanted Evening” by the Temptations. And do you know that is what would make my baby go to sleep? I would listen to that song forever and ohhh I, yeah it was wonderful. I mean I did not get stretch marks or anything!

It starts from the inside when that child is conceived and for me being Mursi’s mom started when the test was positive, not when she came. I took on the responsibility of what my mind was thinking while she was on the inside. Because they only had to tell me one time that your child feels everything that you feel. So my first thought was to protect her. I thought “wow.” I was carrying her on the inside – I needed to be a certain way. So I surrounded myself with very positive people – positive things – listening to music, going to church, laughing, I watched cartoons, I ate – like, good! I was active – I danced – um – I shopped – everything. So consequently while I was pregnant, she was like baboom baboom baboom ba boom (she moves her hands as if she is hitting a drum.) They said that it was too early for her to move, but at my first ultrasound she flipped her hand and turned her butt up at them and it was like “I’m here so now what?” Yes.

Motherhood starts when you realize that test is positive and then you keep that baby.

[You are a] protector because I mean, they don’t know. So you have to guard them against the elements on the outside, even from the doctors and the nurses and stuff
like that and I think that is where your prayer life and communicating with the God of your understanding, to guide those doctors and those nurses through just that process, because protection begins – well you know inside. But also when they are on the outside and then from that moment on [you are] teacher because you start teaching them from – well actually I taught her name when I was pregnant. Once I decided on a name, that is what I called her when I was pregnant. So when actually, when she was born and the doctor was like, “oh baby”, I was like – her name is Mursi. Call her Mursi. [She was like] “Oh mother” (she says in a condescending voice.) And I said, no baby you don’t understand. White people are not the only ones that talk to their babies while they are pregnant! Call her by her name. I said indulge me – call her. And so sure enough she said “Mursi” and my baby turned her head and looked at her like “what’s up?” She knew. She responded to her name from the time she came out because I had talked to her, I had read to her. I danced with her – everything. I talked to her – I rubbed my stomach, I sang to her, you know all that stuff and when she came out she knew who she was. She knew what her name was. I didn’t [know] – I just figured I needed her to know and I thought that is what I was supposed to do. You know they give you this whole list of what you should and shouldn’t do and I went on what I feel. I didn’t [use the list] – I just said I am going to go with what I feel, with what my instincts are, because I always wanted a baby. Always from when I realized I could have kids and when they told me I could not have kids. I said no – and for the longest time that is what I dreamed of.

[I am her] teacher – authority figure, and I think there are more roles to evolve as she gets older. I would love one day for her to be able to say that I am one of her closest friends. I did not have that with my mom – she was very old school: I am never going to
be your friend – I am always going to be your mother. And right now – in order to be an effective authority figure and in order to be her mom – I can not be her friend because friends are going to let you get away with things and friends are going to co-sign your crap and I just, I just can’t do that. I just – I believe in when you plant the seeds and you water, then they grow. If you start them out as little bitty babies raising them ain’t all that bad. The challenges are going to come – Yes! Girlfriend can hit that last nerve and I tell her, “girlfriend, don’t take your own life in your own hands like that.” Or sometimes I say, “girl do you know Jesus just saved your life?” Mursi was raised on the look. And sometimes, that’s all it has to be. But at some point as she gets older and becomes an even more responsible adult and lives her life and when she begins to go through love and meet her husband and have my grandbaby or grandbabies, I want to be a nurturing friend. I want to take that to the next level that I did not have with my mom. From my mom I learned to give my child what she gave me and more. That is the cornerstone of who I am as Mursi’s mom.

Protecting Mursi means having honest and real conversations. Not cutting off the news and letting her see. As hard as that is – that is the world that we live in so. Reality enforces when we have a plan if you are supposed to go from point A to point B and we have a plan as to how you are supposed to get to point A and point B. Your safety depends on you doing exactly what we have always been doing. When you deviate, these are the things that can happen. Like with the guy being killed outside our front lawn. When we came home, we got our stuff together and we came directly into the house. Trouble can’t get here unless you open the door and let it in! So consequently – for me – [protecting] is just being honest, being gut-wrenchingly honest. You have to pay
attention to her surroundings. Allowing her to catch the CTA\textsuperscript{31}. She has done it once. She has only done it once! But she did it. By herself from her school to my job! We have caught the bus before, but allowing her to do it by herself and her feeling comfortable with that and going through different scenarios. So if the bus is crowded, this is what you need to do. Or when standing at the bus stop, we need to be talking so somebody knows where you are at or what you are doing. When you get on the bus, make sure you stay close to the bus driver so the bus driver can see if anything is happening with you. When you get ready for your stop, don’t be sitting on the phone texting, pay attention. Having those kinds of conversations with her. When we are out, don’t be talking to the phone when you are walking with me – nuh uh – put that phone up! You know, pay attention to your surroundings. And teaching her how to drive so when the time comes she knows how. [She is] 12 but she is tall enough to reach the pedals! We just, if anything were to happen and she is in the car with me, I don’t need her freaking out! I have to look at how I prepare her for life events. She is going to freak out, but she can. handle. it. (she claps her hands to emphasize every word) because I have given her some tools to use. I have exposed her to difficult things.

And family is that unconditional net of love that takes you through the good, the bad and the ugly and when you can come home to a secure and loving place, you are happy. You know you are safe. You know you are loved. No matter what is going on out there you come on and put on your cozy, comfy clothes and go in your girl cave and listen to your music or cut your Wii on and stop downstairs to see your sister who can

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\footnote{Chicago Transit Authority is the city’s public bus system, sometime regarded as an unsafe space depending on the route. In May 2009, 16-year old Blair Holt was fatally wounded on the bus traveling home from school while trying to protect a female classmate.}
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show you how to walk in heels because your mama done messed up her knees and can’t
walk in heels anymore. That you can not buy! That’s love! That’s nurturing. I helped my
sister raise her kids. I was always – I always had kids before I got pregnant. My sister’s
three kids. All of them from the time they were born, or from the time she found out I
was pregnant, I have been a part of their lives. Yeah – yeah and I mean on the weekends I
would have [Child A]. When [Child B] was a little kid I had her, when [Child C] and
[Child D] was born, it was the crew. They all hung out. And then their friends, when we
lived in the high-rise, their moms were single moms too. Before Mursi, um – there were
probably 8, 9 10, kids somewhere. The oldest, who is 24 now, [List of abovementioned
children and more], they can come over and crawl up in my bed or they could you know,
spend the night and that kind of thing.

“Old school.” Old school works! But you got to include the new flavor. I
remember having a conversation with Mursi one day and she was ragging about going to
school and I said, “do you know how many people died to go to school?” I had to break
it down. I said people literally died for you to go to school so we can read and not be
ashamed for knowing how to read. People died so you could go to any store that you go
to today to buy anything that you want to. It was not always like that! You know you
can do the old school message but bring it home today because you would not be here
today if these folks had not done it before. (She pauses and sighs before she resumes.)
You got one life – you got an opportunity. The one thing that you can do that nobody can
take away from you is get your education! And be a responsible productive member of
society. Be responsible for yourself. Own up to what you do. If you did wrong, be woman
enough to say: I made a mistake. Own who you are and what you do. And dream. If you
dream and you see it, you can do it. You got to work hard for it. Nothing in this world is free. All of that is how our parents raised us. All of that still holds true today.

The world that we live in today is not Black and White – it ain’t even Black, White and gray. It is multicolored, all shapes sizes, culture, nature – everything and if you don’t expose them to that – they will grow up thinking it is one certain way and that hinders their coping skills. If you don’t expose them to White people or deal with Hispanic, or Indian, or Asian people, when they get out into the work force, they are not going to be able to handle that. So do I want to hinder my child like that – no! Your exposure has a level of responsibility to it. You have to guide them through the exposure – you don’t just set them out there and let them loose – you walk with them and you answer their questions and you show them this, and you show them that and you talk about this and you talk about that and a couple of her teachers – we were talking after this first marking period is exposing them to world and current events. Getting the *New York Times* for the kids. Letting them read and knowing what is happening with Khadafi because that is the world. That strengthens their vocabulary. That strengthens them as a person and you never know the gifts that are inside a person if you don’t show them things. They will never get the opportunity to realize some gifts if you don’t expose them. How will they know if they are a dancer or a politician or a lawyer or an architect or a bus driver? Or a garbage person or a, um an IT person or a scientist, all of those things our kids can be, or a fashion designer.

**Preparing Mursi for leadership.** Starting with home – well starting with herself – her body, her mind, her spirit – she is not learning if I am not teaching her to take care of her body. How can she ever grow up and take care of somebody? Going through her
menstrual period – all of those things. Dealing with her self-esteem, owning who she is right where she is at – not sweating it. Just dealing with just that kind of thing and teaching her responsibility with the home. One of the things that we are doing more and more, she is taking more of an active role with me and budgeting finances. No, we can’t always go shop, we have bills to pay. “Well, what’s the bills?” The light, the gas, the alarm, the internet, the phones. Our toiletries, our groceries, your bus service, your dance tuition, toe shoes all of those things. You need clothes because you can’t wear what you wore last winter – so we need some things. And for a minute she was talking about the money, the money, the money. And I said, back up! It aint about the money, it is about responsibility. So, you know she has taken a more active role in that and I give her a chunk of money for her chores and stuff like that. And she has to buy the little things, the little nick-nack things that she likes, like her nail polish and stuff. She has to put a certain amount of money in the church, I leave that to her discretion and if I don’t feel it is appropriate I say, “really?” Because that is a part of your service to God – because you are always asking for things and so what are you doing for Him? And washing clothes, keeping her room clean. As a matter of fact come and let me show you – this is all her. I actually had it painted before we actually moved in. She takes me on a tour of Mursi’s “girl cave” with posters of Justin Bieber and Jaden Smith on the purple walls, dozens of books, girl toys I remember from my own childhood, and a Minnie Mouse television.

Now iTunes girlfriend, she is going to get into! She manages her iTunes account well. I give her a certain amount of money and I don’t say you have to keep this within a certain amount of time, but because she loves her music and she wants to put it on her iPod, she knows those songs have to be censored through me. She just can’t go onto
iTunes and get whatever she wants because she ain’t grown. We have a discussion – and now I have to listen to this music! (She sighs, smiles and throws her head to the side.) It was um, Kanye West’s song – I can’t stand Kanye West! But some song that he was talking about his struggles with his daughter and not being able to be in her life and going through all of that and I thought really… So I can let her listen to that song because it talks about a life struggle. Also Lil Wayne, “How to Love” is on point. It talks about coping with your lack of self-esteem and the choices that you make and what you are willing to settle for. Now what are you going to do? She introduced me to that song with Lil Wayne – she is listening to the words. So I got to quit; stop being so strict and listen. And it is humbling. And it is so rewarding to listen to my kid. It brings me to tears sometimes because if you listen, you will see their growth. And you can appreciate their personality as they are growing and her accepting responsibility when she falls short and getting her to admit when she is not making good choices. Later in the conversation, Maya’s phone rings and the Lil Wayne song plays. I completely raise my eyebrows and ask is that in fact her phone. She says, Girl, look, I’m comin up in the world! 

I have always said to Mursi since she said she wanted to be a new creature in Christ – she wanted to be baptized – this is what that means. You are called to be different – I don’t care what your friends do. I emphatically put my foot down because when she gets in her way, she gets in her way. [I tell her] you are an 8th grader, (she claps her hands loudly) Act like it! Because although she is in 7th now, my mentality of pushing her is – no, you are in 8th grade because you want to transfer out of this school and go to an academy. You can not transfer out and go to an academy acting like a 7th grader. Sister you have to rock 8th grade when you walk in the door.
**Self-aware.** A mother is a mother – a mommy and you either going to raise your kid like you are supposed to or you ain’t. I have never been one boxed in. There probably are [stereotypes associated with Black mothers] but that is not something that I look at or care anything about because my mother did not raise me like that. You know, they’re out there and I see them and I know them, but does that define me? Absolutely not because you put your panties on one leg at a time just like I do. You pull your bra up the same way that I do. *She pauses for a while and then speaks again breaking the silence as if I have provoked her in some way.* And you know what? I hear a lot of people talk about that and it irritates the crap out of me. Because I have a couple of friends that say the Europeans this, the Europeans that….grrrrrr! We have no excuses. You choose to be a responsible productive member. How responsible you are is up to you. When I see [discrimination], it does irritate me but it pushes me to do more. There is money out there to be made. The question is are you going to present yourself, not as a Black person as a person. Are you going to position yourself to get that money? Now, yes, as a Black person I am going to probably have to work harder. I am going to have to endure a lot more crap, but my thought is that Jesus’ endured so much – who am I? That irritates me and that pushes me to set myself apart because I see that what God has given me is for me and I am supposed to shine. I am not supposed to be like this – I am not supposed to be passive. I am not supposed to be, you know. As I get older yes, there are times where you – silence is golden. My mother always said: never let everybody know what you know. Because one day everything that you know – I promise you – all you got to do is bring the [record of your performance] down and say bam! Let your work speak.

*Nikki*
I immediately perceived her as the businesswoman of the group. I liked Nikki the first time I saw her but I found her to be a bit intimidating. On an early Saturday morning, she was pretty “put-together” with makeup, hair, and attire, even in a casual way. She spoke fast and proper with a full voice and struck me as solid middleclass. Her profession came up a couple of times so that I figured her to also be one of the mothers the school staff felt was “safe”: She was very articulate, action-oriented, light-skinned and I seem to remember her having substantial rock on her left ring finger. In the meeting, she spoke less of her son – Nkrumah – and more about the administrative duties of the parent organization. She has a board position – having a critical influence with administration and decision-making for the school. I got the sense that she was operating as if she were at work; however, the longer the meeting, the more relaxed her tongue. I was excited when she, Maya and Sonia invited me to lunch, along with two of the children, after one of our meetings. We had a brief personal conversation and discovered a couple of parallels in our lives.

When I first contacted her to begin our interviews, she was incredibly receptive and assured me that “the door was open” for whatever I needed. Because of schedule conflicts, we only had one interview which was during the second round. She welcomed me into her home the way I imagined a big sister would. This was the first time I met her son, Nkrumah. I found it awesome that one his friends came over for a sleepover and he arrived with a Lego suitcase in hand – mainly because it reminded me of how I used to play with my friends and it evoked feelings of innocence and pure enjoyment. There were occasions during the interview that Nkrumah popped in and out to ask permission for something – either about food or games he wanted to play. Throughout our 2-hour
interview, Nikki makes many references to being perceived as “soft” – which she largely attributes to being biracial\textsuperscript{32}. This is critical in how she exercises her voice, privilege and messages for her son.

