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Fruits of Momma's Labor: A Qualitative Analysis of Motherwork in Los Angeles

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Sociology

by

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September 2019

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August 2019

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Nia Zee Flowers

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ABSTRACT

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by

Nia Zee Flowers

The term Black mother is haunted by a history of racialized colonialism, in which enslaved women were denied maternal privileges, having their children ripped from their arms and stripped from their protection. The afterlife of slavery and the cultural myths of *pathological* Black families created in its wake have deliberately portrayed Black women as domineering matriarchs and excessively procreating welfare mothers (Collins 2000). Blaming Black mothers and attributing the problems of the Black community to deviant parenting diverts attention away from the racist institutions and practices at the heart of racial capitalism. It allows those in power to evade their responsibility to redress pervasive discrimination in employment, education, housing, and health care.

Theories on mothering tend to lack intersectional frameworks and analysis which perpetuates white hegemonic ideals based on the normative heteropatriarchal nuclear family unit (Chodorow 1989; Hays 1996). They tend to embrace a universal model for conceptualizing motherhood that generalizes from the experiences of white, middle class families and assumes a sharp dichotomy between public and private spheres (Chodorow

1978). These family ideals remain entangled with longstanding historical notions of true womanhood that vilify mothers that do not conform to nuclear familial roles. Ignoring structural conditions, some research even blames Black mothers for the patterns of single women-headed households in urban Black families. Despite their incessant battles with institutional injustices, Black women's profound determination to uphold their roles as mothers has proved invaluable to the survival of Black families. While intersectional theories grounded in Black feminism have contested pathological imaginaries of Black women (hooks 1981; Crenshaw 1991; Omolade 1994; Collins 2000), and empirical work on Black families has reframed and contextualized Black motherhood (Joseph and Lewis 1981; Moore 2011; Barnes 2015), there still remains a need for research that provides a space for dialogue between emerging sociohistorical concepts and the people whose lives they implicate.

This study focuses on the ways Black mothers perform motherwork, mainly through navigating their children's engagements with educational institutions in Los Angeles. I deploy the term motherwork which was conceived by Patricia Hill Collins to discuss the ways Black mothers have historically navigated the challenges of parenting in a racist and sexist society. In an attempt to create a dialectical space for Black feminist frameworks and Black women's experiences, I utilize in-depth, semi-structured interviews as a way of acknowledging participants as agents of knowledge production.

I identify and analyze three distinct performances of motherwork: transformative, adaptive, and integrative. My participants convey how their enactment of motherwork includes serving as both educators and advocates for their children. Essentially, they conceptualize motherwork as an educational tool that reaches far beyond the boundaries of a classroom.

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I. INTRODUCTION

“To describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colors of a rainbow.” – Maya Angelou

The term Black mother is haunted by a history of racialized colonialism, in which enslaved women were denied maternal privileges, having their children ripped from their arms and stripped from their protection. The progeny of slave women enriched the holdings of slave owners, even those produced by the terrors of rape, subsequently fueling a system of social control by which Black women’s wombs served as exploited, abused, and neglected spaces of productive and reproductive labor (Davis 1983; Roberts 1997/2018). The afterlife of slavery and the cultural myths of problematic Black families created in its wake have strategically characterized Black women as domineering matriarchs and excessively procreating welfare mothers (Collins 2000). Blaming Black mothers and attributing the problems of the Black community to deviant parenting diverts attention away from the racist institutions and practices at the heart of racial capitalism. It allows those in power to evade responsibility to redress pervasive discrimination in employment, education, housing, and health care.

Despite their incessant battles with institutional injustices, Black women’s profound determination to uphold their roles as mothers has proved crucial to the survival and success of Black families. They are the maternal innovators of community-based social practices that continue to build inter-generational wealth of cultural capital and inspire hope of transformative change. Their demonization in popular culture, public policy, and social science research does not flow from objective evidence about their behavior and beliefs, but

rather because, as Dorothy Roberts has demonstrated repeatedly, condemning Black mothers for the poverty of their children supplies racial capitalism¹ with its central legitimizing trope (Roberts 1993; 1999; 2011). It portrays people with problems as problems, as innately unfit for freedom. It emphasizes Black families' disadvantages while ignoring the many ways in which they have been taken advantage of. By faulting Black mothers for Black poverty and family fragmentation, it advances an understanding of all inequality and injustice as natural, necessary, and inevitable.

Even seemingly positive images risk reinforcing the trope of the deficient Black mother by ignoring the uneven distribution of power and opportunity in society. As Herman Gray (1995) demonstrates in his analyses of *The Cosby Show*, *Frank's Place*, and other televised representations of Black heteronormativity and affluence, the seeming exception confirms rather than refutes the rule, because it makes it seem as if all Black families could emulate idealized white families if they only had the right values and attendant conduct. While efforts to historically contextualize Black families have been taken by contemporary television shows like *Blackish*, the attempt to normalize depictions of Black prestige also erases Black families' diverse experiences battling economic marginalization. For instance, the character Rainbow Johnson from the well-known television show *Blackish* is a biracial, Black presenting woman employed as an anesthesiologist, residing in a grandiose, suburban home in Los Angeles with her husband and children, who attend private school. The image of Rainbow in *Blackish* stands in stark contrast to my memory of my own mother, an Ethiopian woman, separated from her husband, working graveyard shifts as a cashier at CVS in Inglewood to take care of her only daughter attending public schools. Like many other single

¹ See Cedric Robinson's (1983) *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*.

Black mothers, she exhibited degrees of dignity, determination, and dedication that are overshadowed by fantasies about excessively procreating drug addicted “welfare queens.” The lived experiences of my mother and the many Black mothers like her need to be described, analyzed, and interpreted when discussing Black motherhood in social science research.

Theories on mothering tend to lack intersectional frameworks and analysis which perpetuates white hegemonic ideals based on the normative heteropatriarchal nuclear family unit (Chodorow 1989; Hays 1996). They tend to embrace a universal model for conceptualizing motherhood that generalizes from the experiences of white, middle class families and assumes a sharp dichotomy between public and private spheres (Chodorow 1978). These family ideals remain entangled with longstanding historical notions of true womanhood that vilify mothers that do not conform to nuclear familial roles (Giddings 1984). Ignoring structural conditions, some research even blames Black mothers for the patterns of single women-headed households in urban Black families. Following Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s malicious, inaccurate, yet influential 1960’s report on the Black family, researchers and public policy makers too often portray Black women as supposedly failing to take care of their children and emasculating their Black male partners (Staples 1970; Collins 2005; Steinberg 2011; Geary 2015). Nonetheless, activist scholars have challenged and disrupted this recurrent theme in research, pointing out that it contributes to both the neglect and misrepresentation of Black mothers (Kelley 1997; Kaplan 1997).

My study prioritizes and contextualizes the perspectives of Black mothers. As eyewitnesses to the injustices perpetrated at the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and class, Black mothers have formulated strategies of child rearing that fuse interpersonal justice

with social justice by acknowledging the power of “politically conditioned love” (Rose 2014). Their ingenuity has created an inventory of ways to survive and thrive as Black mothers despite being demeaned, defamed, and despised in the larger culture. I deploy the term motherwork which was conceived by Patricia Hill Collins to discuss the ways Black mothers have historically navigated the reality that their lives have shown little distinction between public and private realms. Their public work has often entailed keeping house and caring for other people’s children in private homes (Dill 2015), while the putatively private dwellings they inhabit have been shaped by public policies like segmentation of the labor market, employment and housing discrimination, failure to enforce the minimum wage, and subsidies for normative families paired with punitive measures directed against non-normative households (Jones 2009). I draw on Black feminist theory and its valuation and validation of knowledge gained from the lived experiences of Black women whose social locations stand at the intersections of race, class, and gender oppression. Centering Black women’s experiences reveals how the very communities most marginalized by the vested interests of white, political establishments are also the agents of radical resistance to systems of power that attempt to govern their lives and police their behaviors (hooks 1984).

This study focuses on the ways Black mothers perform motherwork, primarily through navigating their children’s engagements with educational institutions in Los Angeles. For Black families, educational institutions serve as sites of paradox. They offer both opportunity and obstacles, intellectual development and disciplinary surveillance, validation of achievement and the violence of being pushed out. I chose Los Angeles as my field site given my access and familiarity, but also considering the metropolitan area’s rich racial and economic diversity that complicates mothers’ experiences. Los Angeles is home to both the

richest and poorest Black populations in the nation. Black mothers live in a range of neighborhoods, including some that are frequently associated with poverty and violence, but also in others known for their prestige and exclusivity. Rather than demonizing or glorifying the mothers in this study, I describe, analyze and interpret their viewpoints, providing a platform for them to conceptualize and voice their social roles and realities. Many researchers have theorized about Black mothers without listening to how the women themselves make sense of their lives, disregarding their aspirations, abilities, and agency as thinking and acting subjects. While intersectional theories grounded in Black feminism have contested pathological imaginaries of Black women (hooks 1981; Crenshaw 1991; Omolade 1994; Roberts 1996; Collins 2000), and empirical work on Black families has reframed and contextualized Black motherhood (Joseph and Lewis 1986; Moore 2011; Barnes 2015), there still remains a need for research that provides a space for dialogue between emerging sociohistorical concepts and the people whose lives they implicate.

In an attempt to create this dialectical space for Black feminist frameworks and Black women's experiences, I utilize in-depth, semi-structured interviews as a way of acknowledging participants as agents of knowledge production. I identify and analyze three distinct performances of motherwork: transformative, adaptive, and integrative. I describe transformative motherwork as women significantly altering their work trajectories by pursuing higher education after becoming mothers. Adaptive motherwork conveys how women stay within their respective employment sectors but make major changes to their schedules and/or job positions after they became mothers. Integrative motherwork portrays women who make little to no changes in their work trajectories after becoming mothers, maintaining their pre-motherhood relationship to work. My participants explain that their

enactment of motherwork also involves serving as both educators and advocates for their children. Essentially, they conceptualize motherwork as an educational tool that reaches far beyond the boundaries of a classroom.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Black feminist epistemologies: Motherwork and Controlling Images

Collins situates Black women's historical experiences within the context of the exploitative work they most often perform to argue that Black women have developed an "outsider within social location," providing them with unique insights on how society is structured to perpetuate the unequal distribution of power (1986:14). This distinctive insight stems from a collective wisdom formed from a legacy of struggle for survival. Black feminism as a social and theoretical framework builds from ideas expressed in the Combahee River Collective Statement, which advocated for the implementation of Black feminism as a political catalyst toward human freedom. The Combahee statement, created by Black women in 1974, recognized Black women's incessant struggle for survival, understanding the ways in which identity and politics can intertwine in struggles to dismantle heteropatriarchal, capitalist systems rooted in imperialism (Combahee River Collective 1986). They envisioned a radical shift to a human-centered society that remained devoted to the social, political, and economic liberation of all people, particularly those historically marginalized by race, gender, class, and sexual orientation.

Black women's roles as mothers generate an oppositional knowledge that is constantly reshaped. Understanding the realities of discrimination faced in a heteropatriarchal, white capitalist society, Black mothers must prepare their children to face

obstacles and hardships. Mothers negotiate complicated terrains, teaching their children to navigate social systems strategically while still resisting racial domination. Collins (1994) addresses the dialectical relationship between oppressive institutions that seek to control Black motherhood and efforts taken by Black mothers to assert agency and preserve power over motherhood. She outlines three struggles waged by Black mothers: (1) control of the body and the choice to be a mother, (2) maintaining and keeping children, and (3) empowering children's minds despite dominant discourses and structures of power. This study deploys an intersectional approach to those very issues that contextualizes motherhood in relation to the systematic ways race, class, and gender inform mothering experiences (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000). Because researchers tend to conflate womanhood with motherhood, treating the mother and child as a single entity (Glenn 1994), this research pays attention to development of personhood and expressions of agency among women. In addition, it works to acknowledge the heterogeneity of Black women's experiences with regard to age, sexual orientation, social class, region, and religion. Though a flexible intersectional lens should be employed when studying mothers across racial and class lines, it is implausible and particularly egregious to attempt to study Black mothers without an analysis of racialized and gendered oppression, both historically and contemporarily.

Black feminist theorists identify a number of controlling images used throughout history to pathologize and essentialize Black women in an effort to justify discriminatory social practices (Collins 2000). These images are critical to this study because they have constructed and reconstructed public perceptions of Black women. As a result, Black mothers, including those in this study, continue to navigate and negotiate these labels that fail to frame accurately their interconnected roles as women, mothers, and workers. The

controlling images relevant to this study include: jezebel, mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, and Black lady. I describe these ideal types in the following way:

Jezebel: The jezebel represents a hypersexual Black woman, contemporarily referred to as “THOT²,” “hoochie,” “hoe,” “trick,” and “slut.” The practice of labeling Black women as sexually deviant has origins in slavery, when white slave owners justified the rape of enslaved women by stigmatizing them as temptresses with a seductive allure (Collins 2000). Shifting the blame onto enslaved women was a tactic used under white supremacy to control and terrorize Black women’s bodies while perpetuating a distorted view of Black women’s sexuality. This allowed masters to rationalize their acts of horror since they expanded their labor force by exploiting Black women as reproductive laborers (Roberts 1997/2018; Davis 1981; Hartman 2016). The jezebel image continued to be used in the Jim Crow era by white rapists and has persisted well into this era of mass incarceration. Politicians have used the image to characterize Black women as excessively fertile, having an irresponsible sexual appetite, and producing too many children with different fathers, allegedly in order to increase the cash benefits they would receive from social services.

Mammy: The idea of the mammy has roots in slavery but became prevalent during the Jim Crow era to describe subservient Black women who worked in homes of white families. In his essay, “The Black Mother,” W.E.B. Du Bois (1912) refers to the Black mammy as a “foster mammy” who is forced to take care of white children at the expense of her own children. This is a precursor to Collins’s (1986; 2000) argument that the mammy has an outsider-within social location, in which white employers masked exploitation by

² THOT is an acronym, meaning “that hoe over there,” that is sometimes deployed colloquially on social media and in music.

claiming her as a sort of family member, ultimately blurring the line between labor and love. The Black mammy represented the dominant group's idea of the proper relationship between Black women and white patriarchy. She is stripped of her humanity because her value was linked only to her household services. Integral to the ideology of the Black mammy was the expectation that she would teach obedience to her children to accept the unequal and exploitative placement of Black people, reinforcing their roles in the white power structure. The "mammification" of Black women is not exclusive to their devalued work as domestics historically, but continues into their contemporary employment sectors, which can range from service jobs as waitresses and retail cashiers, clerical work as secretaries and administrative assistants, and even professional careers as educators, health care providers, and social workers (Omolade 1994; Collins 2000). Black women are often expected to perform unpaid emotional labor by regularly doing a level of mothering in their work spaces. Essentially, the image of the mammy strategically sends a message of white superiority rooted in the exploitation of Black women's labor in the capitalist political economy.

Matriarch: The image of the matriarch, propagated by the Moynihan Report, refers to the large number of Black families that are female-headed households. Moynihan (1965) criticizes Black mothers for creating a matriarchal culture that they supposedly transmit to their children which stunts the growth of Black people by emasculating Black men and further burdening Black women. He states that the pattern is formed by Black women being better educated than Black men because Black mothers prioritized the education of their daughters, not sons (Moynihan 1965). He describes Black women as being disgusted with Black men's inability to find work, and thus they choose to alienate Black fathers from their families. The matriarch is considered a *bad* mother because she spends too much time away

from home, leaving her too little time to supervise her children's behavior. The matriarch is blamed for her alleged inability to abide by typical gender expectations of white patriarchy, including letting her husband do the work with her staying home with the children.

Conforming to the separate spheres of gendered labor enshrined in notions of true womanhood, however, requires material and social privileges that Black women defamed as matriarchs do not enjoy, especially in contexts of mass incarceration, unemployment, and violence.

Welfare Mother: After the election of Ronald Reagan to the Presidency in 1980, the image of the mother as welfare queen was used by the president and his followers to justify the government's extreme cuts in social welfare programs that many working families needed to survive (Collins 2000; Alexander 2010). Despite some Black women using these services (which they are legally entitled to), many could still barely afford to survive (Roberts 1994). The "welfare mother" counters the normative expectations of white families because she is viewed as being alone, with no husband to help her raise children. The stigma associated with the welfare mother was used to control the fertility of Black women through forced sterilization and other coercive measures used to suppress Black births (Roberts 1999/2018). Similar to the matriarch, the welfare mother is labeled as a bad mother. It is not because she is too busy and aggressive like the matriarch but instead, the welfare mother is demonized for her alleged passivity. She is depicted as sitting around all day collecting government checks, which sets an example of a bad work ethic for her Black children.

Black Lady: The image of the Black lady describes middle-class, professional Black women that uphold Black respectability politics (Collins 2000). Despite their success in a system stacked against them, they are nonetheless demonized as well. They are alleged to

prioritize their work over relationships and motherhood, and hence become stigmatized as too aggressive to marry, explaining why they are largely unwed. The Black Lady is also viewed as stealing jobs from more qualified and deserving job seekers, particularly males. The rhetorical portrayal of the Black Lady became revived in response to affirmative action policies which were designed to level the playing field for minorities in education and work places. Although the greatest beneficiaries of affirmative action were white women (Crenshaw 2006), Black ladies were blamed for being in positions they *did not belong in*. This helped contribute to the idea of reverse racism, which argues inaccurately that unfair advantages are given to minorities to fill a quota, an argument that essentially reflects the powerful sense of white entitlement that actually dominates the labor market.

B. Mothering under racialized systems of control

The lineage of Black motherhood in America cannot be traced without contextualizing the progression and expansion of racialized systems of social control. In analyzing the era of slavery, Black feminist scholars have unpacked the dehumanizing acts by slave owners using Black women's bodies as both *mules* for manual labor and "procreative vessels" for reproductive labor (Omolade 1994; Spillers 1987; Jones 2009; Hartman 2016). Considering that slave law indicated that children born to enslaved women were considered slaves, slave masters had an economic incentive to rape enslaved women to increase their supply of unwaged labor and subsequently their wealth (Davis 1971; 1983). However, Dorothy Roberts (1997/2018) clarifies that this rape should not be viewed as strictly economic or sexual; instead, it should be viewed as a means of social control over an entire community by first terrorizing and controlling the Black body. Despite this violence, many enslaved women displayed acts of resistance in an attempt to assert bodily agency.

Such acts included escaping with and sometimes without their children, using preventative birth control, attempting suicide, and (in extreme but rare cases) killing their child (Taylor 2016). In addition, slaves resisted the notion that they were breeding machines by forming alternative families –such as claiming (non-biological) aunts and uncles as kin –as a tool for survival (Roberts 1996; 2011). This means for survival remains relevant to how the mothers in this study recreate conceptions of family by incorporating community-based childrearing to help balance the extensive demands of their work.

During the Jim Crow era, Black families navigated a segregated world rife with unequal access to education and unchecked employment discrimination. They endured the everyday fear of Black men and boys getting lynched for their mere existence, for their imagined threat to the “purity” of white womanhood. Imagine the agony felt when Emmet Till’s mother discovered the brutal murder of her 14 year old son at the hands of two white men, and her courage to have an open casket to display the inexplicable horrors of anti-blackness (Whitfield 1991; Harold and DeLuca 2005). Racialized violence also impacted Black women and girls who survived brutal sexual attacks while their assailants were never jailed. Such attacks include the assault of Recy Taylor, a twenty-four-year-old mother, kidnapped and raped by seven armed white men on her way home from church (McGuire 2011). White male criminals were rarely prosecuted for violating the bodies of Black women by the then nearly universally all-white juries and judges. This delineates a system of control institutionalized in a “justice” system, in which white men serve as the criminal and the judge and jury considering the crime. This establishes white male identity as immune to punishment by the law when the victims are Black and female. This structure upholds racially gendered systems of violence and terror that perpetually reproduce impunity for

criminals in power (Segato 2010). As a result, Black women were left in vulnerable positions where their bodies were subjected to attacks without any shield of justice to protect them (Hine 1989). Not only could they not protect themselves, but they also could not protect their children and husbands.

A sense of fear amongst Black mothers based on their inability to protect their families persists in today's context where mass incarceration and police brutality disproportionately steal the lives of Black people. In a nation where prisons are funded more than educational institutions, where the rhetoric of "law and order" justifies placing Black parents and children behind bars (Alexander 2010), where a white law enforcement officer can shoot and kill a Black person with impunity, one thing remains clear: Black lives are disposable under white supremacy. Consider the case of 18-year old Mike Brown, who was shot multiple times by Officer Darren Wilson, until he was left lying dead for four hours on a blistering hot street in Ferguson. The nature of this slaughter was undoubtedly gruesome; however, the way that Wilson characterized Brown when speaking in court also reveals the denial of Black humanity (Taylor 2016). Mike Brown's body was left for hours in the St. Louis summer heat, guarded by police officers with guns using dogs to keep mourners from the body (Taylor 2016). They denied Brown's parents access to remove their son from the street. The case of Mike Brown, along with the history of violence that has plagued Black lives for generations, stirred the insurgency of Black Lives Matter. In addition to Mike Brown and numerous Black boys and men who have been targeted, Black women and girls are disproportionately jailed and victims of police brutality (Crenshaw, Ritchie, Anspach, Gilmer, and Harris 2015; Gross and Hicks 2015). Deaths like Miriam Carey, Tarika Wilson, and India Kager are examples of Black women, particularly mothers, whose lives were

snatched and deemed disposable at the will of the state³. After the arrest and subsequent death of Sandra Bland, the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) initiated the #Say Her Name campaign to bring attention to the ways Black women and girls experience racially gendered violence by police.