Learning “mother”. My mother was everything to me, she could fix anything, she could do everything right. I think when I got to high school that she was going through her own thing. Being the age that I am now I completely understand it. But I felt resentful in a lot of ways or that she was not there for me. And I must say both of my sisters were teen mothers so I was the youngest child up until the time I was 12. My niece was born when my sister was, she was 14 when she got pregnant and 15 when she had her daughter. So I think from like 12 on up I just felt like on my own, taking care of what I needed to do. You know I lived in the suburbs, I did not live in the city or ride on the CTA. I don’t want to give you that impression. But you know, I was on the volleyball team and my mother wasn’t there. She had to work and I had to find a way home. But I was also very independent in terms of like, I started doing teenage things when I was younger because it was always like, “take your sister with you.” So I was 12 years old drinking Southern Comfort with teenage kids that I should not have been with. But I think what that taught me was to make some better decisions for myself because no one else was making these decisions for me. Um, so you know, in high school, I did not have a – what do you call it – when you have to be home? \textit{Nikki is struggling to find the word} ‘curfew’. Yeah, one time my mom tried to pull it. She felt like she had been so on my

\textsuperscript{32} Nikki is the only biracial mother in this project. This was brought to my attention when I asked her about what lessons she learned from her mother – assuming she was Black. This opened an intense conversation about the duality of identity that was different from the other participants. However, all of the women in this project self-identify as Black mothers.
sisters, and they went in that (she gestures away from herself) direction. I think most of
my life and family experiences being the youngest child and the child that had the least
choice in the family, I think I’ve grown up to be the most outspoken. But I would say
what [my mother] taught me was more valuable than anything else, which was common
sense. Like I said, even though I did not have a curfew, I would be like, “yall I am ready
to go in the house, I know yall don’t have to be in until 1:00, but phishhh, but I’m tired.”
I think that is why I survived college. I think that is why I was able to make those
decisions of myself. (She takes a long pause and begins to talk as if she is still thinking) I
have never had this question asked of me – ‘what did my mother teach me?’ I think it
was much easier to love my mother when I realized she was not a superwoman. When I
realized that she could not fix everything and she did not have every single answer. That
is when I started to really appreciate her. But, I also had those, you know, you still have
those resentments and it’s like – it is what it is.

Now, I feel a little too responsible for being that superwoman and being able to do
everything [in the] image of the successful Black mother, because we are all single, you
know what I am saying? I think there is a certain sense of having to be on top of it all the
time. Like I am in [the grocery store] tonight on the phone trying to get an ad in because
my colleague called me and said this woman is all freaking out. I said, I will call her right
now. So, I am in the checkout line but it is not a big deal. And at the end of the day I am
like, Jesus I am tired. And I think that is kind of where I fail SSCES because I feel a
certain sense of responsibility for the Beacons not kind of keeping that momentum, but at
the same time I have to say, at the end of day I go to work early, girl and I will still be
working when you leave tonight. So it is… I need the support as well but I feel I should be the support, so why am I asking for the support?

**Becoming mother.** I didn’t make that choice (she laughs loud.) I mean, you know I was 24, um – I had been broken up with his dad for a month and a half. Yeah, and was like, um where is my period? I was pregnant and was abortion an option? Of course it was. Other things were an option, but at the time I felt like for me, I had my college degree – I was going back for my Masters – but I have my degree, I know I can do this. So I made the choice simply because I felt like at that time, that was the right choice for me. I knew that his father and I were not going to get back together and that the road ahead was going to be a tough one. And it has been one in terms of our relationship. I don’t get no child support – I don’t get any support what so ever. But Nkrumah has two fathers. So I have my ex-boyfriend. We were together ten years – from the time Nkrumah was 2 – until two months ago. He is going to take him next weekend. That’s his father and he knows his role. That’s his father and is his male model. That is who he looks to, that is who he acts like, that is who his mannerisms come from and I think his biological father is well aware of that. He does see his biological father – I have made that a priority. I have a hundred thousand miles on my car [getting him back and forth to his father]. I do have to say that I have tried to help him. I have tried to advise him on going back to trade schools and done what I can even in a space where I can’t stand him (she chuckles). This is Nkrumah’s father. So even though he is not the best, Nkrumah deserves a healthy, okay father. Um, but he also knows how his father is. And he is very aware.
Nikki and preparing Nkrumah. We have talked about STD’s. We have talked about masturbation. We have talked about – I don’t want grandbabies by a hood rat. You know what I mean, for real. So you need to know what chlamydia looks like, you need to know HIV looks like, you need to know what herpes looks like – it is nasty! You know what I mean? We have to just put it out there. He always comes to me and says, can I just ask you for some advice real quick? He will get advice about a girl. He is very – very open.

This morning he asked me about Penn State. Yeah, it was on… we watch WGN every morning because they are hilarious and they were covering Penn State and he asked, “what is this? What is going on? I have seen a lot of this lately,” and I told him exactly what the situation was. I said that that coach Sandusky – he took boys about your age – that looked just like you – into a locker room and had sex with them anally, you know in their behind – mortified face, right? But you see those kids that are protesting? And he said “yea.” They are protesting for [Joseph Paterno] to stay. They are supporting him. And that – he did not even look horrified, he was speechless. He could not understand. And so I guess my point is that I feel like I am preparing him for our – our society values system. We value football over protecting our children being abused. And um – you need to know that and you need to understand the world that we are coming into and we just have – I mean, I just try to have real conversations with him that are going to benefit him in life. And everyday I ask myself, am I telling my child too much? I don’t know. And I don’t think none of us really know unless you have studied mothering and unless you have had many kids and stuff. But for a lot of us, it is just kind of doing it as I go.
There was an instance about him bullying one of his friends over an empty seat in art class. [I asked Nkrumah] if you know that [your friend] has emotions that get a hold of him and gets upset about little things like that – if it is just a seat, why couldn’t you give it up? And he had a hard time answering that question. Well, I am going to tell you why I think you did it and you are going to tell me if I am right or if I am wrong. And if I am wrong, I am wrong. I think that you would not have done that to [she lists names], I named kids in his class that I knew were a little bit hard. I think that you did that to [this friend] because you felt you could get away with doing that to [him]. What do you think about that? And he said, you’re right, that is why I did that. And I said to him, “Nkrumah, I think that I am raising you to fight for the weaker person and not identify their weaknesses and take advantage of them.” I feel like that kind of tells a story about how we are in my house in terms of talking about what is happening at Penn State or what is happening in whatever realm. I just feel like I am trying to raise him as a conscious person and conscious of what is happening around him. Part of that is because he so does not pay attention. But we are also trying to understand each other. And I want to show you an article – this is my child, he (Nikki interrupts herself to grab a parenting magazine from the kitchen bar) – I have done a lot of yelling lately because I have been frustrated with him not listening. One thing that drove me crazy Billye, oh my God, is, there is a ritual: You go in the bathroom, you brush your teeth, you wash your face, you put lotion on your face, you brush your hair and you put some grease in it. I mean there are all these things that we have had to go through and the other day I kissed him on the cheek and could tell he did not put lotion on and lost it! I lost it because I was just like, AHH! – I don’t ask you to take out the garbage, do dishes. Just put some lotion on! So it
is things like that. So I had to stay at the school late one night and he was in the principal’s office reading through this magazine and he literally pointed out this article that he would like me to read. He said ma – ma, page 103, I want you to read this article. (She hands the magazine to me and flips to an article titled, “Are you listening to me?”) And at first I thought that it was him saying (she laughs) “bitch are you listening to me?” And I’m like, oh my God! – oh my God, I am horrible (we are both laughing), no, but we are actually going to read it together. I was like, have you read it? He said he read some of it. I said, well you need to read it too if you are going to refer that to me. You need to know what it says. So we are going to read it together this weekend because actually his next [school] essay is going to be on that article.

“Knowing” Blackness. I did not know I was Black until I went to college. I knew I was mixed… but… yeah when I took that African-American History course, I think that’s when my eyes were open for the first time and I was like – I am a Black person. Regardless of the green eyes that I see in the mirror and the pale skin and this hair, I am a Black woman. And for years when I would go with my dad somewhere on Michigan Avenue, we would be stared at or we would have been followed. I never [understood] that – it did not register for me. I think that my experience of a half Black, half White person in this country is completely unique.

So like with Nkrumah. My child has never gotten a write up before so this has been the first teacher that has called me. I was like “are you sure you are calling the right Nikki, mother of Nkrumah, are you sure you are calling me – me right?” And she was like “yeah,” she was not amused and so (Nikki and I are both laughing). This incident involved him kind of being pestered by a friend of his – a good friend. And he said to his
friend um, if you don’t leave me alone I am going to kill you. So that was a major referral. Because that is violent language. And that is language that I try to limit. He loves video games. He loves Xbox. He likes the violent stuff. But we talk about that. This stuff is not real and if he were to go over to Iraq or Afghanistan, this would not be the situation. [He has] got to understand that. But my ex and I had to sit him down that night and tell him what his words mean. There is power in your voice. And pretty soon you are going to be 16 years old and 6’4” and they are not going to know you still have hug time with your mama, or that your mama has to remind you to zip up your pants in the morning. They are going to see you as a 6’4” young man and you are going to have to have a cool head about you. You are going to have to see that your words matter and these are all of our conversations since he started 7th grade. We have had so many of these conversations about what is to grow up, what it is to be a Black male. I can only

33 I am deeply compelled to note a case that is unfolding as I write. On February 26, 2012, 17-year old Trayvon Martin was murdered while walking on a residential sidewalk in Sanford, Florida by a neighborhood watchman – 28-year old George Zimmerman – of the gated community where the boy was visiting family. According to a 911 recording, Zimmerman phoned local authorities to report a guy “who looks like he’s up to no good or on drugs or something.” The authorities told Zimmerman to not pursue; however, he continued to follow stating “these assholes always get away” and whispered the racial epithet, “fucking coons.” He stepped out of his vehicle and subsequently fatally shot Martin in the chest – as he was only holding a bag of Skittles and a canned tea he’d just bought from the local convenient store. A call to his girlfriend minutes before he was killed revealed he was in fact running away from Zimmerman. In other 911 calls from the same time and area, an altercation is being reported and a child’s screams can be heard. Trayvon Martin’s body was not only tagged John Doe – as the family searched for him for three days – it was also tested for drug use. Because George Zimmerman “feared for his life” and the shooting was an act of self-defense, his alleged claims are arguably within the limits of the “Stand Your Ground” law. As of March 23, 2012, Zimmerman had still not been charged nor arrested and during an unrelated press conference, President Barack Obama addressed the tragedy stating: “If I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon.” Finally, 46 days after Martin’s death, State Attorney Angela Corey announced Zimmerman would be charged with 2nd degree murder; Zimmerman turned himself in
speak to a certain, you know, perspective of that. But I am lucky to have a male role model for him that can give him examples of when he has been questioned by police and when he knew that he didn’t do anything wrong [except that] he ‘fit the description.’ You always have to be cool. You have to be on the level that you know you did not do any wrong. But you can’t use language like that because people are going to look at you very different. Even different from the White boy language. It just comes out differently and you are a threat. So it has been difficult to have these conversations with him because it is a reminder that he is growing up and I am really preparing him to be out in the world. But they are necessary and they have to be had.

Nkrumah asked me, “why these kids call me White boy?” and I was like because you are light-skinned and that is just what they say. You are gonna have to let it roll off you. You know that you are not White and because he is working on fractions right now, we went through the whole, half, an octoroon, and a quadroon (we are both amused by this) and we had this whole discussion. And so I have always been very up front about that. He knows that the reason that his name is Nkrumah is because I knew he was going to look like that. I knew he was going to be a little light-skinned, pretty little curly haired boy and so – I [originally] wanted to name him Christian. But I knew in my heart of hearts that I could not have a light-skinned boy named Chris. So, His name is Nkrumah Christian [surname] – and I knew that I needed a strong name for him because he was going to look the way that he does. And I know how folks look at resumes and I made it so that if he wanted to do “N. Christian [surname]” he could do that on his resume.

and was placed into police custody the same day. In less than two weeks, he was released on bail and is currently awaiting arraignment set for May 29, 2012.
Giiirl, I gave WAY too much thought to it I’m sure, but I felt like I had to because he can’t be considered soft – soft boy Chris – he can’t.

And we’ve talked about the perceptions and why in the Black community there is still this intra-cultural racism. But outside of this, there is racism that is pointed directly at us, so we have just had conversations from a very historical perspective cause I am just a logical person. Because when I was little I was – I am beige because my father is brown and my mother is crème colored – so BAM! – this is the color of my skin. My eyes are this color because my mama has blue eyes and he got brown eyes and I have this gold and green thing, you know? For me it was logical. So I think my approach with him is the very same way that, you know, you are going to be viewed this way in the Black community and you are going to be viewed this way by the rest of the world. And in the Black community you are going to be a soft light-skinned boy and they are going to test you and in the world at large you are going to be a Black man. It is the duality like DuBois\textsuperscript{34} discusses.

So we just talk about the roles that we have to play – the fact that I have to play different roles in different spaces. I have to be a different person to different people. For example, in my company, we are going to meet with – I don’t know – a multi-cultural prospect and they are going to take me. I know why you are taking me. It is like the whole Obama thing when White folks want to claim him, “oh he is not all Black”, but he really

\textsuperscript{34} In the opening chapter of \textit{The Souls of Black Folk}, W.E.B. DuBois, proponent of the double consciousness theory, writes of himself between two worlds: one Black, one White. Upon interaction with those of the other world, he restates an implicit question posed to him. “...Instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? They say, I know an excellent colored man in my town...” DuBois continues to discuss the implications and tensions of self-determination within a dominant society of those who already claim to know him.
is Black in your eyes. He is Black in society. I feel like we are really getting off track, but I also feel that – um – I feel that I get a little bit more respect in the school because of that. That bugs me and I hate to say that out loud but I see that. But I will play that role and if my role at SSCES is to be this safe light-skinned lady who can relate to us (referring to the staff) then I will be that too. So I just tend to play the role that the situation requires and I am trying to teach him the same thing. I have never been a big fighter, but I have always felt physically like folks think one way about me because of the way that I look. And I know my mouth. So I have to be prepared for what’s gonna happen after I open my mouth and we get into the bottom of things.

I tend not to worry so much about how other people perceive me as a Black mother because my own expectations are to not fail. Because I feel that is the perception of most people – that we will fail. So that is what makes me be on the Board, and that is what makes me mentor on Saturday mornings. I feel it is my responsibility to the community. You know I have a son, but we have a lot of Black girls that need a lot of help. So Saturday mornings, I mentor with [Organization], which is sort of my way of giving to the girls. It is all about communication and we talk about how to present yourself because we need children to be successful and they are not going to be successful if people are always cussing each other out and this and that. And I feel I have a certain responsibility because of that. And I feel a certain sense of guilt because of knowing better, like I need to be the one to tell you how it is and help you out. So I sometimes feel like I have that martyr savior complex, but at the same time I genuinely care and genuinely enjoy my time with the girls and helping them, and modeling for them and just answering questions and being open with them.
Involvement, Communication and Relationships. I [have a mutual friend] that works at CPS so she emailed me a list of schools I could look at – a lot of new charter schools and SSCES was one. It is an extended school day, which I really loved, which is one of the things when I would volunteer, I was literally running with the teacher because the whole day was like rush, rush, rush. So people who were like 8 – 4? That is so long! It is not. Try going to a 8:30 – 1:30 school. They have time for *nothing*. They are rushing through everything. So long story short, I went up to SSCES the very last day because I got the list a little late and they were doing orientation. [The first principal of the school]³⁵ was there and she was like literally packing up and putting things in boxes. I remember it was raining and I was like, I am so sorry and parents were gone. But she sat there and talked to me for like 90 minutes. And we discovered how much commonality we had: I was a historian, I had worked at the DuSable [African-American History] Museum and she is the great niece of a legendary curator. So that kicked it off and we were just like blah, blah, blah.