The criminalization of Black families, particularly Black mothers, can also be seen within the actions of child protective services. Dorothy Roberts (2002) discusses how Black children are disproportionately removed from their families, and seldom reunited with their parents, revealing the underlying state ideology that Black families are *pathological*. Because they are disproportionately poor, Black families are especially targeted for charges of neglect due to their inability to provide enough resources for their children (Roberts 2002). Their poverty is criminalized and treated by the law as willful child abuse rather than as evidence of the scarcity of well-paying full-time jobs. Moreover, the removal of Black children from families has been a matter of race not reducible to class. Roberts (2002) observes that Black children were more likely to be removed from their homes even when their parents were mentally and financially stable, lived in *relatively* safe neighborhoods, and avoided using drugs. In addition, Black cultural traditions are often misinterpreted by social workers, such as labeling the use of community parenting as neglect (Roberts 2002).

Not only do Black families worry about state violence, but many Black mothers in urban centers may also fear violence from other community members. Nikki Jones' (2010) ethnography of Black girls in inner-city Philadelphia reveals the struggle for survival felt by

³ Other Black women and girls killed by the police include: Tanisha Anderson, Yvette Smith, Shelly Frey, Darnisha Harris, Malissa Williams, Alesia Thomas, Shantel Davis, Reikia Boyd, Shereese Francis, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Kathryn Johnston, Alberta Spruill, Kendra James, and a plethora of more women with a sadly increasing list of names.

Black mothers. The mothers in her study understand that sometimes in the inner-city, there are no safe zones. Homes, schools, and neighborhoods can serve as sites of violence. With law enforcement failing to protect and serve the lives of residents in Black poor communities, Black mothers recognize that inner-city neighborhoods have created systems of accountability often governed by revenge and retaliation, also referred to as the “code of the street” (Anderson 1999). Although this code is presented as a masculine code, Black mothers must manage navigating a violent terrain while simultaneously trying to raise daughters to negotiate normative gender expectations that intertwine white femininity and Black respectability politics.

João Costa Vargas (2006) presents an ethnographic study that focuses on blackness in South Central Los Angeles –a neighborhood so notorious for not only crime, violence, and drugs, but also the infamous 1992 LA rebellion –that officials changed its name to South Los Angeles. He shifts the blame for these conditions from the community members to the structures that produce their environment, discussing the narratives of the Black mothers in an apartment complex. All of the mothers have a history with drugs, domestic violence, and entrapment within the welfare system. Despite the constant discrimination they encounter and their hyper-criminalization by the state, Vargas (2006) argues that the mothers display resistance by building a community of solidarity based on shared struggles with poverty, policing, and instability. He describes how the women viewed their drug addiction as produced by poverty rather than personal fault. Poverty produces the trauma but denies them resources for healing, resulting in the use of drugs to treat wounded hearts and neglected souls. The same society that criminalizes their survival strategies also restricts access to knowledge about healthy pregnancy and lifestyle choices, resulting in a few mothers having

children with mental disabilities. These findings reveal mothers' critical consciousness of social inequalities while also uncovering the ways they cope as a community. Though the mothers are aware of their oppression, they are generally unaware of community-based organizations that could better assist them. This sparked my curiosity to inquire how mothers throughout Los Angeles, often marginalized by systems of discriminations, may struggle seeking to find community resources, or may even struggle finding the time off from work to ask for help.

Susan A. Phillips (2012) also conducts an ethnography of Los Angeles, discussing the social disintegration enacted by the war on drugs. She finds that the families, particularly the mothers and children impacted by loved ones incarcerated under Operation Fly Trap⁴, suffer tremendous health issues. Phillips (2012) notes that most of the family members she studied were already in poor health from poverty, but poverty coupled with the stress of incarceration led to stress related severe health problems. Women not only have to compensate for a now absent male provider, they also have to balance sending money to their loved one in jail, raising money for phone calls and legal defenses, and traveling often long distances to supervised visits. Phillips (2012) calls out most "outsiders" that blame families for the domino effect of problems that come with the crisis of incarceration. She situates subjects within the structures that oppress them, calling for attention to the problems that are caused by flawed systems but blamed on allegedly flawed people. This re-humanizes Black mothers in contrast to the dehumanizing and demonizing labels applied to them as matriarchs

⁴ Operation Fly Trap refers to a Los Angeles police department task force intended to "crack down" on alleged gang members and drug dealers in marginalized communities during the War on Drugs.

and welfare mothers. The criminal justice system is responsible for exacerbating the instability of many urban Black families.

C. Prioritization of Motherhood Across Class Lines

Empirical research on motherhood and work shows how many Black mothers across class lines prioritize mothering and family over career expectations. Riché J. Daniel Barnes (2015) develops a concept entitled *strategic mothering* to describe how affluent mothers in Atlanta reshape their relationships with work to focus on their children and marriages. Although Black women across generations have served roles as both mothers and workers, simultaneously attending to the demands of family and the economy, these Black career mothers alter their positions as workers in an attempt to emphasize their roles as mothers and wives (Barnes 2015). Barnes (2015) identifies how strategic mothering is impacted by a context where Black mothers are waiting to have their first child and are also depending less on the support from extended family members in an age when families tend to live further away from each other.

That Black mothers sacrifice for their children may not be incredibly surprising. Their sacrifices for the stability of their marriages, however, deserve particular attention. With Black women having the lowest marriage rates among women (U.S. Census Bureau 2016) and being the least likely to marry outside of their ethnic group (U.S. Census Bureau 2017), the fact that Black mothers alter their careers to emphasize their roles as wives holds significance. Barnes (2015) discusses how these career mothers rationalize their decision to leave formal work obligations by underscoring their commitment to their marriages. Their dedication to their marriages is considered foundational to the stability of their families and subsequently a modern tactic to preserving Black families while challenging pathological

imaginaries. Despite the difference in the ways they alter their careers, all of the mothers remain involved with work to some extent, including being primarily responsible for childcare and household tasks (Barnes 2015). While Barnes (2015) focuses exclusively on Black career mothers whose marital and class statuses provide them with a level of financial stability and flexibility, the concept of strategic mothering remains applicable to the plethora of ways Black mothers in my study negotiate various types of work for the sake of family.

Not only do we see instances of affluent mothers prioritizing family over career expectations, but the impoverished single mothers in Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas' (2005) study also elevate caring for their children over career trajectories. These mothers focus their efforts on motherhood rather than marriage and education. This contrasts with middle-class expectations of family formation in which women are encouraged to pursue education, secure a career, get married, and then have children. This normative timeline also intertwines with notions of Black respectability politics, often preached amongst wealthier and educated Black families. The impoverished mothers argue, by contrast, that they would rather have a child out of wedlock than rush into a marriage that ends in divorce, hence countering the stereotypical assumption that poor families do not value marriage at all (Edin and Kefalas 2005). In addition, Edin and Kefalas (2005) point out how these mothers value their children as sources of stability and inspiration in a context of poverty and mass incarceration. Edin and Kefalas (2005) discuss how the mothers who were struggling to maintain financial stability learn to acknowledge and appreciate their achievement of familial survival, rather than judging their children's educational milestones as markers of their worth as mothers. This is not to say that economically struggling mothers do not value educational

achievement, but rather they do not evaluate their performance of mothering based on middle class understandings of excellence.

D. Race, Gender, and Education

Historically, educational spaces have been contradictory sites of both opportunity and repression. Slave masters denied their chattel access to schooling except for distorted religious teachings that instructed them to submit to their lot on earth and seek reward only in heaven (Cornelius 1991). Eventually the education of enslaved people became a crime in southern and border states. The prospect of literacy in enslaved communities instilled fear in the hearts of the outnumbered southern slave masters who recognized that reading and writing can be fundamental and complementary tools for community mobilizing. Slave masters worried because they realized the link between education and agency, and thus criminalized learning for the enslaved as a means of social control. Enslaved people, on the other hand, understood the interconnectedness of literacy and political freedom (Williams 2005). They created their own alternative learning spaces, secretly reading and writing and developing community learning networks among one another and sometimes with sympathetic whites. The experiences of Frederick Douglass detailed in his well-known autobiography reflect the struggles endured by enslaved communities to advocate and embody a forgotten democratic principle: education as a right for all.

During and after the Civil War, formerly enslaved people continued to take their education into their own hands by expanding learning opportunities for themselves and their children. Heather Andrea Williams (2005) points that after emancipation, Black people prioritized education by becoming teachers and developing schools with the support of Black churches and the Freedman's Bureau. This work challenges the problematic, yet widely

accepted narrative constructed by the white historical imagination that paints northern Yankee teachers as the saviors of learning, guiding *helpless* Blacks into educational prosperity (Jones 1992). Nonetheless, schools for Black people remained separate and unequal, with limited government funding for supplies, teachers, and mere infrastructure to house a learning space. Even after the monumental *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling in 1954 called for integrating schools as a prerequisite for democratic citizenship, Blacks stayed (and continue to this day to stay) in a segregated schooling system. The ruling proved to be more symbolic than impactful, considering the unwillingness to enforce the law due to the lack of government intervention and subsequent absence of institutional change. While a few Black students were able to attend predominately white schools –although often entering learning environments that reeked of racial hatred –many Black students remained relegated to their underfunded, local, predominately Black school (Orfield 1975).

While efforts toward desegregating schools have been made through magnet programs and busing initiatives (Tyson 2011), little change can be seen, as evidenced by schools that are obviously disproportionately dominated by a particular ethnic group depending on the given neighborhood. Racially segregated schooling, coupled with divestment from schools disproportionately attended by students of color, breeds educational inequality. The result of this inequality is often characterized as an achievement gap (Ladson-Billings 2006; Howard 2010), a concept used to describe and contextualize why students of color (particularly Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and certain Asian populations) underperform on standardized and westernized measures of learning compared to their white counterparts. The alleged achievement gap, however, in reality reveals an opportunity gap (Ladson-Billings 2006; Howard 2010; Tyson 2011), where race, class, and gender merge to

structure inequality in classroom settings. Derrick Darby and John L. Ruby (2018) argue that schooling practices maintain the *Color of Mind*, a concept they devise to describe the racialized ideologies of inferiority used to marginalize Black students in learning spaces. They articulate that the supposed black-white achievement gap is a product of indignities and injustices against Black students that can be ameliorated by removing the Color of Mind from educational institutions.

Further unpacking this phenomenon, Karolyn Tyson (2011) counters the presumptive effort taken by neoliberals to explain Black academic underachievement by focusing on their supposed resistance towards *acting white*. Instead, she highlights the fundamental role of racialized tracking in the formation and usage of the *acting white* slur amongst Black youth. Racialized tracking refers to the ways that race impacts how students are grouped based on perceived ability, and thus placed into segregated classrooms (Tyson 2011). Tyson (2011) argues that students begin associating achievement with whiteness as a result of racialized tracking that formed after desegregation, clarifying society's tendency to confuse cause and effect. Thus, institutions produce the ideology of education equating with whiteness because historically the education of Blacks has been delegitimized. Additionally, Tyson (2011) engages with scholars like John Ogbu (1978), who tend to homogenize the Black community as not believing in the practical importance of education⁵. She points to the limits of Ogbu's (1978) conclusions by providing narratives of low-income Black families that actually do promote school, even in cases where the parents have minimal formal education. Often

⁵ Ogbu's (1978) misinformed claims regarding Black families' value of education are also refuted by Jo Jones and William D. Mosher's (2013) report which found that a larger percentage of Black fathers helped their children with school work every day compared to other racial groups.

influenced and deceived by paradigms of racial individualism (Gordon 2015), there are many low-income, high performing Black students who believe education is their path to success, and consequently incorporate a strong work ethic to achieve the uncertain and illusory promises of the American Dream. Though they understand the prevalence of racism in restricting social mobility, they believe education is their tool to overcome institutional barriers (Lang 1992; Perry, Steele, and Hilliard 2003; Oliver and Shapiro 2013).

Despite conceptualizing education as a means for upward mobility, many Black students experience the realities of policed learning. Classrooms tend to incorporate a banking model (Friere 1972), in which teachers deposit privileged knowledge to students in a manner that reflects regurgitation rather than rigor, expecting the students to mold themselves into an imagined iteration of a *promising* scholar. This banking model is infused with racially gendered deficit notions of particular students whose intersectional identities are disregarded and deemed ornamental instead of fundamental to pedagogical practices. We especially see this type of problematic learning used on students tracked in lower performing classes, which disproportionately encompass students of color. It is unfortunate that classrooms are not spaces of dialogue, where students and teachers are both respected as sources of knowledge (Friere 1972), validating the cultural capital students acquire in their lived experiences and encouraging students to develop their critical awareness of scholarship, thereby devising innovative applications of relevant academic concepts (Yosso 2005). Instead, teachers are granted little flexibility when it comes to devising curriculum, since they are expected to prepare their students for yearly mandated, standardized tests which impact not only how the student is tracked within the school, but also how the school is tracked within the district (Kohn 2000).

In addition to policing the minds of Black students, school spaces criminalize their physical bodies⁶. Monique W Morris (2016) discusses how Black girls are policed and punished by policies and practices that label them as socially deviant in ways that disregard their individuality, criminalize their culture, and delegitimize their experiences, thus channeling them to school-to confinement pathways. Morris (2016) delineates how Black girls are considered disruptive for having the audacity to talk back to authority, reinforcing the stereotypical label of the *Black girl attitude*. Black boys also face racially gendered policing in schools, being disproportionately suspended, arrested, and kicked out (Ferguson 2000; National Education Association 2011). Rather than offering learning spaces that have a foundation of gendered and raced cultural sensitivity in their perception of and pedagogical practices with students, schools tend to blame students for their performance, and maintain structures that proliferate these exclusionary actions. Since schools have made little institutional change to ameliorate these conditions for Black students, my study takes into consideration Black mothers' experiences with teaching their children to navigate these complicated terrains, in addition to their own experiences, particularly in Los Angeles –a city filled with both high performing schools and dropout factories.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Structure

I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten Black women who have experiences mothering children in Los Angeles. Interviewing represents way of valuing the

⁶ Schools have criminalized certain hairstyles associated with Black culture such as cornrows and dreadlocks. Black children have been suspended for violating a “dress code” that resolutely enforces a racialized and gendered bias against Black girls, boys, as well as students who are gender nonconforming.

participants' interpretations (Charmaz 2014) while shifting the source of knowledge from that of the researcher to that of the subject, aligning with the goals of Black feminism. The interviews ranged from forty minutes to an hour and a half, with most averaging around an hour. They were either collected in person, via Facetime, or over the phone, depending on the preference of the participant. These testimonies provide rich detail on these mothers' experiences with family, work, and school, chronicling their lives from early childhood to post-motherhood.

I recorded interviews with my cell phone recorder, and later transcribed them. In my data collection, I decided to use pseudonyms for my participants in an effort to protect their privacy. Once transcribed, I used both in-vivo coding and process coding (Saldaña 2013) to facilitate my data analysis. I chose in-vivo coding –which uses the participants words to create codes –as a way of acknowledging and appreciating the language participants use to conceptualize their social roles and realities. In addition, I utilized process coding to assess the nuanced ways these mothers perform motherwork while navigating educational spaces. After the interviews were collected, each participant was entered into a raffle in which three were randomly selected to receive gift rewards. Although all of the mothers stated that they did not *need* a gift as an incentive to share their stories, I decided to do a raffle as a token of my appreciation for these mothers' willingness to take time from their busy schedules of work and school.

B. Context

Los Angeles County has a population of 10.2 million people, with an ethnic composition that is 48.6% Hispanic or Latino, 26% white, 14.6 Asian, 7.8 Black, and 2.2 *Multi-racial* (Data USA). Rising property values make it extremely difficult to own homes, with the

median property value nearing \$600,000 dollars, more than twice the national average (Data USA). Consequently, the homeownership rate is about 45% in L.A. County, considerably less than the national average (Data USA). In analyzing gender, 33% of households in L.A. County are headed by women (Los Angeles County Commission for Women). With regard to Black families, 20% live in poverty and more than 60% of these families are households headed by single mothers with children under the age of 18 (Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation).

Historically, Los Angeles has been conceptualized as a space of both refuge and opportunity. This particularly applies to the millions of Black families fleeing the unbearable racialized violence and economic discrimination in the south during the Great Migration from 1916 through 1970 (Sides 2003; Wilkerson 2010). Those families heading west imagined Los Angeles as a space of hope for attaining employment with decent wages, owning property assets that would accumulate over time and be passed down to future generations, and accessing better schooling opportunities for their children. They did not anticipate, however, the structural racism and interpersonal prejudice that they would face upon their arrival. Although Los Angeles did provide more jobs relative to the south, Black men were still largely limited to low wage unskilled labor and service jobs, while Black women were marginalized to domestic labor and later clerical work (Sides 2003). Anti-black employment practices in Los Angeles included white employers preferring to hire Mexicans for blue-collar jobs, with some power plants even prohibiting Black labor (Sides 2003). Black males often competed against Mexicans for industrial jobs, while Black women largely entered administrative and clerical work spaces. Black women worried less about competition considering that they were often more formally educated than their Mexican

women counterparts (Paul Bullock 1966; Sides 2003). However, colorism against darker skinned Black women permeated clerical and sales sectors revealing a preference for lighter skinned women.

Not only did Black migrants face economic discrimination, but their movement into Los Angeles triggered violent backlash from white residents attempting to protect their conception of their white spatial imaginary (Lipsitz 2011). Racial covenants restricted Black people from buying and living in homes in white neighborhood until housing covenants were ruled unenforceable by the state in the *Shelley vs. Kraemer* case ruling in 1948. This ruling did not stop angry white residents from terrorizing families of color, including acts of racialized vandalism and violence. This resistance grew from fear of seeing areas that were once predominately white change into multiracial transitional cities that now included Black, Mexican, and Chinese residents (Sides 2003). Although some of these places remained racially diverse areas, many of them became racially segregated as Black when they had previously been segregated as white. White families left areas like Compton, Leimert Park, Gardena, Hawthorne, and Inglewood, and created new white spaces in on the west side and south bay (e.g., Manhattan Beach, Santa Monica, Bel Air, Beverly Hills, etc.)⁷ and in regions in the San Fernando Valley, commonly referred to as “the valley.” Many Mexican families moved into neighborhoods in East Los Angeles, which often became Mexican barrios that experienced similar social and economic struggles as Black neighborhoods (Sides 2003). With a growing number of Blacks becoming formally educated, Black affluent families

⁷ Areas inhabited by white people were zoned totally residential while the places inhabited by people of color were zoned industrial or mixed use – a hidden subsidy for the property owned by whites.

moved into suburban areas that were once inhabited by whites including View Park, Windsor Hills, and Baldwin Hills (Hunt 2010). These suburban Black families attempted to create new Black places in spaces in close physical proximity to inner-city poverty but located on hills and behind palm trees that created an illusory barrier from the problems of the Black poor. Although de jure segregation was illegal, de facto segregation remained evident.

Gerrymandering and redlining strengthened housing segregation which reinforced school segregation, even well after the *Brown vs Board of Education* ruling in 1954. Considering that schools attended by students of color were underfunded, many Black families wanted to enter racially integrated spaces to increase their children's opportunities to attend better schools. While students were largely required to attend schools in their local areas, white students who attended racially mixed schools were granted waivers to attend a predominately white school outside of their areas. (Sides 2003). When the Los Angeles school board ignored the 1962 ruling in *Jackson vs. Pasadena School District* requiring schools to integrate, Black parents led efforts of direct action to advocate for their children. Their efforts along with the advocacy by NAACP, ACLU, and other prominent Black leaders opened the door for the founding of the United Civil Rights Committee (UCRC). The UCRC organized the largest march in the history of LA on June 24, 1963 (Sides 2003). They protested for educational equity throughout the summer, while some whites decided to organize an anti-integration and anti-miscegenation counter protest⁸.

Because Black families may have imagined Los Angeles to be free of the overt racialized violence that characterized life in southern states, they did not fully anticipate nor were they prepared for their incessant battles with the militarized agents of institutional

⁸ See Yeazell (1977), Weaver, Negri, and Wallace (1980), and Orfield (1984).

violence known as the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the LAPD took extensive efforts to rapidly increase their police force with officers, many of whom did not live in the neighborhoods they were policing. With excessive law enforcement practices that criminalized spaces and policed racialized bodies (Horne 1995), it is no wonder that Watts erupted with rebellion in 1965, along with New York City, Chicago, Newark, Detroit, and countless other cities during the 60s. (Camp 2016). Police brutality and mass incarceration in Los Angeles continued to be fueled by the War on Drugs, which disproportionately targeted and criminalized Black men and women. Black families were drastically impacted by an anti-Black political apparatus attempting to get “tough on crime.” Thus, Watts would not be the last incident of insurgency in Los Angeles.

Racialized anger ignited after Latasha Harlins, a Black teenage girl, was wrongly accused of stealing a bottle of orange juice and then brutally shot in the back of the head by Soon Ja Du, the Korean store owner (Stevenson 2013). Although the incident was caught on camera and Du was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter, Judge Joyce Ann Karlin only sentenced her to five years of probation and 400 hours of community service. This sentencing revealed the racialized stereotypes that paint Black girls and women as aggressive and violent, while suggesting that Asian women are passive and docile (Stevenson 2013). Internalizing such stereotypes caused people like Judge Karlin, and many others, to dehumanize the bodies and attitudes of Black people, and thus disregards the value of their lives. The anger of the Black community exploded in the 1992 LA Rebellion, when Latasha Harlins’s death was followed by the viral video of the attack on Rodney King by four police officers who were later acquitted by an all-white jury in Simi Valley.