So I think that I bring resources [to SSCES] in terms of being a safe parent that can be talked to in a high level way and understand it and carry that message – I hate to do that – but you understand what I am trying to say. To carry that message to the broader school community and I have given [the school] a lot of feedback. I have gotten a lot of weird faces, but you know you have to frame how to talk to Black people. You have to think about how you talk to people about their children. You have to understand when you tell Black folk, and especially a single Black woman: “oh by the way, this year,

³⁵ The first principal of the school was responsible for opening my position. Immediately after, she was offered a promotion within the company and was transitioning and training the new principal the summer I was there to develop the University.
every other Friday we have a 2:00 dismissal.’ That’s very different. You have to frame that for parents. You have to present it in a way that is not intimidating, because change normally means something bad is coming. And so when you switch out a teacher, *no* it is not just switching out a teacher. No, you need to address that with these parents because they have trusted *this* White woman. And another White woman coming in here that they don’t know? You have to frame that in a whole different way.

And I am trying to work with the [new] principal because she is a White woman from the South. You know she is young and she is struggling and I emailed her the other day and was like, dude if you need to vent – I am there. I am a Board member, but understand that I am a human first and foremost and I can just listen to you and try to help you and try to prioritize and help you figure these things out but you have to tell me how things are. But I think my biggest resource for the school honestly is just being an honest voice that says, you are doing this really shitty. That is insane that you are not thinking about how you are communicating to these parents. That is like the first step – like in saying the right things and framing your messages in the right way that they are going to be received positively. You can’t just say to folks, “yep every other Friday it is going to be 2 o’clock – peace” because people are like – dude I work at Currency Exchange and I don’t get to leave. And I am a consultant and right now I am freaking out because I am leaving every day at 3:30 because [my ex] moved out and I don’t have that same support for pick up and drop off. So you know I come home and he does homework and I continue working and I make sure I email my boss and say I am working… Um, and as much of a pain in the butt it is to be on the phone with that woman in Portland trying to get this ad in the newspaper, that is still a luxury when you look at
how work is for people and you look at what their demands are. It is still a luxury that I can take care of my job and do grocery shopping – even as much as I don’t like it. You have people that just have to sit at Currency Exchange until 6 o’clock, 8 o’clock. They can’t get off at 1:30 to come get their child, so it is relative. You know what I’m saying? And now (redirecting her conversation to the principal again) it is messed up – how you just delivered this message and we have to figure out how to do it better next time. And I get the whole – okay – I mean you are uncomfortable, and I am a little uncomfortable too but it is a conversation that needs to be had. So I, I think that has been my biggest contribution but I would like to see other contributions. For me time is my enemy. I mean literally it has just been time and being able to commit to [being involved at the school].

There is a certain level of respect that I get there but I also feel that they know I am on their side and they talk to me. I have had a number of teachers say to me I am dying here – I am tired, I am worn out, we can’t have meaningful conversations because I feel like I am afraid that someone is going to walk into the classroom and see we are not focused on testing – a whole other issue, but I feel that teachers trust me – both Black and White. I am that safe space.

I do a lot of these discipline hearings because I do feel that it is so important for these White teachers to understand what misbehaving looks like in the Black community and if a little Black girl sucks her teeth, that [should not warrant] a write up. And you need to be able to overlook that. And at some point she has to stop, but in 4\textsuperscript{th} grade she sucked her teeth, whatever – get over it. When she calls you a bitch – \textit{then talk to me.} You know what I’m saying? You have to learn what the levels are and you have to
understand our culture. So I sit in these hearings because the majority of our Board is White and I feel that there needs to be communication and there needs to be – I mean I am the middle, I am gray. I have been a fence rider my whole life, I have had teachers write that on paper, “you are a fence rider – pick a side” – and I am like no. I am going to see the sides that need to be seen and I am going to assign relevance to them and I am going to choose the side that to me makes the most sense. I am always going to see both sides because I have no choice other than to do that.

Carolyn

**Carolyn is the woman that nearly every SSCES mother points to as a support.**

She is seemingly the backbone of the organization because she is the initial contact for all parents in the school. She is regarded as “the reason my child is here,” and “the reason I am active as a parent.” She smiles, never really taking credit for the praise given to her by the parents and will sometimes have tears in her eyes when she speaks passionately. The parents feel comfortable talking with her openly. Carolyn also has a child enrolled in this school, so she plays the dual role of administrator and parent. You can tell she carries the responsibility of being honest with her parents about the frustrations she feels from both sides. She often “puts a bubble in her mouth”, takes notes, nods her head, and speaks very patiently.

I worked with Carolyn the most – three days out of every week. If we were not in physical contact, we were emailing or phoning. Our relationship was certainly strained in the beginning; I was brought in as an outside contractor to formalize and execute a project she’d already been independently operating. It was clear that my position was a slap in the face. To add injury to insult, I was to work directly with her, in her office, and
develop additional projects for her to execute, on top of the two roles she had already been assigned. She had also just been passed over for the position of principal months before I arrived. She never verbally communicated her frustration to me but through her patient smiles and constant moving to keep with her responsibilities, it was obvious on many occasions. For these reasons, I deferred to her often and stepped up to assist her. I kept constant, open communication, careful not to come across as her “babysitter” or “spy,” as I had to maintain communication with her supervisors reporting of my progress and how she was assisting me. She was leaps and bounds ahead of me with experience, not only as an administrator but the mother of two pre/teenaged daughters – Kanuri and Khoi. Yet, I was assigned as a peer of some sort – I had to trust her. And if neither one of us wanted to feel like I was simply getting in the way or making more work for her, she had to trust me as well. So now, not only was I responsible for developing a parent incentive program (which was slowly taking shape before I arrived), I was assisting with school administrative duties – specifically school enrollment (which is very critical in an urban “school of choice.”)

Before long the focus became less about the “job” – that was pretty routine and we avoided stepping on one another’s toes – and more about Carolyn being a mother, wife, and lover of house music. As she began to warm up to me, several other members of the staff engaged with me as well. Many of them were family members through blood and marriage, so their connection was very intimate and supportive; they provided a relaxed energy on many tense days. Soon I was invited to her home and began a relationship with her daughters. She is fiercely protective; therefore, I was honored when she allowed her oldest daughter to attend a late evening poetry event. Of all the
parents I have worked with, Carolyn is the one with whom I was most intimately involved. I have interacted with every member of her immediate family and she has been supportive of both my partner and I in events outside of our primary relationship. Due to schedule conflicts, we were only able to have one interview, which lasted approximately one hour and took place after work at a restaurant on the South Side. We were joined by Khoi.

Schooling narrative. My mother wanted to make sure that we got something more; we weren’t gonna be the status quo. She advocated. She pushed to make sure that we got the best education we could possibly get and we knew that we had to go to college. We knew that. That was at the top of her list because that was something she was not able to achieve. She went to junior college for about a year and that was it. So it was not an option to not go to college. [She made] sure that I had everything that I needed – from school supplies to tutors to transportation to – all across the board. I did not miss any events. When I was in high school, starting my freshmen year, I went into the Upward Bound program for all 4 years. She just made sure that I was always doing something positive.

Back then it was not a lot of parent involvement. I only remember [my mother coming] report card conference time, report card pickup. And then any school event, like if there was a show or performance or parent meeting, she was always there. And then I had a relative in the school too. It was like she was just there. There was no getting in trouble. So [my brother and I] always had to make good choices. It wasn’t like, I’m gonna act the fool because I can. It just did not happen because she was that stern; these
are my expectations, this is what you are going to do and that’s it. She wasn’t mean, we just did not want to disappoint her – so we didn’t.

**Becoming mother.** When I became a parent it completely changed what I wanted to do with my life – completely. I never grew up thinking I was gonna be a teacher or in education – that is not something that I wanted to do. But when I became a parent that kind of superseded everything and um – I decided all my focus and energy would go towards them and that is what it has been. And still is.

I think I saw a flyer about SSCES and at the time I was working at a day care center. I was the director of a center and through the mail I received a flyer about a new charter school. It was the arts infusion piece that kind of drew me in. That is Khoi’s love and what is she completely focused on. I thought it would be a great fit for her – not for me, but for her. She enjoys music, art, dance, drawing – so I was like let me see what this is about and when I went to the open house I was talking to the principal and she was just taken aback by my interest in the school. She asked what did I do and I told her and she was like “oh you need to come here and work…”

I liked that it was a new school and that it offered parents a choice. Um, I loved the structure of the school and that it was college focused and they were doing something different. I felt like I had a voice. Like Khoi was *not* – I didn’t want her to go to a traditional Chicago school. Unfortunately I did not live in the best neighborhood at the time so sending her to her neighborhood school was never an option. It was *never* an option. Because I had been – I had not only worked in Chicago Public Schools, but I had been – I had seen administration, I had seen other PTAs or PTCO\(^{36}\)s as they call them and

\(^{36}\)Parent Teacher Associations and Parent Teacher Community Organizations.
just did not like the way things were being done. How they managed the school, how they managed the children, um – and it was just not something that I wanted for [Khoi or Kanuri]. So, it was either find a charter school or something private. Those were my choices, those were my options.

**Passion and connection.** My expectations [of the teachers] are that they believe in and are passionate about what they do or what they say that they were going to do once being a part of, you know, our children’s educational endeavors. This is not something that we take lightly and so when I sit on the interview panel, I don’t just look at you educational wise and what your background is, I want to see your passion. Like, is this something that you are really passionate about? Are you going to do your best to develop a relationship with your students and their parents, and is this something that you really want to do? Because this is not just about teaching – it is far more beyond that – and if it is not there, it is going to show.

Having a relationship with the parents, is something that I think everybody should have – not just me. That is why I have the least problem with the parents [at SSCES] because they know me and I know them and it is as simple as that. It is not rocket science. I am not doing anything special – hanging out with them – nothing extra. It is just I have taken the time to make this my priority – to get to know them because they trust me with their child. And I want you to know exactly what I’m here for. When I call parents about discipline, I get no push back: “I trust you. My child was acting up. Do what you have to do. I apologize so…”

The board noticed that there was a deficit with parent involvement, not because of the tone but because of the data. Data, data, data – the attendance at parent meetings, the
[school issued] surveys about parent satisfaction. So um – this past summer they sent myself and another young lady to a [professional development] to find out about this new parent involvement program called “I Care.” It’s called, I Care Parent Involvement. Excellent program – difficult to implement. They say it is easy and when we went to the training we were like oh we can do this, we can do this. But to get parents to buy into it, it is hard. So the goal is, their whole mindset is, parent involvement is not just coming into the building. It is what you are doing with your child at home, the whole nine. So at the beginning of the month a form goes home to the parents: This is the characteristic. There is an activity you can do and we want you to share what you’re doing. In the classroom, the teacher is teaching a lesson on the same characteristic. Then at the end of the month the teacher sends home a feedback form so we can see and this is your opportunity to document what you have done. So we see it’s starting to open the dialogue to see what the differences are – what you are doing. If students that don’t ordinarily get compliments, get them or get praised. Because [the parents] send those forms back and then the teachers get to talk to the kids about it or whatever, but you get to see. And then we put this information into a data system and it is supposed to, hopefully it is supposed to curb our behavior. But we just started in September.

And of course this is something that I had to do again, because I am a parent, which I found very difficult to do. And the only reason that I did it was because I had to do it. But once I did it – it was great. What was difficult was finding the time to do the assignment, to do the project. Even thought I had 30 days. So you had 30 days to do this assignment and it could be nothing big. It could be reading a book with your child, it could be going to the park, to the movies. But ours was middle school – more of having
conversations. So we had to have conversations about being a good listener, what that looks like, what it sounds like, what it feels like… I found out that I was not listening to her as much as I should have been. Through the discussion we just found out more things about each other and *we do* spend a lot of time together and *we do* talk a lot but I guess you know, as a parent you always miss some things. It just made us just stop and think. Something she brought to my attention before when I was talking about transferring her, she said to me: “Like if you feel like I am not learning everything I need to learn, why don’t you just give me what I’m missing?” You have a point and so I started doing it and now every week we have a vocabulary word on the refrigerator and she has to add a sentence to it. Everybody gets to contribute – and this helped her. These are words that I encourage her to use in school and so this is something that I would not have thought to do on my own, I probably would have but that I had to do it…

[I Care] is definitely supportive. Because it gives you activities but there is also room for you to make lists. And so we did a couple of the activities but I feel it opened up the dialogue like – for example – I am always refereeing something between her and her sister but understanding that they listen to each other differently. We figured out for instance, that I do not like to communicate in the morning, none of us do, but we force ourselves to say good morning when we don’t want to instead of respecting each others’ space and respecting who we are and what we like. So, just talking about it and implementing it has been interesting.

Jill

*When we first met, she was pregnant with her second daughter. Jill was always present for our meetings but not someone who caught my immediate attention; she was*
more of a quiet force. She was not one of the initial parents that I contacted but Carolyn strongly suggested that I should. What I found through our interview was that she is a teacher and balances the responsibilities of motherhood with the perceptions and expectations of school administrators, of which she is intimately familiar. What was most interesting about her is that her roles as mother and teacher are closely intertwined. We spoke a lot about expectations and discipline and it was many times indistinguishable which role was impacting her ideas and choices. More than once she described herself as “non-confrontational” however, when she spoke either of her daughter Jola, or her students, her tone was strong and certain.

Unlike the other mothers, the most time I spent with Jill was during this interview. What makes her important to this project are the other ways she stands out from the other mothers. Not only is she the only one employed as a CPS classroom teacher, but she is also the only one who was married when I met her (still is), not originally from Chicago, and the only one with a private/boarding school background. Our interview took place during the first round; therefore, we focused quite a bit on school structure, her frustrations as a teacher, her expectations for Jola, the I Care program and how she balanced all of her roles with the addition of a new baby. Jill agreed to meet me at the Starbucks on the South Side and where we met on the outdoor patio. It was a beautiful day and we talked for about an hour and a half.