Images of Black people looting and rioting in Los Angeles dominated news outlets and public perception with little regard to the legacy of pain felt by an aggrieved community struggling to be seen as human beings. In reality, these distorted images engrained in the collective memory of many Americans both ignore and neglect the lived experiences of the plethora of ways marginalized people survive and make meaning of their lives in LA. They ignore the workers commuting to the city from the outskirts attempting to maximize their yearly income while minimizing their monthly mortgage, and those afraid of being pushed out of their apartments because of rising living expenses caused by the trendiness of their gentrified cities. They erase the children who grow up in the depths of poverty, living in food deserts next to dropout factories, negotiating feelings of danger because of the accumulated gun violence from both the police and from community members. They have no room to relate to the strikes led by teachers in LAUSD in 2019, demanding funding and improved learning spaces for children enrolled in public schools who are not wealthy enough to attend private school nor lucky enough to live close enough to a high performing charter school. My study takes another approach. Its evidence is grounded in the perspectives of mothers struggling to raise families in this complicated city.

C. Participants

I recruited participants through a mixture of snowball sampling and convenience sampling (Lincoln and Denzin 2000). I made and distributed flyers, while also relying heavily on the recruitment efforts taken by my mother. Thus, this study is not only a study of motherwork, but also a product of it. I see my mother's knowledge and social networks as an important point of entry into the practice of motherwork and the skills it requires. My mother met many of my participants while working and interacting with a plethora of mothers who

shop at and work near her job. The dialogue sparked by those encounters reveals significant evidence about their shared positions as mothers.

The mothers in this study range widely in education levels, employment trajectories, marital statuses, numbers of children, and locations in Los Angeles County. The mothers also vary in their stages of mothering, with some currently raising toddlers and school-aged children, while others have adult children and reflect back on their experiences, I intentionally use the term Black to provide inclusivity to mothers who identify as African-American, Afro-Caribbean, and/or African. Below, I provide a chart revealing relevant demographics of my participants.

Name	Education	Work trajectory	Marital Status(es)	Location in LA county
Crystal	Master's degree	Social worker	Unmarried	Los Angeles City
Shaina	Master's degree in progress	Graduate student in public health	Unmarried	South Central
Grace	Bachelor's degree (Ethiopia)/ Trade school certificate	Surgical technician	Married	Inglewood
Tina	Bachelor's degree	Educator and Registered nurse	married → divorced	Gardena
Jasmine	Bachelor's degree	Flight attendant	married	Inglewood
Lila	High school diploma	Waitress	Married → divorced	Northridge
Sara	Bachelor's degree (Ethiopia)	Cashier	married	Inglewood
Hailey	Master's degree	Supervisor in Social Work	Married	Covina
Brittney	Master's degree	Pharmacist	Unmarried with partner	Culver City

Alyssa	PhD	Lecturer	Married → separated	Culver City
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D. My positionality

My interest in Black mothers in Los Angeles goes beyond mere curiosity; it draws on the depths of my experiences. While careful not to project my experiences as universal, I wanted to develop a deeper analysis of the city I was born and raised in, which fostered mixed emotions of feeling trapped and a sense of belonging. I grew up as a young Black girl, with immigrant parents (an Ethiopian mother and a Belizean father) living in run down apartments in an impoverished neighborhood so close to the LAX airport that my ears became numb to the noise. With the transition from a chaotic household filled with unhealthy bickering between parents to the later solitude of being an only child of a single mother struggling to pay bills, I found inspiration in the classroom setting. Although my mother was overworked and underpaid, she managed to get me to and from school until I could attend university, always smiling through her worries and encouraging my educational pursuits. With the sad reality that I seldom saw my mom wear anything other than her work uniform, school was both an escape from my loneliness and an opportunity to make a better life for my family.

I struggled to excel through the complex arenas of K-12 education in LAUSD, eventually landing a full-ride scholarship to UCLA, which seemed like “the promise land” to me growing up. After graduating from UCLA as an African-American Studies major and Education minor, I wondered how my lived experiences and formal education could merge to inspire my interest in research. Hence, this project emerged as my window of exploration into the intersections of family, work, and education.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Types of motherwork: Transformative, Adaptive, and Integrative

In assessing how mothering shapes Black women's relationships with work, I group my participants' performance of motherwork into three categories: transformative, adaptive, and integrative.

i. Transformative Motherwork

The first type of motherwork is transformative motherwork. I describe transformative motherwork as women augmenting their work trajectories by actively pursuing higher education after becoming mothers. For mothers performing transformative motherwork, their matriculation into motherhood inspired them to think critically about their previous work relationships as they apply and advance through post-secondary school, and eventually specialize in a field they can call a *career* rather than a *job*. Among my participants, I identify three mothers as performing transformative motherwork: Crystal, Shaina, and Grace.

Crystal had her first child at seventeen, graduated from a high school that has been labeled as a dropout factory, separated from her first child's father, and started taking classes at her local community college. While taking classes, she struggled working at low wage jobs while simultaneously balancing her course load and her relationship with the father of her two younger kids. She describes her journey through community college, stating:

...You know that's supposed to be two years; it took me about twelve years. 'Cause out of high school, you start college because you are supposed to do that. But not knowing about college. Not knowing what the FAFSA⁹ is... You know I had [my first son] at seventeen. But then having two more children, getting into another relationship, working, and trying to balance it at community college, it was really difficult. But towards the end, I really pulled it together...

⁹ FAFSA refers to the "Free application for Federal Student Aid" form used when applying for financial aid including grants, work-study, and loan to pay for higher education.

Crystal's determination plus the financial support of her *on-and-off again* partner led her to continue pursuing education. After twelve years of community college, she was able to transfer her credits and enroll at one of the largest and most prestigious research universities in southern California. Her life changed markedly as a result. Being a student made her eligible for residency in university owned family housing with reduced rent, pleasant living conditions, and safe surroundings. After transferring, she found community support and academic resources in a university-based center that caters to nontraditional college students, providing jobs, peer learning assistance, and funded research opportunities. This helped ameliorate Crystal's initial doubts about whether she belonged at the university, as she describes:

Because where I come from, my story, my background. Like, "Yo... I'm really here" ...then you feel out of pocket. You feel like you don't belong here. You feel like, "Am I really gonna' make it? Am I really doing this?"

Crystal's performance of transformative motherwork was inspired by her desire to shatter glass ceilings and challenge stereotypes founded in society's controlling images of Black women. Despite being the first in her family to attend college and lacking a framework for what it means to navigate institutions of higher learning, Crystal's role as a mother served as a catalyst for her educational journey. She perceives her education as a means of disengaging with the projected trope of the welfare queen. She recalls her struggles:

[I] have three kids, [I'm] uneducated, and [I] have two baby daddies...I'm going to combat ascribing to that. Because we have to keep those behaviors going in order to keep the stereotype alive, right? So...I'm going to combat that by pursuing higher education. So yes, I'm all these things, however...I'm getting my education...I didn't want to be a welfare queen.

Reflecting on her own struggles growing up in the projects in a single-family home with her mother from Central America, Crystal was adamant about declaring her journey as ending

the cyclical nature of poverty and educational discrimination, making way for a new cycle founded on personal strength and academic achievement. In reminiscing on her conversation with her eldest son after he showed her a draft for his *exaggerated* personal statement for college, she reminded him:

It's no more first gen. I'm first gen. We don't get to say that anymore. Nah, homie...Quit playing. You didn't grow up in no projects, you wasn't dodging bullets, and at night you weren't scared of hearing fire trucks. That's not your truth. Like, you're privileged.

Not only did Crystal break barriers by graduating with her bachelor's degree, but she continued her schooling, and attained a graduate degree in social work. She is now employed as a social worker for L.A. county, in the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), working with commercially exploited youth. Crystal understands her transformative motherwork as her attempt to lead by example not by mere words, reversing the common and hypocritical phrase parents sometimes say, "do as I say, not as I do."

Like Crystal, Shaina was raised in the inner-city projects of South Central and became a mother in her teenage years. She had her first child, her son, while she was as a student at a California State University (CSU). With the overwhelming demands of mothering, her grades plummeted, she was subsequently placed on academic probation and later dismissed from school. Still determined to go to school, she had to "start over" and attend community college. She described her battle with her internalized mentality that "school wasn't me." This stemmed from her early discouragement from and frustration with institutions of higher learning that often marginalize students with intersecting identities.

Despite fighting feelings of insecurity and isolation, Shaina was determined to earn her associate degree in hopes of later transferring to a university. Yet, similar to Crystal, Shaina clarifies that she did not follow the *expected* trajectory to transfer within two years.

Becoming a mother provided her with the motivation she needed to continue her studies. As Shaina explains, “It took me a little minute, but it wasn’t until I became pregnant with my daughter, that I decided that something was going to have to change.” For her, becoming a mother to a daughter –perhaps imagining being able to get a chance that her own mother never had after having her –allowed Shaina to envision educational attainment as the means by which she could change her own life and the lives of her children. Her supportive partner died while she was pregnant, creating another obstacle in her path. It was the birth of her daughter that she said saved her.

Shaina balanced school, work, and motherhood. She attended school during the day and worked at night, leaving little time for sleep. Even while pregnant, she held down jobs, laboring at call centers, warehouses, factories, and airports. Continuing her education was also work, although in need of the paychecks that come with employment, Shaina decided to quit her pattern of working in low wage jobs, to focus instead on her education and her children. She delineates how and why she made this choice:

It just wasn’t going to work. So, something had to give...so knowing what it is I needed to do, and wanted to do, and learning that I had a daughter, I know how I was growing up, and what I wanted to do and some of the things my mom did, so a lot of stuff had to change. So, [my] job had to go...my mom was also a big help. And, my mom moved in with me when I was pregnant with my daughter. She moved in with me to help me and stuff, but that’s when I stopped working. I stopped working and committed to school full-time when I was pregnant with my daughter...

Shaina’s mother’s assistance with childcare reveals another aspect of motherwork I refer to as *intergenerational motherwork*. I define intergenerational motherwork as the pattern by which grandmothers help raise their grandchildren, provide parenting advice to their daughters/sons, aid with household tasks, and take on a large share of the financial obligations. Although Elaine Bell Kaplan’s (1997) study on Black teenage mothers uncovers

how not all grandmothers assume this form of motherwork to be their responsibility, many do share child rearing responsibilities with their daughters, especially when there is no father figure present. In describing her experience with intergenerational motherwork, Shaina attributes the support of her mother as being instrumental to her ability to treat her schooling pursuits as work, granting her some time to balance her own implementation of motherwork. Fusing personal drive with familial support, Shaina not only graduated with her bachelor's degree at her dream university, but she is currently enrolled in a graduate program in public health from which she is expected to graduate next year.

Grace is an immigrant from Ethiopia, who migrated to the U.S. as an adult with her Caribbean husband. She grew up in Ethiopia with a family that strongly valued education, particularly her dad who encouraged her and her siblings to pursue college despite his own lack of formal education. She attended a university in Ethiopia, getting a degree in business administration. She later worked as a sales person, marketing books for a publishing company and later sold cars for well-known automobile manufacturers. Although she viewed this as a relatively good job that made possible a good lifestyle, especially in light of the limited job opportunities for women in Ethiopia, Grace moved to the United States in search of a better life, for better job and educational opportunities.

When she arrived in the U.S., however, she quickly learned that her educational credentials did not transfer over, forcing her to be de-skilled, to work as a cashier on the weekdays and as a caregiver on the weekends. While balancing her marriage and her two jobs, Grace got pregnant with her first son. She recognized that she could not balance these jobs and mothering long term. Grace quit her job as a caregiver and decided to go to trade school in the U.S., keeping her job as a cashier until she graduated and could gain

employment as a surgical technician. She explains how motherhood fueled her determination to balance work and school:

I decided...before Obama leaves his office, I need to go to school. So, I went to school as a surgical tech...So for 18 months. Then I graduated...And then, in California, to get a job as a surgical tech, you have to start at the bottom. It's so hard...But life taught me a lot. Trust me ...back home [in Ethiopia], my character is like a man...Even when I used to work back home, it's like I've been doing like a man's job. And I was independent... that makes me say, 'No, I need to go to school. I need to do for my kids. I need to be an example for my kids.' And still I push my husband. He has education, a diploma, but I want him to go to [more] school.

Grace affirms her determination to continue her education. She strongly believes in self-accountability, constantly identifying perceived American opportunities for higher education and employment as privileges that her peers back home in Ethiopia are not afforded. Most importantly, her commitment to continuing her education is framed as a commitment to her children, thereby elucidating a central aspect of transformative motherwork. For Grace, pursuing schooling and vocational training would not only expand her financial opportunities, but it would also transform the type of mother she imagined she could be for her children. Like Crystal and Shaina, she conceptualizes her ability to advance through realms of higher education as reflective of her ability to be a *good* mother.

For these women, becoming mothers reshape their perception of how education and work inform their view of their own parenting expectations and responsibilities. They feel that becoming educated and increasing employment opportunities for themselves allows them to counter racially gendered stereotypical assumptions about their interconnected roles as mothers and workers. This finding engages with Averil Clarke's (2011) enriching discussion of how Black degreed women struggle with inequalities of love—specifically marriage, sex, and childrearing—compared to their white and Latina counterparts. She argues that their romantic deprivation is not merely a matter of choice, but rather rooted in and perpetuated by

intersectional systems of race, gender, and class discrimination. While some Black women in Clarke's (2011) study may forgo intimacy and family formation in an attempt to disassociate from societal stigmas regarding unwed childrearing, the women performing transformative motherwork in my study actively pursue higher education to counteract and complicate these stereotypes regardless of their marital/relationship statuses. In addition to the plethora of reasons Clarke (2011) identifies for why Black women pursue higher education, becoming a mother can be seen as another reason for degree attainment among some Black women, particularly those already negotiating stigmatizing labels regarding their marital and/or class statuses.

ii. Adaptive Motherwork

Adaptive motherwork delineates how women stay within their given employment fields but make major alterations to their schedules and/or changes in their job positions after they become mothers. These mothers, whether having great or limited flexibility, adjust their work relationships to accommodate the childcare needs and the school schedules of their children. Among my participants, I identify five women who embodied adaptive motherwork: Tina, Jasmine, Alyssa, Lila, and Sara.

Tina lives in Gardena a suburban enclave that would be considered *hood adjacent*, located near the well-known streets of Normandie and Western that gained notoriety during the 1992 LA rebellion. She has roots in the South, as her parents moved from Louisiana to Los Angeles during the Great Migration, a time period during the Jim Crow era where countless Black families fled to the north and west due to lack of employment opportunities and fear of vigilante and police violence in the south. Tina is the mother of two adult children: a daughter with a bachelor's degree who is currently in graduate school studying to

become a teacher, and a son who has a bachelor's degree from a historically Black college.

Tina has a bachelor's degree in nursing, and currently serves as an educator for the Compton Unified School District as director of a health academy. When asked why she chose the position of an educator specifically, Tina replies:

That job I chose was to be able to see mine off to school...Oh yeah, every decision you make. I could have made far more money in management, I did before I had a kid. But there's 24-hour responsibility when you're running a unit, or you're running a hospital. And this job was 7:45 [a.m.] to 2:45 [p.m.]. All holidays off, and all the same days your kids have off. And I felt like, well I had a teacher one time and she said, "it is very important that you send your kids off positive. It impacts their day." So, I felt like I needed to see them to school. I might not pick them up, but I need to see them to school.

Tina chose working as an educator to align her schedule with her children's educational calendars, an adaptive motherwork act. Mothering also impacted her work at her job where she found a way to extend her motherwork to other parents' children. Along with three other teachers, she founded a school-based organization that mentors underrepresented students in an effort to provide love and encouragement while promoting higher education. She describes the program, saying:

I have this organization called Apache Gems, which is through the extension of the school. It has fifteen girls that we identify, at risk girls but hopeful at risk. We can't take nobody crazy. They either lack familial support, or they lack the academic support to try and get them to that next level. A lot of them ...So, um, some of them didn't know college was an option before. So, it made them know and understand that it is an option and it is possible...Yeah, well it was informal, I mean it was four Black teachers. We all picked five girls; we took them from the ninth grade till the twelfth grade.

Jasmine's role as a mother also shaped her work schedule as a flight attendant. Jasmine is a woman born and raised in New York City, who attained her bachelor's degree in criminal justice and sociology at specialized university in New York, and who later settled down and

raised her children in the city of Inglewood. Her four children are now all adults. She reflects on her intense yet flexible work schedule as a flight attendant. She explains:

Because when I first started flying, I got pregnant, and I was feeling nervous about it. Like, how am I going to do this? Then some of the senior flight attendants told me, “Sweetie, the best thing for you to do is being up all night and do all-nighters...Boston, New York, D.C...That way you will be home with your kids more. It’s going to be hard on you, but you’ll be home.” ...And I tried it, and it worked. To be honest, I’ve done it for most of my career. I’ve been a flight attendant for 26 years, and I would say at least 23 of those years I’ve been flying all-nighter trips.

The advice from the senior flight attendant, who was also a mother, reflects the way in which some mothers establish networks among one another in work spaces. In her job, Jasmine would routinely leave Los Angeles around 10 pm, work as a flight attendant for a five-hour flight, arrive on the east coast at 3 am (pacific standard time given the three-hour time difference), stay on the east coast until 5 pm (PT), work another five-hour flight, and then make it home to LA by 10pm. She would work all-nighters about twice a week, having three-day breaks in between her trips. With this flexibility, not only was she able to adjust her full-time career to fit her desired schedule, but she also managed to provide homecare and home-based learning on her days off for all four of her kids, from birth until they were ready for elementary school. She viewed the drastic changes she made in her work schedule as necessary to ensure that she could accommodate her multi-faceted roles as a mother, a wife, and a worker.

Alyssa’s narrative also reflects adaptive motherwork. She is a woman raised in Inglewood, in a single parent home with her mother and siblings on welfare. She excelled through higher education and started working as lecturer for a CSU after attaining her master’s degree. Alyssa decided to pursue her PhD, get married to her long-time boyfriend and become a mother after being awarded a prestigious fellowship. She was able to move

away from her research campus located two hours from Los Angeles and reside in a two-bedroom apartment with her husband. Although carefully planning how to merge family and career, particularly as a Black woman in academia, Alyssa could not plan for the news that her son has Down's Syndrome. She describes her journey raising her now toddler-aged son, accommodating his medical needs, while struggling to maintain her marriage and advance as a scholar. She recalls:

...I was just so isolated. I was very, very isolated. And I was very isolated from the world of academia period. So, I think during a period of time which was most important for professionalization, like going to conferences and networking, preparing for the market, I wasn't doing any of that because I was focused on parenting and he has special needs ... The first year, in terms of his medical needs, was really the worst. Things have like gotten easier over the years, in that respect...it was really bad, that's why me and my husband separated before he was a year old. It was just really isolating. But, I mean, until I ran out of fellowship money, at least I was able to kind of be home with him, and kind of be home with him and just navigate. And, you know, I wasn't working so I was able to kind of keep things in order, so after I put him down to bed, I was able to write...[But] I just feel like a lot of shit came together at the exact same time to just put me in a really difficult position, between the complications in my own life, as well as the complications in my department. And it really sabotaged me, I feel like, in terms of career. You know? So, sometimes I'm like, dang, was this the right thing to do when I did it...

Because Alyssa had to adjust her graduate work, so she could cater to the cost of her son's medical needs, while also dealing with a deteriorating marriage, Alyssa could not rely on her fellowship money like most awarded graduate students. Instead, after she became a mother, she struggled to balance teaching an intense course load as a lecturer, completing her PhD requirements, and changing day care centers to find a sufficiently safe and supportive educational space for her son with special needs. As a result, her relationship with academia changed from an exploration of intersectional research on Black women to a meager means to pay her bills. She currently works as adjunct professor – an overworked and underpaid academic category –while sending her son to a local day care center that can accommodate

his special needs, though it still fails to provide an educational learning space that she can feel completely comfortable with.

Lila also negotiated her relationship with work to meet her interconnected obligations of work and family, despite having limited room for job flexibility. She discussed raising her two now adult sons initially with the support of her husband and eventually all by herself. As an Ethiopian immigrant displaced from her homeland as a child, Lila attended and completed middle school and high school in the United States, and quickly entered the workforce. She settled on a part-time job as a waitress in the San Fernando Valley, but when she became pregnant with her eldest son, she quit her job to stay home with him for the first three years of his life relying on the financial support of her then-husband. For Lila, being present for her child's early years was fundamental to her conceptions of mothering, drawing parallels to her own mother who stayed home to raise eight children before passing away young. Lila's work as a waitress allowed her the limited flexibility to work around her mothering obligations, especially after her divorce. No longer having her ex-husband's financial support, Lila realized working part-time as a waitress would not only allow her to prioritize her children's needs, but it would also grant her government assistance. Her pay appeared low enough to receive aid yet was still higher than the minimum wage, especially because she could supplement her income with tips that she did not report. She describes this strategy:

When you make over [a certain amount], they don't help you. If I wasn't working, they don't give me nothing but like 600 hundred dollars a month. What am I going to do with that? And food stamps... That's why I stayed in waitressing. If got a minimum wage job, I would not have anything for my boys. Even that, the government will help you...So I stayed in [a] waitressing job working part time, and I have time for my kids because I believe in family time...I can't just leave them, and work, work, work. I have two, three jobs and still I managed to be home every night for them.