**Encouraging involvement.** I think over time, parent involvement has become a higher expectation for schools. Schools have more outreach, more programs for that, I think. So at SSCES, I feel the outreach more because they have this “I Care”. Their theme last month was creativity. So when we got it, they said these are the suggestions:
take your child to the library and get your child a library card and do this, and do this. They are telling us what to do with our kid, right? So at first I was like, my kid has had a library card since she was you know, like 4 years old and I was like who are they to tell me – like assume that I don’t know? I talked to some people at my school where I work and one of the teachers was saying that we had parents that didn’t know that that is what they should do. Or, had not thought about that is what they should do. So I took a step back and said I just can’t take it personally. And then they sent home this paper at the end of the month that we have to turn in. You have to write five things that you did with your kid this month that has something to do with creativity and I was like, oh one more thing! I started to push the thing off again and then I was thinking well, I try to teach Jola that sometimes you got to do things you don’t want to do. And so I was sitting there thinking – well we did this – I let her style her hair one day. Just little stuff and we went to the meeting and there were a few complaints: Why do we have to do it? I work with my kid – why do I have to fill this out? Basically the same feelings that I had when I got it. And there are a lot of moms that are going back to school themselves and one says, “I am in school and this is just extra.” So, I raised my hand and I was like, I did not want to do it at first either. But, it allowed me to reflect on what I had done during the month to work with my child and I found that there were more than five things that I did. So it is a good “atta-boy” for the parent because it really showed you what you had done during the month and you just might do it – to make sure your child is well-rounded. It is still a pretty useful tool and for the mom that had said she was in school, I said your kid is seeing you do your homework. It is very powerful – especially if you are talking about what you are doing: “I am really tired but I have to do my homework” – or when you
bring home the grades that you get and you show them to your child. That is a big
difference. It’s what they see. If you look at it as a reflection tool – I don’t know joy or
self-confidence. … and it just gives us another little focus and supports what they are
doing in school and it is another connection with the school and the parent.

I think my experience [as a student] was – we want you to pay your tuition, we
got the rest of this! To me it was like, what [the parent needs] to do is make sure your kid
has lunch, or their uniform but I don’t recall there being a lot of outreach about this is
what you should do with your kid at home. Because you are paying this money, we are
going to make sure you are getting the education that you are paying for. So you can
learn another language and all that kind of rich stuff that you want – that all kids deserve.
All kids deserve to learn another language.

**Being vocal.** A lot of parents are afraid to say something and then sometimes – I
don’t want to say afraid, but apprehensive. Because when I approached Jola’s teacher
last year, I went back and forth about do I need to really write this email? How is it
going to come across? What is the tone? Am I being… I’m not trying to be *that* parent. I
don’t want her to think I’m like, that’s my kid who is perfect – I don’t, but then I had to
come to the realization if I don’t fight for her – who is? You know this is important –
even if it comes out where I don’t look right. This is something that I need to do.
Because I think that some parents would have been apprehensive about approaching
teachers or administrators when they have some concerns. And then other parents that
may approach it in the confrontational way which you know, then it is like… why does it
have to be a fight? Parent involvement is advocating for your child, advocating for other
children, you know? And also supporting the school in whatever they need. Just sharing
your ideas – that is your involvement right there. And whatever your level of comfort level is with that.

So, we were doing two hours of homework – seriously? This is ridiculous and we went back and forth a little bit with the homework and there were other parents that had issues too because we wanted to do the homework right. To do all of this at home and then we went through a thing where she was not getting all of her points for her homework and I was like “look – if I am sitting up doing all this homework every night – she needs her points. It’s homework, I’m a teacher. Nobody grades homework”. Because it is homework, give her all her points. And I would look at her progress report… She went from making straight A’s, and we were all very excited about that – to now she is making B’s and I was like okay, but her tests were good and her class work was good and it was this homework thing. I ended up talking to Carolyn who told me to write a letter – or send an email with my concerns. Because I had spoken to her teacher before.

I am not confrontational at all. I avoid confrontation. That is why it took me so long to get to actually address the homework issue because I – I did not – mind you I did not send the email until almost the end of the school year when [Jola] got her progress report and it was B’s on there and I had been watching her grades and you know it took me a minute and I did not do it right away, I had to think about it… I need to look at her scores, I need to see a pattern all that before I do anything. I am like Law and Order. I want to have my case set up, I don’t want her teacher to think this is frivolous at all.

I sent the email to Carolyn, but I copied the principal. I did not copy the teacher, which I probably should have done, but they ended up sending it to her anyway. But I
was like, I’ve been talking to you enough – you’re not hearing me. So it ended up that she was being *just a little bit anal* about the homework. And [the teacher] said that they hold [their homework] up and put it away. So if they don’t have it on their desk or it does not look complete then I take off points. So you are telling me that *my child doesn't have homework on the desk? More than once?* (Her voice continues to escalate.) *For real?* She is not that kind of kid. She does not want to be embarrassed first of all. I wouldn’t think. And *if she is* that is a *discipline* issue as opposed to an academic issue. But we got it all straightened out and she’s changed her policy and it’s much better.

So, um, I don’t know. Maybe advocating is not a threat to the school but it can be seen as a threat to the teacher. Because the school is going to protect itself. So it is all going to come down to that individual unless it gets to the school level. Now, if [the problem] is a *school* policy, that is how I approach it. *This* is your policy. This is what it says and when I went to the meeting I made sure I was prepared. This is what you said was your homework policy, this is what you said was supposed to happen. So I came to it as a school policy, because as a teacher, you know, it is hard – it is hard and no matter what you say, it can be switched around, so I did not want to sound like I was attacking the teacher. But sometimes in order for your needs to be met, you have to go there. Because as a teacher – teachers think they know everything – I mean *really*. I am with your kid all day long and you are just with them at night. For real. *I see* this side of your child. I mean you think that your kid is perfect and because of the way that they behave at home or whatever, but she does not have her homework on her desk every time. But if the teacher is not following the policy – which they are so broad now – you know, we need to fix that. Parents have to advocate for their kids.
Now there is a difference between advocating for them and making excuses for them. Which I run into a lot as a teacher, which makes me not want – makes me more conscious for doing that for my own child. I will not make excuses for her. I will explain, like I will write a note if we did not have time to do homework because blah, blah, blah, like please excuse her. Now if she is doing something wrong – no. No. But as a teacher we have parents that say: “I don’t think it is right that you are doing this.” I’m like look, you have a demon! So, I will write. I am keeping notes! So you know, there is a difference between advocating for them and making excuses for them.

Yeah, when parents are too involved – when they are making excuses for their child. When they are trying to live, relive their childhood through their child. When they don’t allow their kids to make any mistakes. When they don’t allow their child to receive the consequences or the rewards for their actions… I want all her homework to be right but I am not going to do it for her. And there are times, there are – when I know telling her how to do it is the same as doing it for her. Now sometimes, I justify that as giving her a good example. (She smiles.) But when I notice that she is pimping me into doing her homework, it is like you have taken it too far. You have messed your own self up because it was like, I was doing it and she will be like, “I don’t really understand” and I will be like, “oh its blah, blah, blah.” Then you know: well, what does such and such mean? Go get your dictionary and please stop pimping me! And when parents don’t let their children grow and make those mistakes and be imperfect – I think that is a bit too much.

When you sit down and think about it, parents have to ask themselves, is this correct behavior? I don’t care what you see on TV or what your life is, you have to know
[some behavior] is not okay! You have to – I mean some people don’t – but you know you are cussing [a person] out because your mama cussed everybody out and now your kid is cussing everybody out – but notice that 90% of the world does not go around cussing everybody out. You know. You don’t want anybody cussing you out. Because you puff up and make everybody scared to say anything to you – so nobody will say anything to you. So I think it sends a message. Just like suspending a kid from school or expelling a kid – it is going to send a message. Even though that is not what you want to do, sometimes it is what needs to be done. If it is affecting the environment that you are trying to have in your school.

I think we should reach out to those parents who don’t know – don’t know and go home. But I would think at a place like SSCES, although I am sure it does happen – but people who send their kids there want something better for their kids simply because they sent them there. Like I needed a place for Jola to go because I could not get her into any of the other public schools. Like – well like I was not comfortable in the schools in my neighborhood just in terms of achievement and so I originally wanted her to go to a Catholic school but we could not afford it. But there is that extra layer at SSCES that may not be at some other schools. The extra layer is following the rules and guidelines and orders that are set in the school.

The push is more now schools can not do it on its own. We only have eight hours in the day at SSCES but at these other public schools where they add this extra 90 minutes, whenever they do that next June, it is still not enough time. We need your help – it needs to be a partnership and it is really important. But a lot of people are still in the same mindset that I sent [my child] to school there. They are responsible for teaching you
your academics, I will teach you your social thing, or not, but why are they calling me about this? You [the teacher] take care if he is doing that. You take care. So, and the schools are like – I can’t hit him – I can’t take care of him… . I mean not that I am advocating hitting children that are not yours… I was talking to my friend and she is old school for real – I remember you used to get a whooping from your teacher and you would get a whooping from your mama and you better not say anything to anybody. Corporal punishment is not the best thing to do anyway, so you know as we move away from that mindset, you need more tools and the parents are the tools because they can have more consequences at home to back up what we [as teachers] are trying to do.

And getting, like you said, getting a spanking you know, that is only going to work for a minute. So, do you want punishment or do you want a whipping? Oh, I’ll take a whipping. No, you don’t get a choice – you are going to get them all – all the above. And they will be like – okay I won’t lie anymore or whatever. And don’t go to school acting like that. And don’t set me up with your teacher. Do not. Because I will tell a kid in a minute: You are setting your mama up – you are setting her up. Because when she comes in here, I am going to tell her this, this and this, and what are you going to say? And she is going to be upset because she did not get the full story from you. Don’t set her up. And they are like okay, (imitating the child) – the teacher wants to talk to you because… Do you really want me to call her? Because I have my list. I can go waaay back. You did not just start this. Don’t set your mom up.

**Perceptions and stereotypes.** Yes, I am battling perceptions. Because I had those perceptions before I became a parent, since I am a teacher. I could tell a mom based on the kid’s appearance. That is why I have to slick down Jola’s hair because (we
both laugh) because if a kid comes to school with their hair looking wild, [I’m thinking] what is your mama…?? Until I realized it is not that easy to get everybody up and dressed and get their hair combed in the morning. You know, it does not matter how many degrees you have or don’t have – I mean, I respect the moms that have the time to get the hair done and it has the little braids in there and they look cute every morning (she says this as she playfully demonstrates braiding in the air.) Now I don’t know. I can assume she does not have anything else to do. **But** she might have a *whole lot of stuff* to do and that might just be her talent – that I don’t have. So I had those perceptions of [Black] moms. I have only taught Black children – which comes from my good private school education – to pass my good private school education on to others who didn’t have the opportunities I had. But you know, I [made judgments].

Yes, there is an overcompensation. I need to make sure her homework is done and in order and correct. She might not be a rocket scientist but I want the best education that I can get for her. So um, I’m lucky in a sense that I am a teacher and her teachers know I am a teacher and then that perception has additional responsibility because I could be: ‘here comes Jola’s mom again – she thinks she knows everything cause she is a teacher and she is going to question me and she is going to make suggestions and she is going to try to rule my classroom.’ But I am the first to step back. Like, I am not trying to run your classroom. Like, I made a suggestion to her 2nd grade teacher. They were talking about civil rights and it was a discussion of like Susan B. Anthony or somebody and I was like well, what about Ida B. Wells – you’re right here.**37** But you know, she was

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37 Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862-1931), sociologist, journalist, suffragist, anti-lynching activist and namesake of the low-rise development built in 1941 exclusively for Black families on the South Side of Chicago.
going by the book and she’s an excellent teacher but sometimes that cultural thing gets lost and… (her voice drops), I said, I’ll just leave her alone. I will just teach her Ida B. Wells at home. And the teacher did a really good thing and was like well if you want to come in and do a little piece on that or send me some stuff and I never got a chance to send her anything and so I was like – yeah I will keep my mouth shut. But um – yeah – as just a regular Black woman without being a teacher and that other stuff, there are perceptions that I am going to be confrontational and stuff like that and I am going to baby my kid. But also with the added education that I have and the experience that I have, there can also be the perception that I am going to be overbearing, which I do not want to be. Perceptions of Black mothers – there is always going to be that perspective – especially in Chicago. Especially in neighborhood schools a lot of times. It is going to be negative before it is positive. A lot of times. And it also depends on how you come to the teacher though.

And how you come to the school. We can look at kids that are well kept and a lot of it is reflected in your child. The care that a mother takes, and not just in education, but the care that a mother takes for her child, the way your kid goes out, is a direct reflection of you. So if her hair is standing out…. the kids hair is looking all crazy and the mother’s hair is all whipped. She got the weave here and back and the kids come to school dirty. Your child is a reflection of you in education or anywhere else.

When I started teaching, that was the first time I encountered parents who were not necessarily involved or they listened to what their kids told them and not the adult. They came ready to whoop your tail because you were picking on them and you called and said that you needed to conference with them because their kid was acting up. And so
you know, I learned from that. And the parent involvement – there was no parent involvement. The assemblies we had were during the day and the parents did not come. There were no “family nights” or anything like that. Parents did not have to walk their kids to school; the kids came straight out the projects down the stairs. You might see parents when somebody called but basically, only when you called. Now, at [another school] we had more parent involvement – not a lot more – but of course graduations and stuff, report card pick up, open house we have more parents and there was more outreach at getting parents and I am not sure if that has just changed or if it was just again, because of the parents in the area. Because there seems to be a lot of outreach to parents. We will call you, we will text you if there is a problem, you will have my cell number, your kid can call me up until 9 o’clock. That’s two-way involvement.

**Sonia**

*Sonia held a leadership position with the parent organization. I seem to remember everyone having a pretty equal hand in responsibilities, but any loose ends were tied by her. Also, if there were concerns that the parents wanted to collectively address to the school administration beyond Carolyn or Nikki, it appeared that Sonia took the charge. Her primary responsibility was to serve as a liaison, not just to voice the parents’ needs, but the schools’ needs as well (including principal and teachers) so that everyone was “on the same page.” However, as a parent, it appeared that Sonia felt there were no hindrances to information from their end, but there was a slow leak of*

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38 During my second conversation with Sonia, I shared with her the pseudonym I selected for her and she responded: “ohhh! I’ma look her up on Google as soon as I get off of the phone! I’m frantic!”
information from the other side. Sonia was very vocal about her frustration and urgency to communicate more effectively as a whole, rather than on a parent-by-parent basis.

Having been introduced as a researcher in our first meeting, Sonia blatantly said to me (not asked), “I want to read what you’re reading.” Sonia, more than anyone, acknowledged my position as an outsider with leverage and access to information that could instigate major change. In this way, she immediately made me feel like an ally; I also felt like I had to be a better researcher. While I wanted to be comfortable as an observer, Sonia made me realize I had to ‘pay off.’ In many ways, Sonia made me feel like a spy. In smaller planning meetings she would ‘off the record’ ask, “Well, what have you heard?” I constantly had to negotiate my position not just as researcher but a contracted employee of this school and my funders, while still making sure to prioritize the parents’ needs rather than shadow them under the ‘major’ stakeholders. I can’t say that I always dodged this bullet well but Sonia surely held me accountable.

In the middle of the school year, Sonia relocated to another state. This had a major impact on the parents’ organization as well as her personally. However, this became an incredible transition period for her. Not only had her first son – Sundiata – began college away from home, she remarried and moved to an entirely different climate. She is now raising her younger son – Selassie – in a blended family with a 13, 12 and 5-year old. Due to distance, both interviews took place over the phone and lasted a total of approximately two hours.