Sara is an Ethiopian immigrant balancing part-time work with the demands of mothering. She migrated to Inglewood as an adult with her husband and twin babies in search of job and educational opportunities. She discovered that her business degree from the university in Ethiopia would not help her attain a high paying job in a field related to her expertise. Instead, Sara could only find part-time employment as a cashier, an occupation she is currently employed in while struggling to get enough hours to make sufficient money to take care of her five-year-old kids with limited help from her husband. Nonetheless, Sara prioritizes mothering over work, refusing to take hours at work that conflict with her children's educational schedule. Instead, she receives government assistance plus some financial support from her husband that combined give her the bare minimum for survival. Articulating her frustration, she says:

My hours, I am not too happy with my hours because it's too low. Uh, the expenses of living in California are too high, and what I am getting now is too low. It's because I have to watch my kids. I cannot leave them anywhere else. So, I have to take lower hours. It's difficult now because...I have to pick them up at 4 pm, and we go home, sometimes we have to wait for the bus. We spend some time waiting. Maybe like twenty minutes. Sometimes we have to walk. When we walk, it's like thirty minutes. So, when we come home, they are tired and I am tired, and they have to be ate, and take some time, and I'm tired too, and I have to cook, so I usually don't have time to make them study or make them read. That's difficult.

iii. Integrative Motherwork

Integrative motherwork refers to women who make little to no changes in their work trajectories after becoming mothers. These mothers may make minor adjustments to their hours, but essentially, they maintain their pre-motherhood relationship to work. The mothers that I identify as performing integrative motherwork are Hailey and Brittney.

Hailey is a married mother, raising her toddler son in Covina, (located on the outskirts of LA county). With her master's degree in social work, she gained employment as a

psychiatric social worker for L.A. county. She eventually got licensed and moved her way up into the realms of administration. She is currently employed in a supervisory position where she manages two county wide programs that cater to the needs of families, including their mental health. In that job, she trains staff, works with partner agencies, and devises new policies and procedures with other leaders in administration. In addition to the high level of responsibility at her job, Hailey also commutes about 4 hours a day during primetime traffic hours getting to and from home, work, and her son's school. She describes this process, conveying:

I literally have to leave at like 4:30 [am] to get to work by 6:30 [am]...And after that, I pick him up from school, and then we get home. Sometimes we get home at like 6:45 [pm]...the latest like 7 [pm]. And then when we get home, it's like, you know, getting him something to eat. Getting him fed, getting myself fed. And then, you know, trying to get him a little time to play. You know I play with him. And then time for bath. And then after bath, getting him ready for bed is a whole process. And then maybe [my husband] will get home anywhere from 9 to 10 [pm]. And when we get home, I'm usually about to fall out...and then, [my husband] will put him to bed. And then we start the process all over again, Monday through Friday.

Attempting to balance a demanding career, an intense commute, and her toddler, Hailey expressed feelings of overwhelming tiredness. Though her lifestyle clearly demonstrates an integrative motherwork model, she shared a curiosity for performing adaptive motherwork in the future, perhaps changing her position in her field by working in school settings to match her schedules with her child's education. This, however, seemed like a financial sacrifice she felt her upper, middle-class lifestyle in L.A. County could not afford. When asked how she balances these tough terrains of work and family, she replied:

You just do your best to get through the day. That's literally what I'm trying to do right now. I haven't figured it out, I haven't honestly figured it out. I see myself dragging, I see myself always tired, and then you know with my Dad [passing away this year] ...you have just life factors on top of that. I mean, I'm not

balancing it out good right now, I already know that. But I think it's important to recognize that...

Brittney also has a rigorous job schedule, working graveyard shifts as a pharmacist while raising two girls, ages one and eleven. She is originally from New York, received her graduate degree in pharmacy, and moved to Culver City for employment. Her daughters have two different fathers, with the father of the eldest daughter playing a minimal role in co-parenting, and the father to her recent baby providing parental support to both girls and partner support to Brittney. Her job as a pharmacist requires her to work for five days, and then grants her five days off. Given her flexibility in work scheduling, Brittney was able to integrate her mothering expectations with her preexisting work obligations. She describes:

Well I work graveyards, which is tough. But you know the shift is a 9:30 [pm] shift. I talked to my GM, and he's allowed me to do a 10pm start. So, I'm the last pharmacist to leave...because my daughter, her track and stuff, sometimes I'm taking her to track practice...and I did pick up another job, so in between sometimes I'll do double shifts. So, I'll be tired. So, from 8-9:30 [pm], that will be an hour and a half where I could sleep before I go to the graveyard shift. So that's why I come at 10. So that way, when I wake up at 9:30, I get myself ready real quick, you know, because those thirty minutes made a difference in my life, and they continue to. So now, with the younger, sometimes I'm walking out, and she starts crying, I have to change her diaper, or anything like that. You know, her father can do it, sometimes she'll cry for me. So, I'll try to console her before I walk out...A lot of the time this is happening when I have to leave. So, that's the thing. A lot of people that see me at work or whatever, think, how am I going to do a graveyard shift with a young kid?

Despite the intensity of her workload and wishing she could be home to tuck in her daughters at bedtime, she expresses joy that she is able to attend her eldest daughter's daytime activities.

But balancing, it's hard because what I have to do is –something has to give. What I have to sacrifice is my sleep, in order to make a lot of things work. So, I just make sure she does a lot of extra-curricular activities. Like the ones that she had to do, it would have to be the ones on campus where she doesn't have to get picked up or dropped off. So, what I would do is the cooking class, the science class, and the chess class right after school, and she would have to just walk

across to another room. Just so she can get some extra stuff going on. If it was anything where I have to pick her up, it would be hard for me because I'm using that time to sleep...in order to function at night. (*She laughs*). It's tough.

B. Mothers Navigating Educational Spaces

All of the mothers in my study value and prioritize education, particularly educational prosperity for their children, despite their varying levels of education, performances with motherwork, and stages in their mothering trajectories.

i. Early Childhood Education

When women get pregnant, many have to instantly negotiate their terms of maternity leave (if they can even do so) and think critically about when they will go back to work, and where to subsequently place their child. In discussing mothers' navigation of early childhood educational spaces, it is imperative to first think about their negotiations with childcare. Many day care centers and Montessori schools will accept babies in their infancy stages. Considering that parents often want their developing babies to have constant access to stimulating learning activities and materials, we must start conceptualizing and complicating the different types of early childcare environments as educational spaces. The mothers in this study reveal diverse experiences with finding education-based childcare.

Some mothers were able to turn their homes into early childhood educational spaces. For instance, Jasmine's ability to work all-nighters as a flight attendant and subsequently get full days off, granted her the ability to provide home-based learning for all four of her children until each of them turned five. Like Shaina, she understood herself as being the first educator her child encounters and thus foundational to their future success. She discusses how she viewed her home as a schooling space, structuring time for curriculum, arts, play, and even fieldtrips. She details:

Oh, it was very important. Um, because I wanted them to be able to know how to read, you know, to know how to write. I was focused on that the majority of the time. And always, I would read to them at night...I always took them to the library. I would always go to the library. That was our little thing. And it was almost like an everyday thing. We would go to the library, we would have a little snack with us, we would sit and take the books out. We had this library box at home, and they would put all their little library books in it. I loved that. Library books.

Alyssa was also able initially to turn her home into a learning space; however, her understanding was complicated by the reality that her son has special needs. She felt rejected by advanced day care centers that were not inclusive enough to accommodate her son's needs, disappointed with the unstructured spaces in the available centers, or flabbergasted by the high prices of well-regarded Montessori schools. Alyssa decided to employ her own sister as her son's educator, tailoring the environment to both his learning and medical needs. This was a temporary solution, but it afforded Alyssa some time to eventually find a local LAUSD preschool that is inclusive to children with special needs. Nonetheless, she expresses frustration because she has to send him to an afterschool day care center, where little educational learning is fostered. She explains:

In terms of early childhood education, I have a lot of thoughts because my son has special needs. And I have not been able to find an educational space that really works for him, He is a preschool program now at an LAUSD public school, which is actually our [local] school. Which I'm really happy about that... I didn't think that I would find that. You know, but, it's preschool...we will see as he gets older, whether the school is going to continue to work for him. But in terms of finding day cares, when I was looking for somewhere for him before he got the age where he can go to the school, it was just very difficult because there's not enough affordable, inclusive options. You know...Right now, he's going to an in-home day care, after school. And it's not very professional. They watch TV all the time. But...he's there because I feel like at least his physical needs, like he's being diapered, you know, like all of that is being taken care of. It's just these little old ladies, you know. They're watching him, but they're not teaching them...They just turn on the TV...

Other mothers also express their frustration with finding affordable, education-based spaces to send their child while they are working. Sara recalls how powerless she felt when

she went to pick up her twins from a day care center run by an older woman unable to keep up with all the children she was watching –and discovered that her son had a busted and swollen lip. When she inquired about his injury, the care provider simply told her that she didn't see anything. Though frustrated, Sara's financial limitations forced her to keep sending her children to that center until her children were of sufficient age to matriculate into a government subsidized preschool and kindergarten nearby.

Grace had similar frustrations with her limited options for child care, stating:

Actually, trust me, I didn't like it. It's in the house, it's a bunch of kids...like she has five or six kids. But I have no choice but to put him there because first, I have to get up at like 4 am to go to clinic, because it's in Tarzana. So, I have to leave from home, it's 4:30 [am]. So this is the only place [that's] open. She takes the kids. That's why I have no choice. It's like just to be with the kids around all day. Just the caregiver, just the house. If you say, do I like it or not, I have no choice. I didn't like it, but I have no choice.

Although acknowledging the difficulties of finding early childhood educational spaces, some mothers express positive experiences with their available learning spaces. Brittney discusses how the day care center in Inglewood to which she sent her daughter shattered the projected stigma of schools in Inglewood. Although she was told by her peers that all schools in Inglewood are too “hood” and “ghetto,” Brittney was pleasantly surprised to see her toddler actively learning, even mentioning a spelling bee the staff put together. Hailey also had positive experiences with early childhood education, having the financial means to send her son to a Montessori school. Nonetheless, she describes a concentrated process of finding a safe place for her child that she could feel comfortable with, especially given her demanding job and the fact that her son would have to spend anywhere from seven to ten hours a day, Monday through Friday, in this educational space. She details her process, declaring:

I looked at Montessori schools and to see what they were about. So just figuring out the different types of childcare. And with that, looking at the cost. I literally visited like fourteen schools. Yeah it was crazy... The place he goes to now, well he's been going there, they have cameras in the room. If you go through the front office, it shows all the locations. So that's what I wanted. Safety. I also wanted him to learn. I didn't want it to just be to play. I wanted it to be where it's a learning environment, like a school environment... it's literally like you have a curriculum. He learns a lot of stuff. You know they even give us homework for him. Also, too, the types of activity were a combination of things... They were learning arts and crafts, music, and things like that... and another thing that it was clean. It needed to be clean. When we walked in, they were cleaning. ... And then also too... I felt comfortable with the staff... energy wise...

ii. *K-12 Education*

Navigating public education in Los Angeles remains a difficult task for most families, requiring meticulous strategizing of picking the best school within one's district attendance zone. This becomes particularly tricky since funding for public schools is partially based on local funding, derived from property taxes. Some mothers are fortunate to live in neighborhoods where homes have a high property value, and thus they feel comfortable sending their children to the local school. For instance, Brittney resides in Culver City, which is well known for having diverse schools that have high ratings based on student test scores and thus are well funded and college oriented. She describes her process choosing the best local school in Culver City, with racial demographics being a deciding factor, saying:

Yes, so then she went to elementary school in Culver City. I chose that because it was more diverse. Now they do have one closer. I looked up their scores, they have the best scores, but the demographics, 99 percent Caucasian. For me, I wasn't comfortable with that. You know, I wanted her to not be the token. So, I wanted to find something that had a mixture. You know, a mixture of white, black, and Latino... It is a struggle, but I don't want that to be the focus. Especially if she sticks out, like there's twenty kids, and she's the only black kid, you are going to notice her... but if it's 10 of each, you know 10 black, 10 white, she's just going to be blended in. I would rather that.