Schooling narrative. Until third grade I actually went to a school in a poorer community, quote unquote – it was in the projects. And then third through entire high school I was, we moved out South. Out of the projects, it was supposed to be considered
a better – a higher economic situation. My mom was not active [in school]. She went on the first day and showed up for the report cards. So the irony is, my mom has her degree in child psychology and she is a teacher and all that so, it is kind of, very ironic now that I just thought about that. It was just expected, you didn’t need [involvement]. You were smart, you didn’t need it. Do your homework and then you can do whatever you need to do. There was no penalty or repercussion; I was valedictorian, I was head of the class, blah, blah, blah. So at home there was no support or instruction or structure, I guess. There was an independent structure – I will say it that way. With my mom’s education if [participation] would have been more expected of her and blatant I am almost confident that she would have participated.

Sundiata went to the same grammar school that I graduated from because I actually bought my mom’s house and moved in there. And I remember getting the letters from No Child Left Behind saying that the school was failing. So we applied for [Selective Middle/High School]’s program for 7th and 8th grade and he went to [Selective Middle/High School] from 7th to 12th grade. For Selassie, I knew that the local school was not an option. I had gone to CPS fairs. Yeah, I was being more proactive because the local school was not an option. Because I knew that the schools were failing, CPS as a whole was failing, in my mind. So after I pulled Sundiata out and he went through a much different program and was much more successful, so, it just, CPS was just not an option.

My goal is to make sure that [Selassie] continues to be challenged. [Previously] my mom home schooled him. He was getting a really good education with my mom. I was still afraid that he was going to be used to having all the attention and all of that stuff
so I wanted him to be around other kids before he started kindergarten. So I had been listening and trying to learn about this whole charter school movement and we applied for a few charter schools and we got into SSCES. We got into another one actually that was literally walking distance from my house at that time but I decided that SSCES with the longer school day and things like that won me over. [SSCES] really expected the children to succeed. I don’t know if it was propaganda or what. Not settling and expecting the best and it seemed like they had this whole new generation of young motivated teachers and their life’s purpose was to educate in the school and to the children and all of that. I would say they were consistent 110 percent. But, I don’t know, the fact that there seemed to be a war between CPS and the charter schools made me feel like that the charter schools were being alienated. It was politics and the children were really not the focus and the results and other possibilities were just was not enforced.

**School leadership.** I actually took on [a leadership role] because the staff and culture, they were doing such a good job. Their approach to education and they way they worked with my child – that I had never seen happen. I felt like if we could get the parents involved, this would be heaven. The principal used an example of a three-legged stool and she was like we cannot achieve greatness without all three legs and the three legs are the students, the teachers, and the parents. It will not work if one piece is missing. And that really struck a chord with me that I know – that is how it is supposed to work. I’ve never seen it but I know it and believe it and I wanted to help bring that other leg – you know? Because they were doing wonders without us. If we had more participation in helping out and bringing resources and helping our children or whatever, then it would just be over the top.
I read this book um, *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell and I learned a new term called – cultivated parenting? *She mumbles through a lot of words and phrases and I begin to flip through my notes really fast because I am thinking I’d just heard of the same thing. I ask, concerted cultivation?* Concerted cultivation! (We both laugh and sigh.) So I may not have to break it down as much because I think you know what I’m talking about! In school there is currently no concerted cultivation – it is more of an independent, fend for yourself, figure out what you like, support you from afar – if I support you at all, kind of environment. So it seems like it would take two or three generations to get to, concerted cultivation.

I think, well, from what I have learned this year is that everybody is at a different stage and a different level. I think the intention – I think the parents have the best intentions to help and may not execute it in the best way and there might be some results – negative results from that. That is even more of a reason that the administration has to have a qualified leadership role. It can’t be – it can’t, I don’t even think it should be – it can’t be entry level as far as the qualifications for the person that is going to work with these people. How is that supposed to work? It has to be a leader – a person that is really flexible. I don’t know really what the essential requirements are, but I don’t even think it can be a mid-level person. I think it needs to be a higher-level person. So I don’t think that people volunteer with malicious intent, because everybody is different and comes from different backgrounds and communicates differently and all of those kinds of things are normal things that make people different. But it can have some bad results if it is not handled right. We are just different. So many different backgrounds. It should definitely be the parents that identify what unacceptable behavior is, but I don’t know who should
correct it or adjust that. I think the parents can address it on the peer-to-peer level like, “girl, what’s up? You probably don’t want to do that,” and that would be a really good benefit of having a parent group. But when it is something that is beyond a person’s qualifications. The parent group can’t be held accountable. I think the best thing for the parent group to do is get some professionals up in here and we address passive aggressively what negative parent behavior is.

At [SSCES], I was working against the fact that there was no expectations for us. That um, we are going to make our goals and we are going to do our numbers regardless of the parent participation. That’s great, that’s good. But at the same time when you have some parents that have stepped up and said what do we do? We should be putting some kind of system in place to make that happen. I honestly feel like there are more stereotypes against teachers – especially White teachers, but that’s mostly all that comes into the Black community. I think that the stereotype that most Black mothers have, or a lot of Black mothers have against White teachers and White people is “the White liberals are coming to save our kids” does more harm than good. I think a lot of people – a lot of parents – the stereotype that we have about “White people coming into our community help save our kids” – it causes us to be more distant from them and also makes us just get bag off and let them do it and that is more harmful than good. I think a lot of our behavior is based on the fact that, that is the stereotype. I think some labels of Black mothers are: angry… working all day and not able to spend a lot of time with their children. Loving but maybe not as nurturing. [But] I don’t feel like I have to work against these labels. My focus is more on Selassie’s development and his journey verses how my approach is being judged. I don’t consider that, I don’t take it personally. My focus is on him.
Becoming mother. I don’t think I had that deep down I’ve ever been in a position in my life where I was like “I want to be a mother!” With Selassie, I was married and my husband didn’t have any children so I was – that was a conscious decision. And honestly at that time, I felt that was my duty – as his wife – seeing that he didn’t have any children. I was only 17 [when I had Sundiata]. It wasn’t a decision. I was young and dumb as far as really making a conscious decision, like, “oh, I want to be a mother.” The community was awesome. My mother was very vital to my success. Even my division teachers, my father, my baby daddy (she says with a smirk) – as much as he could be as a 19 year boy – his family. It was a lot of support there. And so I probably have a twisted theory on this: that much support sends the wrong message. I can see why a lot of other young, teenaged people can have, can continue to do that – can make that same mistake again with so much support and positive feedback about the situation. But I’m glad I had it. Sometimes in our community though that sends the wrong message. I think there needs to be more education on why… why. The symbolism. What it means to have children. Being a mother. How that affects society. You know, affects your life. Instead of, “oh, everybody and everybody had a baby when they were 17. So there’s no difference and just a bunch of babies. But can we stop this and not encourage this. But you know, it’s such a fine line between having a baby and having a baby when you’re of age. (She is taking long pauses as she prepares to make this statement and stutters through several word choices.) I don’t want to say that having a baby is a curse. But at some point, families need to have those conversations. Mother means personal development. Character development. Nutritionist. Protector. Educators. Character development.
My mom laid it out for me, but I probably put it on steroids – I’m the next generation so I’m pushing the envelope even more. She taught me before I ever read a book to empower our young males – our Black males. To make them realize that they are Kings and they don’t have to fall for the stereotypes and what they see on the TV or in the media. They should want to change that. And let them be okay… be okay if they’re not considered cool – to go against the grain. So the best way I can protect Selassie is to prepare him. A couple of years ago, protection was more like nurturing his emotional needs – and it still is – but he’s 9 about to be 10 (she smiles as she says this), so I have to bag off of, I want to say babying him (she laughs), however that translates. Give him more independence so that as he gets older, he can really protect himself.

**Blended family.** Having a blended family looks like a lot of family meetings. A lot of discussions and respecting each other’s differences. Because we even have our youngest daughter who is Muslim. So, I mean, there’s so many differences with everything and everybody – socially, religiously, as far as diet is concerned. So we’re always watching movies that try to, that encourage everybody’s beliefs and make us open. A lot of family movies that have values about respect, being confident in yourself, learning how to make a decision, educational and value-based movies to try to balance stuff out. Because anything else is going to teach the violence or teach them confusion or teach them non-acceptance or that ridiculing people is okay. We have to be very careful with what we watch, what we do, what we let them have access to. To encourage difference in the family but to also let everyone know who they are, and their background, is okay too.
A big part of my role too, as a mother is helping my husband – be more participatory. For example, when we’re talking at the table and it’s Halloween and the 13-year old says, “I wanna be Nikki Minaj for Halloween.” (She shrieks and screams loudly so that we both start laughing.) Uuuuuuum, why. Why why why? But my husband was like, “oh okay.” Hm. So I’m like, let’s look at it like this. Let’s look at it like you were dating again and a woman says, “oh I wanna be Nikki Minaj…” (Her voice raises) You’re probably not going to date her – anymore. Because that’s just a different value system. So when we’re at the dinner table and your daughter says she wants to be Nikki Minaj, you need to delve into that a little further and have some conversations with her about that. I can’t do that [with her] yet. I do as much as I can. So another part of being a mother is being a psychologist – asking the questions like, “well okay, but why?” And knowing how to approach [situations like this] without shutting it down because the minute you shut it down they want to do it more. So to ask more. To evaluate more. And a lot of those conversations take place. But um, we’re still trying to figure it out. And it does cause conflict because in other spaces they do have access to things like that. Just not here. We “them bougie Negroes.”

I get a lot of pushback. I do get a lot of resistance. I’m “Nappy Swagger” and I’m in the South. I’m so opposite in so many ways, that I think, it’s healthy. That eventually, maybe in four or five years, [the 13 year-old] will [have casual communication] with me. We’re still in the South and you know – you just don’t disrespect adults. So there’s that piece; there is still respect there. But I’m glad to be that different. I’m glad to be that contrast. It’s hard. I just still stand on what I believe in and I voice my opinion. I still dictate what happens in this house – where we’re gonna go,
what we’re gonna watch, what they’re exposed to. When we go out it’s very strategic. And there’ve been moments where I can see her appreciating it. Whether or not she’s willing to admit it verbally. And her dad too. He knows that what we’re doing is so much better. He’s very supportive. It’s just a matter of pushing through and being patient. Pushing through, but not pushing anything on them. It’s either this way or no way (she laughs). It’s not like I’m making you do it – but I am. It’s real passive aggressive (we both laugh).

I’m exposing Selassie to a different culture, to a different education system. I do feel like I am taking risks, but I am taking calculated risks, to make him successful in this world. Only thing I worry about is the reactions that he gets from my family. You know how hard it is in the Black community, where, “yall think yall better than us.” Selassie is like, “I’m not drinking that – I’m not drinking cow’s milk.” And you know you can’t say that to everybody (we both laugh.) And he’s so danggone smart: “do you see any other mammals drinking other mammals’ milk?! Do cows drink monkey milk?” And I’m like Selassie! You have to learn the delivery. Like, just say you prefer soy milk. So examples like this. I know this is better for his health in the long run, and he may get pushback in school, you know. The risk is in being rejected socially. That’s what it is. Not being the average Black boy. And it’s messed up that that even has a label.

**Summation**

The complexities of these women’s narratives make it difficult to do them justice. We have clocked uncounted hours in planning meetings, social events, work lunches, Facebook conversations and of course these interviews – which have been processed and crafted within the span of approximately 50 pages. However, in my role as researcher, I
attempted to capture the most salient themes, leaving room for tension and contradiction so that we – as an audience – may better understand not only these collective experiences, but also what is being taught.
Coming Together: Analysis and Interpretations

Four themes have been identified which function as an interpretation and analysis of both the dominant and complementary narratives presented in Chapter 4. Three of the themes are titled are noted by action and stakeholder: “Defining Mother,” “Preparing Children,” “Navigating Institutions”. The last theme, “Other,” is titled differently because it examines the narrative of “Deja”. She is the imagined other that falls out of the range of “acceptable behaviors” previously discussed.

Defining Mother

Each mother talks about her life roles in various ways – teacher, nutritionist, protector, psychologist, nurturer. However, what is most salient is that they all position themselves as advocates. Whether because they were born into privilege, gained it through Catholic and private institutions, or through the close hand of their mothers, these women discuss the importance of giving back and giving more. In this way, the idea of strength was also repeated. It is this strength that compelled me to stay connected to these women, knowing that their stories had to be told; not as anomalies, but in a tightly threaded quilt which holds centuries of history. History and Education scholars such as James D. Anderson (1988), Vanessa Siddle Walker (1996, 2000), Heather Williams (2007), Cheryl Fields-Smith (2005), Belinda Robnett (2000), have shown us that Black mothers have a strong legacy of fighting for their children, especially when it comes to citizenship and education – often viewing them as one in the same. In this way, each mother’s story was connected to the story of her own mother and continued with the
expectations for her children. These expectations are what provide the foundation for every thought and action.

Becoming a mother may not have been a conscious choice for each woman in this dissertation – we see this range between Maya and Sonia – nevertheless, the will to push, protect, and educate their children and community carries these narratives forward. They remind me of Assata Shakur. In the midst of several court trials, having endured 20 months of solitary confinement in the basement of a men’s prison, sustaining abuse that left her nearly paralyzed and later detainment in a maximum security women’s prison, Shakur made the decision to conceive a child with a long-time comrade and co-defendant who assured her, “if you become pregnant and you have a child, the child will be taken care of. Our people will not let the child grow up like a weed” (Shakur, 1987, p. 92). In the spirit of Women Centered Networks (Hill-Collins, 2004a), Assata understood the sense of community that sustained her. While she was denied adequate medical attention that nearly aborted the child, she writes of her daughter (who is now almost 40 years old with two children of her own), “we are pregnant with freedom. We are a conspiracy” (Shakur, 1987, p. 130). Being a mother is ultimately seen as a great act of revolution.

Additionally, raising the community, or taking care of other children is second nature. Othermothering was a foreign term to the mothers I talked with but the concept was concrete: ‘I raised my sister’s kids before I had my own,’ or ‘yes, Mrs. B raised me and she helped me raise my child,’ or ‘his mom has a crazy work shift so I just let him stay here with my son and I take them both to school.’ There are many mothers whose names are unknown to us first, because of the everyday need to push forward rather than be acknowledged and second, because their names were deliberately and painfully
omitted. The women of this project, who engage the taken-for-granted work of revolution right in their own homes, claim both their name and their work as a continuing legacy.

Inherent of Black mother’s identities is balancing the “strong Black mother image.” The sanctification of Black mothers is a double-edged sword that wields an expected life of sacrifice for Black mothers as a tireless vessel for the Black community (Christian, 1985; Hill-Collins, 1990/2009; Staples, 1970/1981). In Alice Walker’s landmark essay, “In Search of Our Mother’s Garden,” the writer/poet asks rhetorical questions: When do our mother’s rest? What art has been sacrificed so that we may live? Where, aside from the hopes of her children, does the Black mother flourish? Acts of self-sacrifice are inherit in these narratives as Nikki stated, “girl, prepare for guilt to rule your life!” shaping the idea that whatever you do never feels like enough. Maya said plainly, it is not about you anymore and regardless of whether each mother felt that she was doing her best, I received the message that they were giving ‘all they’ve got.’ This was even obvious to me as each mother either apologized for “talking my head” off or “taking me into too many different directions” when the truth was, anywhere they went was exactly where we needed to be. At the end of my conversation with Sonia she said,

39 In the landmark Oliver Brown et al V. Board of Education of Topeka et al decision of 1954, the plaintiffs in the case were 12 women: Darlene Brown, Lena Carpenter, Sadie Emmanuel, Marguerite Emerson, Shirla Fleming, Zelma Henderson, Shirley Hodison, Maude Lawton, Alma Lewis, Iona Richardson, Vivian Scales, Lucinda Todd and one man, Oliver Brown. Mr. Brown was the primary plaintiff not because the names were listed in alphabetical order. To present the case before the Supreme Court, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) insisted a man – of good standing in the community – lead the docket to provide more substance and credibility to the case, thus rendering the 12 women invisible both politically and historically.
“Thank you for giving me this opportunity to reflect on things for myself. We are just on autopilot so we don’t stop to reflect and know.”

Defining Mother teaches us that there are several different entry points for motherhood but a renewed sense of purpose drives each woman forward. This includes a connection to a historical legacy of advocating for our children while also checking the pulse of contemporary concerns; creating strategies for how we expose our children; accepting the obligation of leveraging privilege to take care of our community; and submitting to the idea of strength and self-sacrifice for the fulfillment of what we believe is greater than us.

Preparing Children

When the mothers talked specifically about parent involvement, it was most often in the context of the school. Whereas this appears to be the traditional way we conceptualize parent involvement as a schooling process, this is not in fact how the mothers’ families functioned. Relating the stories of how their own mothers were involved, the responses were, ‘they showed up for report cards’ or they weren’t involved at all. In fact, when the parents were preparing to organize “involvement meetings,” Sonia said she was looking for “anything I could find on Google to help!” However, their ‘involvement’ is better highlighted when the mothers talk about how they engage and prepare their children for the world outside of their homes. Sonia briefly touched on this in our conversation when she brought up the idea of concerted cultivation. Educator and sociologist Annette Lareau explores this process in her work, Unequal Childhoods (2003). We see this in full play as we are brought into the discussions between the mothers and their children as well as the “organized activities” that they have
“established and controlled… By making certain their children have these and other experiences, middle-class parents engage in a process of concerted cultivation” (pp. 1-2).

While economic class is not a subject that was met head-on in every conversation, there were several references to moving away from home neighborhoods that weren’t safe or productive, into areas that had more affluence and promise. One of the exceptions is Nikki who emphasizes that she grew up in the suburbs and didn’t ride the CTA. However, she chose to move herself and Nkrumah into Hyde Park – a multi-cultural neighborhood that hosts an Ivy League university; a mix of ‘mom and pop shops’, small Black businesses, and food co-ops; the Chicago coastline and of course, The Obamas. She says it had been her dream to grow up there because, “God, I would be so much more comfortable in my skin had I been in an environment that was more accepting of my skin.” This urge for acceptance is the product of a long-fermented generational wound. Nikki’s father is a fair-skinned Creole man, who as a young boy was publically called a nigger and denied by his father who was passing for White. Subsequently race – more specifically Blackness – was a ‘quiet’ subject in her house. However, after being exposed to university courses that provided her with an historical context for her life’s experiences, she claimed a name for her child that he would not be able to turn away from. Promise for many of these women translates into personal acceptance and autonomy. These women talk about involvement in ways that are not always charted in expensive curricula or statistical spreadsheets, but in specific ways that build an awareness of race, character development, leadership and responsibility into daily activities.
Preparing their sons and daughters as Black children is the most salient of all subjects covered in our conversations. It is talked about directly, in assumed ways, and also in contradictory terms. For example, Maya insists that she not will not raise Mursi as Black or White but as a person in a multicultural world. She was raised with experiences that allowed her to value meritocracy. She emphasizes spirituality, education and work ethic asserting, “there is money out here to be made; how are you going to position yourself to get it?” At the same time, she lives in a neighborhood where they have to cross police lines to get into their front door. When she talks about her childhood, she is animatedly pointing in either direction to indicate “that is the block I played with friends,” ‘that is the block where so-and-so lived,’ ‘that is the block where so-and-so worked.’ She states, “this is a building full of [us]’ and lists every family member that lives on each floor. She is proud to tell me the same woman that raised her, also had a hand in raising Mursi. She has made the decision to remain in this area for the value of kinship and community. While this may not be widely regarded as expressly Black, I understand this as part of an effort to maintain Women Centered Networks and the value of Othermothering (Hill-Collins, 2004a).

Nikki talks about how she worried too much in naming her son but was acutely aware of the challenges he would face because of his skin color. Bestowing upon him a name that is so identifiably “Black” she not only demands that he acknowledge his difference, but provides the opportunity to embrace it. At the same time, Sonia struggles with raising her son to not be the “average Black boy.” She notes that while eating in a restaurant on 79th street, she is anxious about anything her child may say to have him stand out or be embarrassed but she made the “calculated risk” to raise him “differently.”
These three mothers are raising their children to preserve who they are in a world that may choose to reject them while making space for how they will construct and claim their own identities. While they are taught their *difference*, I make the argument that none of these children are raised to see Black as a deficit.

These women teach survival. When they share their discussions of STDs, Khadafi, Sandusky or stories of letting a 12-year old ride the bus alone (something my mother and father were too afraid to let me do until I was well into high-school,) I am reminded of Mamie Till Mobley’s choice. She revealed her child’s bloated, tortured face to the world to peal back the naivety of race relations in this country and open honest conversations within our families, our government, and our world. The truth is “gut-wrenching” at times, but these mothers take the risk to be boldly honest.

As Maya points out, we may be raising children in the 21st century, but “old school” still works. This is framed with ideas such as “I am your mother, not your friend,” and “nobody can take your education away from you” and opens conversations for how these mothers build character and leadership into daily activities through respect and reciprocity. These lessons are evidenced most in how they talk about their children’s schooling experiences; this is where the mothers can see their work in action – how their children interact with those in their immediate world. Maya uses buying expensive designer homework binders as a lesson to show Mursi that she needs to be different than the popular girls in her classroom: “You have to start thinking like an 8th grader if you want to get through the 7th grade.” Nikki notes the behavior change in Nkrumah when she separated from her partner of 10 years. In each instance she coached her son through understanding his decisions and reminding him that she is raising him to “fight for the
weaker person.” Additionally, Nikki did not have these conversations in isolation but included her partner to maintain the continuity of family. Jill laughs when she talks about accepting the responsibility of Jola growing up. She is honest in saying that she was so used to doing things for her as a baby and toddler, that she too had to accept Jola becoming a “big girl”. So as Jola became older and knew exactly how to push mommy’s buttons, Jill recognized her independence and stepped back to keep her daughter from “pimping her.” Whether it is understanding their budding personalities, dealing with resisting authority or falling in with what is popular, the mothers are transparent in revealing the complexities of raising their children.

*Preparing Children* teaches us that although “parent involvement” is a remote concept connected to in-school practices, the mothers in this project fully accept the responsibility of child development. This includes teaching survival through conversations and daily interactions that bare no resistance to truth and carry the intergenerational messages of their families; placing value on who their children are as Black bodies in a discriminating and multicultural world; accepting that their “babies” will be adults by actively listening to them; and using everyday moments as teaching tools for independence and leadership.

**Navigating Institution**

School is an institution that maintains a gatekeeping system including behavior and language norms, and access to greater resources; therefore, in addition to their motherwork, these women are holding the school accountable for helping ensure social mobility and to secure what no one can take away from them – their education. Every
mother in this project expressed disappointment with the public school system’s ability to do this. While this is not a total indictment of CPS, it is a reflection of how these women’s experiences shaped the expectations for their children. They commuted from various neighborhoods across the city, by bus, train, or carpool to a place where they believed the staff was passionate about ensuring the success of their child, extended the values they teach at home and sustained relationships built on effective communication. When the parents show up, each is responsible for their own child/ren – and only their own children.

During my conversation with Carolyn, she shared a story about an incident between Khoi and a male classmate. She regarded the incident as not much more than a case unnecessary teasing that could be easily amended by either parent; however, in this case, the other child’s parent was a faculty member as well. Obviously Carolyn, had a relationship with both the child and the parent and felt comfortable enough to engage the child in a discussion of his relationship with her daughter. The mother of the boy responded with immense anger and reminded her of the school’s rule that parents are not allowed to engage with other children. While Carolyn admits she was fully aware of this policy, and notes that is has been effective in some cases, she thought their specific relationship opened additional ways of communication but was incredibly disappointed at how wrong she was. Carolyn saw herself as an othermother, concerned for both her own

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40 It is important to note that public schools in Chicago fall under several categories. On the Chicago Public School website (www.cps.edu) there are 11 categories to delineate the 675 public schools in the district for the 2011-2012 school year. These categories include Neighborhood, Military Academy, Special Education, Magnet, and Selective Enrollment. The latter two are not included when generally speaking of the dangers and failures of CPS; these schools are exceptions.
child and her classmate, while she was viewed as a meddlesome parent whose concerns needed to be mediated by the school.

When the SSCES Parent University and Beacons did not reach their full potential to bridge sustainable relationships across the school, the administration decided to implement, “I Care.” Every mother discussed an initial resistance to the program. Some expressed frustration that not only was it something else to do in an already tight schedule, but it was attached to their children’s homework. Carolyn explained that this very expensive program was purchased to foster greater relationships in the school. As Jill noted, the teachers can not meet the expectations of successful child development by themselves (which is strikingly different from how all the mothers discussed the teacher practices of their own schooling experiences.) The SSCES Board recognized the importance of parents just as Jill was clear that she did not want to be told what to do with her child. After the initial meeting where the parents were able to express how they incorporated the requirements of the program into their day, they became more receptive, even referring to it as “excellent.” Jill later says that it can serve as a “atta boy” for parents who haven’t acknowledged all of the little things they do for their children. However, converting these experiences into data, coupled with the high turnover rates of both teachers and students at SSCES, certainly makes this curricula worth exploring in great detail. For the scope of this dissertation, I can only account for the mothers’ one-month experience with the program. Two things worth noting here: 1. The mothers interviewed for this dissertation have served in various leadership roles in the school and are likely more receptive to understanding the benefit of administrative decisions. 2. Maya did not talk at all about the program.
While Sonia jokingly commented that her mother laid out a plan and because she is the next generation, she put it on steroids, this is evidenced most in Maya’s efforts to enroll Mursi into two highly selective middle and high schools in the city. The first school not only requires testing but has a lottery system as well. A year before Mursi was qualified to enroll, Maya assembled a portfolio of all Mursi’s school records, several recommendations from her schools’ administrative faculty, teachers, and community sponsors and documentation of her extra curricular activities. After several attempts, she secured a meeting with the principal of the prospective middle school. Of course the principal does not vote on or enroll a specific child, but Maya simply wanted to make sure that she knew her daughter by name and credentials: “yes sir! Gave her a nice little folder with her name on it.” This behavior is antithetical to the belief that Black mothers do not care about their children’s education as well as the argument that Black mothers do not know how to negotiate within this institution. True, it takes a certain amount of access, research, self- awareness, and training to operate the way that Maya does, but, she is not an anomaly; her behavior simply has favorable outcomes.

*Navigating Institution* teaches us that although every mother has a different handle on access and resources, there are common goals that need to be addressed. This includes the facilitation of effective communication and mutual respect; pushing past what is expected (or not expected) of us as Black mothers and creating a greater expectation for our children; and conferring our privilege to make doors out of walls.

**Other**

Understanding the relationship between mother and teacher as co-parents requires the communication of common goals. As the school environment represents several
different things to these women, modes of communication can function differently. For some, this is a place where you defer to another person’s expertise, for some it is a place of work, and for others it is a service you are entitled to in providing care for your children. Each perspective of this place will determine how behavior shifts (or not.) For example, Jill is very direct in dealing with her daughter yet because she is a teacher and self-described as non-confrontational, it will take her a quarter of a year to draft an email to her child’s teacher regarding a homework concern because she has taken the time to examine every avenue and consequence in her mind before she speaks and acts. Tracy, who resents being identified as “soft,” laughs as she describes a recent incident on the train where she confronted a couple of young girls for getting in her space. She is serious when she lets me know, in no uncertain terms, that she can fight if she has to. Maya takes advantage of the required home visits, opening lines of frequent communication with Mursi’s teachers by providing email, cell and work phone information. Carolyn’s behavior is complicated as she is a parent and administrator within the building so her resolve is outwardly more calm and calculated. These women’s narratives speak directly to and against the mythological apathetic, unloving, lazy images that have been constructed about Black mothers; concerted cultivation has worked in their favor to produce “good” behavior. If then, the institutions favor “good revisionist Mammies,” (Austin, 2003, p. 305) how do we address the “Bad Black Mother (BBM)?” (Hill-Collins, 2004b).

In discussing the culture of SSCES, Carolyn says:

So when we have open enrollment our only criteria is that the kids are a resident of Chicago so they are able to come. If we have space, you are more than welcome. And because we are located where the projects used to be, we get a lot of students and families from that area – some that are great to deal with and
others that aren’t. They have grown up with a certain mindset and this is how they want their lives to be and they have that sort of, I hate to use the word, but ‘ghetto mentality.’ They say whatever is on their mind and walk and dress inappropriately, use inappropriate language around their children...

In every conversation I had with the mothers (with the exception of one,) they pointed directly at a woman who fit this description: Deja. The examples of Deja that are provided in this dissertation paint a broader picture of Black women who are publically regarded as the BBM. She is the same mother that challenged my perceptions during our first parent meeting. Deja was not a quiet woman: she made her professional and personal struggles known as she reached out for help. The Executive Board of the Beacons elected Deja into a leadership position because as Carolyn said, “we felt that this would be a turn around for her.” With three children and three nieces/nephews in the school, she believed she had a major stake there. It was obvious that she felt a great deal of support there, largely due to Carolyn. Some of the mothers saw promoting Deja as an opportunity to fish for others who initially may not have been willing to be involved at the school. However, not everyone felt the same. I observed many times when she came into the school building during the middle of the day to volunteer and was politely ushered to the back offices where she would be less of a distraction. Deja was restless, undervalued but most of all, not a “good fit.” Nikki notes that during the parent meeting, it was Deja who raised the first objection to I Care.

The teachers were there and you know. I don’t want White people to recognize this – like it is family. It’s like I see it and I don’t want you to talk about it. So she was just, “I don’t understand… (She raises her voice) I mean…” I think that she actually did say that “this is stupid” – and at that point she was behind me – she always comes near me, so I turned around and I was like “shh” and I have never done that to her but she knows me well enough that I am going to be like, “Deja – stop!” Because at that point she was talking under her breath, but loudly, so I had to like “shush” her like twice but quietly and was a little afraid but I just had to tell her like “stop, you are – there are too many parents here for you to just
be shitting all over this program, if you don’t want to do it, then your child is just going to suffer for it.” I know being a good parent is important to her and being a good role model is important to her, and when you got that stress on your shoulders and you are trying to raise these kids, you can’t think straight, you can’t put your ducks in your row and stay on that path. Nobody talks about this is a woman who finished her, I think her Associate degree and she has been looking for a job. I looked at her resume and it was pretty good…

Deja left before the meeting even ended. Overall, her role as a leader in the school had backfired. It spread through the school pretty quickly that she later slapped the new principal while in her office. Even though Nikki and Carolyn have noted that they have been working with the principal on her delivery and communication with these mothers, Deja’s behavior is still unacceptable. She was temporarily banned from the school, but many parents avoided The Beacons altogether because they did not want to be associated with Deja’s negative attitude and confrontational behavior. Jill notes: “It’s a lot of trial and error. You don’t want to alienate them, you don’t want to be confrontational with them, but um – you know.” Other parents like Sonia said,

I tried! I did! I tried. I tried. But sometimes you need a professional to help. A lot of people had that “hey girl” conversation but she was beyond my qualifications of what I could do. And I don’t think it’s color, I think it’s class, or social economic conditions. But unfortunately we are always the ones who have to swallow it. Surely there are other people that act the same way. They don’t have the money to do what they want to do and it’s not just Black moms, but maybe it’s just poor moms?

I hear the words of Nigerian writer and activist, Chimamanda Adiche (2012):

“dignity and love matter just as much as bread and water” and this reminds me that Deja deserves a space just as all others. Deja represents more than one woman in one school. She represents someone who deserves to have her story listened to – without judgment or a fix. While she does not have the privileges of light skin or private school, all of us that have come in contact with Deja can see her power. She was not asked to take a
leadership position by chance. She reminds me of the woman who is famous for saying “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired.” Fannie Lou “Hamer had not been taught to be ashamed of herself her body, her strong voice” (Giddings, 1984, p. 301). And I believe that within every narrative constructed here, we all see a bit of Deja in ourselves; however, we have learned when and where to shift. Deja is not intimidated – she feels like she has just as much of a right. Schools argue that not enough Black mothers are involved, but when Deja comes around, she is not welcome. So where does she fit? How does her voice shape the culture? In what ways are we asking her to change? In what ways is she punished when she does not? I present these questions here because I have not had the opportunity to converse with Deja. We’d had several conversations regarding work and church while I was still at SSCES; however, after several attempts to reach out to her for this project, I concluded that she did not want to take part. For a woman who is so vocal, I have repeatedly questioned, why/how did this project silence her? As she rejected the norms of the school, she also subconsciously and consciously distanced herself from the other parents. Her actions suggest there were ways she felt betrayed and violated. My role, having been seen as part of the administration, gave her cause to cut off communication with me as well, in addition to the fact that I began to assert myself as researcher – both positions making her vulnerable and subject to more harm. Still, her silence does not make her invisible; it is an active choice. Therefore, I must acknowledge how critical she is within and alongside these narratives. Deja is our Sapphire. Critical Race Feminist Regina Austin notes, “There are so many things to get riled about that keeping quiet is impossible. We really cannot function effectively without coming to
terms with Sapphire. Should we renounce her, rehabilitate her, or embrace her and proclaim her our own?” (Austin, 2003, p. 301).

*Deja* teaches us that for all the obstacles we face and climb as Black women, for all of the pride we plant in our children, we are granted access to places that leave *Others* behind. We recognize this in our attempts to provide assistance, to facilitate conversations, to recognize her strengths; however, when our efforts to “mold” bare no fruit, we return to our safe spaces to gear up for our own battles. We can not recognize how to redeem her while still in constant negotiations to redeem ourselves; this becomes both a personal and public pain.

**Returning to the Journal**

These narratives and themes pushed me to return to my reflective journal. Journaling throughout this process was absolutely necessary to capture both the shifts in my perspectives as well as the mothers and the relationships we have created throughout this process. It was not my intent for this project to sound like the dream of an ethnographic researcher. There were certainly uncomfortable places and exchanges. For example, Deja is integral to this project; she is the mother that many of the others pointed to as a case study of “what not to do.” While the priority of every mother I interacted with appeared to be what is best for their children, it was mutually agreed that Deja did not do this the “right way.” I spent quite a bit of energy trying to pinpoint what *is* the right way? I share with these mothers the understanding that school is a vehicle for social mobility and access; however, the schooling process, especially in a high-stakes, urban environment also leaves much room for symbolic (and obviously escalating to physical) violence. I was led to questions of how we reinscribe the White middle class norms that
are critiqued earlier in this project and how/where do we draw lines about how we confront issues that concern us and our children. Who draws these lines and who is trusted to mediate? Then, where are our markers of accountability and remediation? These are questions that require more than two rounds of interviews and are ripe for investigation in an additional project.

It can also not be ignored that the reason I was brought into the school was to create a program that had previously been delegated to another member of its staff. In this way, there were obvious issues with respect and value of school leadership that were intensified by race and class. There were many times I positioned myself as a sheep because either that is how I felt or that is how I felt I had to perform. After my time with the program ended, I realized that making the school the central point of conversation not only was too fresh of a wound to pick but it further marginalized the parents’ experiences as mothers and as women. Other points of major consideration were shifts in school leadership, family choices due to the job market and academic performance concerns which have had major impacts in these women’s lives from the time I met them in 2010 through present. These shifting locations meant that rules and practices for today would not hold for tomorrow. Additionally, relationships I initially thought were open and transparent, at times shifted into safe conversations and tight lips once the recorder started.

Why do I bring these things up? Because there were real tensions throughout this process. I do not discuss them all in detail because they are not central to what I want to address, but I identify them as the politics of this space, which was always contextual and mobile. These tensions created points of comparison, dictating the ways these mothers
discussed advocacy for their children to meet the expectations of both society and the schooling institution as well as their relationships with one another. There were several “small” conversations in addition to the interviews so that it took time to build relationships and conversations. I most certainly represented an institution no matter how I fashioned myself. This is evidenced by the length and quality of time as well as the location the mothers chose to interact with me. There were times I could tell they were not comfortable with not being able to provide an answer to a question, or to finish a story, almost like I was a news reporter demanding they give me an ‘accurate scoop.’ It is here they created a new space to protect themselves or outwardly resolve issues that they hadn’t paused to reflect upon before. During some of these times I wanted to turn the recorder off; however, I was included in these acts. I was invited to be part of the “we.” In order for reciprocity to occur in these spaces, all of the participants (the mothers and I) had to be honest about who and where we were. “It is through dialogue that we resist the arrogant perception that perpetuates monologic encounters, interpretations, and judgments” (Madison, 2005 p. 167; Conquergood, 1982). This included sharing a range of stories in how we sometimes doubt ourselves as women, mothers, daughters and the practices we engage that sustain us – whether through community, spirituality, family, or the commitments to our children. This has allowed some of us to maintain relationships that move beyond SSCES and this dissertation.

These four themes and reflections do not cover the expanse of what is/can be learned from these narratives; this is a simply glimpse that works to untangle the dominant discourses that are consumed without question. Defining, Preparing, and Navigating call for us to investigate the structures that we actively work against everyday
in an effort to understand and embrace the complexities and contradictions within ourselves, including the Other. As stated earlier, as much as this work is for us to affirm and reveal, it is also about creating networks and connections to advocate a better society for our children and the generations that will proceed them.
Openings

Our narratives demonstrate that the rules and definitions of law, media, and academia are permeable because there are multiple ways of knowing and being. This is most obvious when considering our interactions within the school institution. Both parents and teachers are trained through lived experience however this space often creates a friction-bearing paradigm of power relations. Schools are assumed to be filled with *children experts* while mothers are seen as *home experts*. These worlds have a delicate relationship that can only be shifted by acknowledging the power in both spheres and leveraging it for the mutual benefit of our children. This dissertation does not propose a mandate or sanction a program that can facilitate this need. Instead, we open a space within the various literatures for Black mothers to speak for themselves rather than be spoken for. This chapter explores broader meanings for society and one another; greatest contributions through various dialogical exchanges; and finally offers short prose and a poetic transcription of “we.”

Broader Meanings

Chicago is the third most populated city in the country, with an approximate 2.7 million residents (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010); I have chosen to share the stories of five. In *Critical Ethnography* (2005), D. Soyini Madison asks the researcher to consider “How is the specificity of the local story relevant to the broader meanings and operations of the

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41 Glesne (1997) writes: “conclusions suggest an ending, a linear progression that can be resolved in some neat way. I see no conclusions here, but rather *openings*” (p. 218).
human condition?” These women speak back to the dominant ideas, explicitly and implicitly presented to us everyday. These women have demonstrated for us the fluidity of language, class, race and wisdom while under the constant threat of surveillance and persecution – whether on a New York billboard, a scientific journal article, or current legislation.

For example, in March 2012, Senate Bill 507 which was sponsored by Republican Senator Glenn Grothman will “require the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Board to emphasize that non-marital parenthood is a contributing factor to child abuse and neglect” (“Glenn Grothman,” 2012). The proposed law states:

Section 1. 48.982 (2) (g) 2. of the statutes is amended to read:
48.982 (2) (g) 2. Promote statewide educational and public awareness campaigns and materials for the purpose of developing public awareness of the problems of child abuse and neglect. In promoting those campaigns and materials, the board shall emphasize nonmarital parenthood as a contributing factor to child abuse and neglect.

Section 2. 48.982 (2) (g) 4. of the statutes is amended to read:
48.982 (2) (g) 4. Disseminate information about the problems of and methods of preventing child abuse and neglect to the public and to organizations concerned with those problems. In disseminating that information, the board shall emphasize nonmarital parenthood as a contributing factor to child abuse and neglect.

This bill has been proposed at the same time women are not allowed to have a voice in our reproductive rights \(^{42}\) or are called “slut” \(^{43}\) when to we create alternate spaces to be

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\(^{42}\) On February 16, 2012, the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee convened a two-panel hearing to discuss contraceptive mandates proposed by the Obama administration. The first panel consisted entirely of men, which created an outcry for the lack of female representation on an issue that directly affects them.

\(^{43}\) While little credence should ever be given to Rush Limbaugh, it is important to note his vicious verbal attack on Georgetown University Law student Sandra Fluke (February 29, 2012) after she gave a speech at an unofficial congressional event in support of free
heard. This bill is another threat of criminalization of women and families, as both women and more specifically – Women of Color – lead the nation in single-parent homes by 79%. According to an analysis performed by the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) of the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2009 Current Population Survey, nearly one-fourth (24 percent) of the 75 million children under age 18 lives in a single-mother family. Of the 18.1 million children in single-mother families, 9.2 million are under 9 years of age. About one-sixth (16 percent) of White children live in single-mother families, compared with one-fourth (27 percent) of Latino children and one-half (52 percent) of African-American children. (Mather, 2010, p. 1)

SB507 takes my attention because four of the mothers in this project have identified as single. In what part of their narratives did you hear abuse and neglect? We, the women of this project have revisited DuBois’ 109-year old question “how does it feel to be a problem?” by noting the race problem is not just the problem of Black women (and men), but the whole of society.

*We Can Speak* provides a foundation for further research that creates thick descriptions of mothers who interface with systems – especially school systems – on a daily basis and must adapt to the rapid changes engendered by reform, personal expectations and everyday life. These mothers make a private space public in an effort to engage critical dialogue of literature that determines the position of Black families in the U.S., while strengthening various networks to co-create action agendas. Their stories

mandated contraceptives at her school. Limbaugh berated her for nearly 10 minutes – the softest parts of his tirade were calling her a “slut” and a “prostitute.”

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44 In this PRB brief, single-mother families are defined as families headed by a female with no spouse present – living with one or more, never-married children under age 18. Single-mother families are a subset of female-headed families, which include mother-child families as well as children in the care of grandparents or other relatives. In 2009, there were 19.6 million U.S. children residing in female-headed families. Additional analyses were provided based on educational and economic status.
propose work that requires researchers, practitioners and advocates to look within, across, and beyond systems to leverage networks of power by incorporating the lived experiences of these key stakeholders and understanding how their voices have implications for a major 21st century city and beyond.

Just as we are speaking for ourselves, it is equally critical to note that we are speaking to ourselves. The narratives and lives of Maya, Nikki, Carolyn, Jill, Sonia and Deja demand an honest and self-named space so that we collectively see more than Mammy, Sapphire, Tragic Mulatto, Jezebel, Crack Whore, Baby Mama, or Welfare Queen when a Black female body walks by or shows up. We do not claim Black women and mothers are currently invisible – quite the contrary. This project is aimed at our hyper-visibility. We do not deny our anger, pain, passiveness, sensuality, aggression, compassion – these are all natural human emotions and characteristics that make up parts, not wholes. Therefore, these “parts” should not define and confine our bodies. We are making r/evolution an everyday practice (G. Gordon, personal communication, 2012), thereby expecting our dynamic individuality to be acknowledged and to be called by our names – the names birthed to us or the names we claim for ourselves. We pull one another in and out of ourselves for strength, affirmation and to help extend our reach to give and receive love.

Greatest Contributions

In addition to “broader meanings,” D. Soyini Madison (2005) also asks us to consider, “how will your work make the greatest contribution to equity, freedom, and justice?” Effective communication must take place between one another if we intend to have meaningful relationships and an impact on society. In this way, justice is about
(re)presentation and conversation. These exchanges can take place between mother-legislator; mother-researcher; mother-mother; mother-teacher with the understanding that dialogue must occur often, and between varied agents. The nuanced perspectives of child advocacy, complexities of our expectations, histories of our community, and alignment of our beliefs better inform all conversations of what it means to be involved as a Black mother.

The first conversation must address Black women as whole beings – not one or the other but as a compound: blackwoman. One of the primary charges of this work is to extend these conversations beyond the familiar – to make “power” hear. We can not shy away from discussions of race and gender; the greatest inequality is treating unequal people as if they are equal (Peter, 1981). Acknowledgement of intersectionality allows us to first draw on the complexities of identity then the injustices faced as an “other.” This entry point of conversation is not intended to make Black women stand on yet another stage but opens a space for mutual transparency. “In part, what makes race a confounding problem and what causes many people to not know what race is, is the view that the problems of race are the problems of the racial minority. They are not” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 42). We obviously see difference, therefore must acknowledge as much to transform our conversations of race construction and to then trace and leverage circuits of power. “Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic” (Lorde, 1979/2007, p. 11). This engenders a second conversation that offers possibilities for others to see themselves in these stories. We continuously create and recreate new
“angles of vision” (Hill-Collins, 2004a, p. 49), because when people can see their own reflections (their humanity, their children), they are more inclined to act.

We must then be careful about how we assign names to ourselves, our spaces and our ideas. This is a critical contribution toward the construction of knowledge. For example, when I talked about *othermothers* to the women of this study, they were generally dismissive. Not because the idea was foreign or inapplicable. To the contrary, these women have been engaging this *practice* for generations. So when I talked formally about this idea and they waved a hand, I found later in the conversations they would talk exactly to this point describing how many children they’ve raised or been raised with throughout their lives. Naming had the potential to end the conversation before it even started. However, I persisted with such terms to create a space for shared access to various discourses. This addresses the point I raised by John Stanfield (1985) in the Introduction chapter that this work we undertake is often deemed invalid. I attribute this to the problem of a narrow discourse. To name and examine subjects and spaces advances empirical evidence that is almost exclusively understood by *only* the researcher – which additionally does not highlight intellect as much as it speaks to the protection of a ruling class (West, 1982/2003). To share this privileged language potentially unlocks gates for institutional support.

If we then subscribe to the belief that language is our tool for action, then how and when in our conversations do we create new discourses? How do we co-create knowledge? What ideas are missed when they are not named? What ideas are lost in an attempt to “claim” them? The process of naming can be seen as both a limitation and a benefit but the means and ends must be cofacilitated by each participant. Who will
listen? Who will act? Each body must define for him/herself the ideas of equity, freedom, and justice before, during and after they are at the proverbial table with one another; with these questions we create new projects. We are not simply teaching others who we are but extend an invitation to holistically learn who all of us are. We collectively become “invested agents in a worldwide community” (“Mecca”, Alexander Craft et al., 2007).

We.

We have learned to switch our codes, our bodies, our tones – for work, the academy, our partners, our children, and sometimes even for ourselves (Alexander Craft et al., 2007). These movements are an artform – a lifelong practice that are as natural as breath and just as necessary for our survival. The successes of Black women are celebrated but each of us has to painfully acknowledge that we function in a country that has not meant for us to survive, much less flourish (See Figure 1). We are asked to enjoy prominent visibility as the "first", "one of the few," or the "only" (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009). We are all **exceptions** and we push our children toward the unimagined parts of our dreams. We are so busy, so hurt, so determined, so curious, so dynamic, so full…

So in a space of comfort, whenever we say “Girl,…” we expect one another to understand. I am grateful these women allowed this project to serve as that space. Conversely, Nikki poignantly expressed the sentiment that we don't want to hang our laundry on the line, but we do not live in vacuums. We construct and co-perform knowledge to teach ourselves, one another and our world that we exist. In our gardens, we must create windows for light – and be aware of those who will peek in. We talk because you need to be clear that decisions should not be made without us. We talk
because when you speak to our children, we want you to know where they come from –
where we come from. And how long that journey has been (and still is). What holds true
for Maya, Nikki, Carolyn, Jill, Sonia and Deja is personal and sacred; yet they graciously
share these stories because we are all in and out of one another’s lives everyday. We take
our departure from the joy, sacrifices and theories of our foremothers and assert our
power to Define, Prepare, and Navigate.

We take risks everyday. When we put our children on the bus. When we speak
up for those who are silent. When we correct those who are loud. And every. single.
one. of. us wants to be understood. We want our children to remember our sacrifices
rather than our mistakes. We want our children to know that they are worth every minute
of our lives.

home

mother
like teacher:
think... KNOW... feel... want... need...
time.

people
see things
one way:
SCHOOL.

Black child,
just go -
make way.
lot way.

get going Black child,
just go.

45 This poetic transcript was taken from the collected narratives of Chapter 4. It is
composed only of the 25 most frequently used words, including the title.
# APPENDIX I

Participants (at time of initial meeting through the course of interviews)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Grade School</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Location of Interview</th>
<th>Dur</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>Catholic School</td>
<td>Late 40</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>UNK</td>
<td>Mursi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikki</td>
<td>Suburban School</td>
<td>Late 30</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Admin</td>
<td>Nkrumah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolyn</td>
<td>Catholic School</td>
<td>Late 30</td>
<td>Rest'rt</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Married/Separated</td>
<td>Admin</td>
<td>Kanuri Khoi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Private School</td>
<td>Mid 40</td>
<td>Café</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Jola Baby Girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia</td>
<td>Public School</td>
<td>Mid 30</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Single/Married</td>
<td>UNK</td>
<td>Sundiata Selassie[3 Others]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX II
Initial Interview Guide

1. Background information
   Probes:
   • Tell me about living in Chicago.
   • Tell me about your schooling experiences?
   • How were parents involved in your school?

2. [School Choice] Why did you decide to enroll your child/ren in this school?
   • What were the schooling options for your children?
   • How did you gather information about school options?
   • What criteria did you use in school selection?
   • How did you ultimately decide on a school for your child/ren?

3. [School Grounds] What have been your interactions with the school faculty and staff?
   • What were your interactions with your school of choice prior to enrollment?
   • What have been your interactions with this school post enrollment?
   • What have you observed about the interaction between other parents and school staff?
   • To what extent do you feel integrated into the school community?

4. [Collaborative Resources] What have been your interactions with parents/other children?
   • What are your interactions with students within/outside of the school?
   • What are your interactions with parents within/outside of the school?
   • What have you observed about the involvement of other parents in the school?
   • How comfortable do you feel with being actively involved at this school?

5. [Direct Involvement] How have you been directly involved with the school?
   • What resources are available to you as a parent?
   • How are you used as a resource?
   • What are the current opportunities for you to be involved with the school?
   • How are you informed of school activities and opportunities for involvement?
   • In what ways are you/would you like to be involved with the school? your child/ren?
   • How are you encouraged and equipped by the school to be involved?
   • How are you encouraged and equipped by the community to be involved?

6. [Future] What are future plans with your child/ren and the direction of the school?
   • What are your achievement goals for your child/ren?
   • How are these goals facilitated by the school?
   • How are you encouraged to work collaboratively toward these goals?
   • What are you plans for current and future involvement with the school?
Hill-Collins uses the term motherwork which “can be done on behalf of one’s own biological children, or for the children of one’s own racial ethnic community, or to preserve the earth for those children who are yet unborn” (2004a, p. 48). This includes:

1. **Women-Centered Networks (WCN)** which are described as a community of mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, cousins [or neighbors] responsible for taking care of the children. Because of the historical value of WCN, many of these women grow to gain “a reputation for never turning away a needy child” (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009, p. 198)
   - How do you define mother?
   - Who are you mother to?
   - How did you come to the decision of Motherhood?
   - What did you learn from your mother?

2. **Mothers and Daughters** describes the ways mothers communicate love in an environment that calls for their protection and survival.
   - How is raising [] different from how you were raised?
   - What does it mean to protect []?
   - Where do you feel like you take risks with []?

3. **Community Othermothers and Political Activism** describes “mothering of the mind” which demands education to be used in a socially responsible way.
   - How is [] equipped to make decisions?
   - How are you preparing [] to enter the world?

4. **Motherhood as a Symbol of Power** explores issues of class, the dumbing down of Black women’s work and the work of community women who are “nameless in scholarly texts, yet everyone in their neighborhoods knows their names” (1990/2009, p. 208).
   - Are there expectations of you as a Black mother?
   - Are there stereotypes you feel like you have to deny or speak against as a Black mother?

5. **The View from the Inside** describes mothering as a “fundamentally contradictory institution” (1990/2009, p. 211) and shares the narratives of Black mothers. These tenets provide a framework that employ an intersectional approach, engaging gender with race and class, to shift the prevailing motherhood discourse.
   - Discussion of court cases
APPENDIX IV
Glossary of Pseudonyms

Carolyn M. Rodgers (1940 – 2010)
Black Arts Movement Poet. Essayist. Critic. Lecturer. Teacher. Rodgers studied with Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks and formed the Organization of Black American Culture. She wrote poetry that grappled with issues of Black identity and culture in the late 1960s and quickly became recognized for delving into the problems and challenges facing Black women. Her poetry was collected in volumes including "Paper Soul," "Songs of a Black Bird" and "How I got ovah." She was inducted into the Gwendolyn Brooks Center for Black Literature and Creative Writing at Chicago State University International Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent in 2009. Rodgers joined the ancestors in 2010 as her body succumbed to cancer. Source(s): LA Times Obituaries.

Deja K. Taylor (c. 1990)
Writer. Performer. Mentor. Deja is a major voice in the new generation of Hip hop/theatre female poets. She was recently featured in Russell Simmons' HBO production of Brave New Voices for her poem “Ode to the Female MC” which launched her into the public eye. The Chicago native has successfully headlined an international tour: Beautiful Grind, and is currently developing a one-woman show manifesto: Free Deja Taylor. She continues to perform and work as a teaching-artist in schools across the country. Source(s): dejavoodootaylor.blogspot.com

Haile Selassie I (1892 – 1975)
Selassie was Ethiopia's regent from 1916 to 1930 and Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974. He was the heir to a dynasty that traced its origins to the 13th century and from there, by tradition back to King Solomon and Queen Makeda, Empress of Axum, known in the Abrahamic tradition as the Queen of Sheba. Haile Selassie is a defining figure in both Ethiopian and African history. Source(s): www.africanlegends.info, www.wikipedia.org

Jill Scott (1972)
Singer. Poet. Actress. Philanthropist. With initial dreams of becoming a high school teacher, Jill Scott began her performing career as a spoken word artist, appearing at live poetry readings. She is a self-taught vocalist that listened to Leontyne Price, Sarah Vaughn and Millie Jackson while working odd-jobs including hotel cleaning and construction sites to sustain herself before receiving major public recognition. She has since launched a highly-successful multi-platinum selling career earning both Grammy and NAACP Image Awards. In addition to her music career, she has trained as an actress garnering lead roles such as Mma Ramotswe in the BBC/HBO series The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency based on the Botswana/South African novels of the same name. In 2003, she began the Blues Babe Foundation and in 2005 she published her first
collection of poetry: *The Moments, the Minutes, the Hours*. Source(s): jillscott.com

**Jola**
The Jola are an ethnic group primarily located in Senegal, The Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau. Primary languages spoken are Jola and Kriol. Jolas are herbal medicine practitioners with a musical and rice-centered civilization. Source(s): www.africanlegends.info, www.wikipedia.org

**Kanuri**
Kanuri peoples include several subgroups and identify by different names in some regions; their primary locations are northeastern Nigeria, southeast Niger, western Chad and northern Cameroon. They have traditionally been sedentary, engaging in farming, fishing, trade and salt processing. Kanuri remains a major language in southeastern Niger, and some 3 million Kanuri speakers live in Nigeria. Source(s): www.africanlegends.info, www.wikipedia.org

**Khoi**
The Khoi-san are one of the eldest ethnic groups in Southern Africa. The Khoi-san languages are noted for their click consonants, which have no alphabetical equivalent in any script. Today many of the San live in parts of the Kalahari Desert where they are better able to preserve much of their culture. Source(s): www.africanlegends.info

**Kwame Nkrumah (1909 – 1972)**
Nkrumah was the leader of Ghana and its predecessor state, the Gold Coast, from 1952 to 1966. Overseeing the nation's independence from British colonial rule in 1957, Nkrumah was the first President of Ghana and the first Prime Minister of Ghana. An influential 20th-century advocate of Pan-Africanism, he was a founding member of the Organization of African Unity and was the winner of the Lenin Peace Prize in 1963. Source(s): www.africanlegends.info, www.wikipedia.org

**Mansa Sundiata Keita (c. 1217 – c. 1255)**
Keita was founder of the Mali Empire and celebrated as a hero of the Mandinka people of West Africa. The epic of Sundiata is primarily known through oral tradition, transmitted by generations of Mandinka griots (oral historians). He is well-known for creating a stable and peaceful government that laid the foundation for prosperous rule of other leaders for subsequent centuries. Source(s): www.africanlegends.info, www.wikipedia.org

**Maya Angelou/Marguerite Ann Johnson (b. 1928)**
Poet. Memoirist. Novelist. Educator. Dramatist. Producer. Actress. Historian. Filmmaker. Civil Rights activist. As a young single mother, she supported her son by working as a waitress and cook; however, her passion for music, dance, performance, and poetry would soon take center stage. In 1970, she began work on the book that would become *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which was
published to international acclaim and enormous popular success. The list of her published verse, non-fiction, and fiction now includes more than 30 bestselling titles. Dr. Angelou has served on two presidential committees, was awarded the Presidential Medal of Arts in 2000, the Lincoln Medal in 2008, and has received three Grammy Awards. She has received over 30 honorary degrees and is the Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University. Source(s): mayanangelou.com

Mursi

The Mursi (or Murzu) are an African nomadic cattle herder people located in the Omo valley in southwestern Ethiopia, close to the Sudanese border. The estimated population of the Mursi is around 3,900. Surrounded by mountains and three rivers, the home of the Mursi is one of the most isolated region of the country. The Mursi have their own language which is also called Mursi. Source(s): www.africanlegends.info

Nikki Giovanni/Yolande Cornelia Giovanni (b. 1943)

Poet. Writer. Commentator. Activist. Educator. She published her first book of poetry, Black Feeling Black Talk in 1968 and within the next year published a second book, thus launching her career as a writer and was dubbed the "Princess of Black Poetry." Over the course of more than three decades of publishing and lecturing, she has authored over 30 books for adults and children and her honors have been steady and plentiful. Giovanni is the recipient of some 25 honorary degrees and is a University Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. Source(s): nikki-giovanni.com

Sonia Sanchez/Wilsonia Benita Driver (b. 1934)

Poet. Mother. Professor. National and International lecturer on Black Culture and Literature, Women’s Liberation, Peace and Racial Justice. Sonia Sanchez is the author of over 16 books in addition to being a contributing editor to Black Scholar and The Journal of African Studies. She has performed her work on six of the seven continents and has lectured at over 500 universities and colleges in the United States. She was the first Presidential Fellow at Temple University where she also held the Laura Carnell Chair in English. Source(s): soniasanchez.net
APPENDIX V
Tenets of a Twenty-First Century Feminist Ethnography

All: These are our beginning steps towards a twenty-first-century black feminist ethnography

Meida: To build my work on the foundation laid by those who had gone on before

Renée: To hold in trust what I have received as a legacy for those who come after me, not just in the academy but in all the communities I belong to

Mecca: To find a way of speaking out – of articulating what it is I have to say, even when I can’t find the words immediately

Mshaï: To honour and affirm Black/African women’s ways of speaking and making meaning

Meida: To know, honour and cite Black/African scholars and artists in my work

Renée: To build coalitions that respect differences even as they seek points of similarity

Mecca: To make room for collective meaning-making, that embraces others’ ideas and concerns and input

Mshaï: To bear witness

Meida: To bear witness

Renée: To bear witness

Mecca: To call up memory, consciously respecting its power to heal as well as to hurt

Mshaï: To claim space for those who have been marginalized in the spaces that I work

Meida: To analyze, working to understand why what is so is so, and whether it should stay as is or change… and how

Renée: To offer solidarity to struggles that are not my own but that challenge the same oppressions

Mecca: To challenge artificial boundaries that separate activism, artistry and analysis

Mshaï: To build my peer-group, even as I mentor and seek mentors

Meida: To always embrace

All: with joy
Renée: The call of scholarship – and do my best to make what I do a joy

Mecca: To not be afraid to trust the aspects of myself as a spiritual super-natural being

Mshaï: To not be afraid of who I am – a twenty-first century African/Black woman who is a creative intellectual and passionate about the things I care about

Meida: To expose the inequities of power through the stories bestowed to me through the rites of fieldwork

Renée: To document, unveil, inspire and incite change through the story in its many forms – oral, aural, embodied, written and digitally mediated

Mecca: As invested agents in a worldwide human community

All: we imagine and put forth the visions of community we desire

Mshaï: Through the stories we seek

Meida: The stories we are told

Renée: And the stories we choose to tell

All: These are the Tenets of a Twenty-First Century Feminist Ethnography
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