On the other hand, Crystal express frustration with sending her children to the schools in her racially mixed neighborhood in Los Angeles. Although she lives in an area that has homes

with high property values, she expressed concerns because the city's busing program allows children who live outside of the neighborhood to attend, coming from areas like Compton, Watts, and South Central. As a result, many of the white families that live in the neighborhood choose not to send their kids to the local schools, particularly the local middle and high school. Unfortunately, many students getting bused in come from schools with even less funding and educational support, and rather than giving more funding to underperforming schools to help level the playing field, funding is reduced at schools that do not meet certain students' test performance standards, which further perpetuates the problem. This causes many families to look for alternative ways to get their children into higher performing and better funded schools. The most common way is using someone else's address to get into a school outside of your neighborhood. Crystal was curious yet fearful of this alternative, noting:

So, it's challenging because my friend lives in Culver City, and his son is still in elementary. So, I was going to use his address, like yo, I want him to go to Culver. So as soon as I called the school and said he has to live with his uncle. [They said] "He has to live with you!" And reading their policies, they do checks at the houses to make sure you really live there. So, I thought about that Black lady who was homeless. Remember, she had her car parked across the school. And she used their address because she's homeless, and they charged her, and she went to jail.

In response to the underfunding and overcrowding in public education, many parents have chosen to send their children to public charter schools, which do not have to follow strict district requirements, and instead abide by their own charters and receive funding based on enrollment. While controversial, the rise in charter schools, particularly in underserved neighborhoods, has granted many children living in marginalized communities access to quality education. Shaina speaks highly of the Knowledge is Power Program, a network of tuition-free public charter schools that prioritize pre-k through 12 education in a manner that

challenges racialized tracking by attempting to provide equal education for all their students. Shaina was elated to discover a KIPP school near her, finally finding a learning space she could trust to properly educate her child, particularly after her own school work intensified and she was no longer able to provide a space for active learning at home for her son. She compliments the schooling environment, explaining:

And um, KIPP, out of all the schools that I looked into, KIP was the one I chose and went to because they seemed to be the only one who kind of matched what I was doing with mine. And that, plus the relationships that I've built with the teachers, school officials, and whatnot, and they made me comfortable enough to leave him there and know that it was okay, because I needed to stop what I was doing at home so I could finish schooling, and know that, he will still be okay. Yes, as much as they needed to. They knew my situation. Because you start with them, um, almost a year before your scholar even starts. That's what they call them. They don't call them kids or children, they call them scholars. So, they were very supportive, they were like a family. Sometimes I didn't get to that school, Nia, until like 5:30 [pm]...but he was okay. He had his homework done, they were very supportive. It was like his teachers were all at my graduation, yeah it was very supportive.

Lila also was able to find a high performing school for her sons to attend. Although they attended regular public schools for elementary and middle school, she strategically moved across the street from one of the highest performing charter high schools in the San Fernando Valley. Raising Black sons in L.A, County, Lila wanted to ensure that they were in a school environment that promoted rigor, discipline, safety, and college prep.

Despite the growing number of public charter schools, some parents would still rather pay tuition to send their children to private school for their K-12 education. Many of the mothers described how they sent their children to private preschool and kindergarten before sending them to elementary schools. Some could easily afford it, others scrapped up whatever money they could, and others found need-based scholarships to help. Jasmine was the only mother of my participants who sent all of her children to private school for elementary, middle, and high school. Only reporting her income (excluding her husband's),

she was able to apply for her four children to each receive partial need-based scholarships to attend a high performing, elite private school on the Westside of L.A., an area well regarded for its beautiful beaches and expensive homes. Although sending four children through private schooling in Los Angeles on two middle class salaries was a challenge, Jasmine felt it was crucial to send her children to private school to maximize their access to quality education and increase their chances of excelling through college. In describing the private school, she articulates:

I saw the quality of education had rose so high...the kids, two of them had this English teacher, who was so phenomenal, a Black lady...And she taught them how to write. And these kids, by the time they got to college, they were writing stuff where the professors in their colleges were saying, "Wow, this is fantastic!" ...It's the quality of the education. And also, one thing, the way this school, in particular, the way they make them think outside of the box. They were very socially aware, social justice. And they would go on marches...and all the kids go to college. Unless they choose not to. A lot of them go into entertainment and they don't want to go to college. But otherwise, everyone in that school...it's a fantastic school. All the kids go to college, all different types of colleges studying every kind of thing. And it's a great school. I'm grateful that they went there, and I'm grateful for the experiences. I think it was a good choice. My sister in Dallas thought I was nuts. "Why you paying all that money to go to school. You could have a house. You could buy a house. Move to Dallas, and you could buy a house." I'm like, "No, I'm okay. I want to do this. This is important to me."

Regardless of the type of schooling the mothers sent their children to, all of the mothers navigating K-12 education conveyed having a strong commitment to being actively involved in their child's education, illustrating yet again how education is central to motherwork. However, their education levels coupled with their time availabilities impacted the way these mothers conceptualized their involvement. Some parents like Shaina, Brittney, Lila, and Jasmine focus more on ensuring their kids were involved in extracurricular activities, often finding the programs themselves, to promote well rounded and college bound children, and assisting them with schoolwork whenever they can. Other parents like Crystal

and Tina feel especially accountable for their child's learning, and so they strive passionately and aggressively for their child's success instead of leaving the responsibility to the child or educational space. Tina reminisces on one of the many times she actively participated in her child's school work, asserting:

And you know you gotta excel from day one. Like day one. Like I remember one time [my daughter] got in the car, and I'm like, "What did you get on the project?" And she says, "I got a 98." And I was like, we stayed up all night long on that, we spent X amount of dollars at Michaels on that mission, what do you mean we got a 98? ...and it was always we. It was not her...She was like, "Mom, I don't know what happened." [*Slaps hands*]. Oh well, I'll be there in the morning because I want to know what 100 looks like. Every time we had a science project, and if we didn't get the 100, I wanted to know what the 100 looks like. Show me the 100.

iii. Motherwork as an Educational Tool

All of the participants understand teaching their children life lessons as responsibility of motherwork. Given the sociohistorical context of policing Black bodies, even the bodies of Black children, I was specifically curious how the mothers in my study taught or planned to teach their children to interact with police, especially in the context of Los Angeles where police brutality was so unbearable it led to the Watts Insurrection in 1965, and later the LA Rebellion in 1992.

First, I noticed that gender impacts the way in which mothers prioritize the conversation of police brutality, despite them all having a fundamental understanding of race relations with police today. For instance, Brittney mentions that she told her eleven-year-old daughter to call the police if anyone tries to kidnap her, likely drawing inspiration from the fear instilled in the public by the news and media sources. Mothers with Black sons emphasize that they constantly tell their children to be extra cautious around police. They feel they need to teach them how to survive, reminding them that getting pulled over or searched by a cop is not the appropriate time to resist. Crystal discusses how she constantly

tells her son to be mindful of his appearance (not to drive with a hoodie on) and his movements (never making too swift of a movement around a cop). She expresses her discomfort with having this conversation with her son, highlighting both city and school police:

But even with hands up don't shoot, they still shooting. So, you have to use your common sense. "No, sir. Yes, sir. No sudden movements. Let them know when you are..." And it's so uncomfortable to have this conversation like with my 20-year-old. And telling you how not to get killed by the people who are supposed to protect and serve... And at school, they do that frisk. If someone accuses you of something, they can say, "Yo, come into the Dean's office. We have to search you." I'm like, "No! What about your civil rights? No! If that happens, you call me. You call us. Tell them, 'let me call my parents.' And you put us on the phone." And it's like, you're preparing them for these institutions, like jail. You have this authoritative figure who can just say, "Hey, I can search you." And he can't contest it because he's a minor? Because you're an adult? The power shift. And then the manipulation that adults use, the tactics... It's disheartening.

Lila's conversations with her sons show similar fears for their safety. She feels she has to teach her boys the realities of being both Black and men, and the implications that had on not only how police perceive them, but how the greater society will. She recalls:

Having two Black boys in Los Angeles, I was scared... because I always tell them, "You are a Black male. Always, down the road, it can get tough on you. So, if you get stopped by the cops, just do everything that you are supposed to do. Don't take it personally, even though I believe it is sometimes." So I was worried. Even to this day, I'm worried... I just tell them..." You have to go to school, you have to do this. You always have to be ten times bigger than what society wants you to be because of your color and because you're a male."

Shaina, given her critical consciousness developed from continually living in the projects merged with her interest in social justice, understands that neither gender nor age will prevent a Black child from getting harmed. She emphasizes the importance of teaching her children, her nephews, and her nieces the realities of navigating this world as a Black person. She communicates that they need to be aware yet respectful, negotiating the balance between dignity and survival.

... honestly, you're never too young to learn. And I have a nephew, as young as five, and I'm also talking to him about his interaction with the police. My main thing that I try to teach them, is yes be very aware, aware of what's going on, and take those stories into consideration when dealing with them, but also to not fear [police]. Don't feel like you have superpowers or that you're superhuman...don't be very resistant, be very respectful, and not just because they're police, but because they are human and they have a job to do. But at the same time, teaching them that [the police's] way of doing things is not always right. And it just may not be the right time or the right place, we don't want to be, you know, the next topic on the news... And it's tough too because my son, he's a twelve-year-old, so he's up in age... I try to engage with him in a way that he will understand and will correlate what I'm saying with real life. So right now, he's really, really into reading... The book that he's reading currently, I believe it's called, Ghost boy. It's about a twelve-year old little boy who got shot playing with a toy gun, and his Ghost and spirit is speaking to Emmet Till.

While most of the mothers acknowledge the impacts of race and gender with policing, Alyssa speaks specifically about her fears raising a Black son with special needs. Although her son is still a toddler, she expresses her deep worry for how his interconnected identity will impact not only the police's perception of him, but also his ability to understand the situation and act accordingly. She stresses her fear for not being able to teach him how to assess an already complicated situation. She delineates:

And there's also been a lot of talk about, you know, race and policing. Maybe not enough attention to things like mental health and disability and policing. You know? A lot of people with disabilities have been disproportionately killed because of mental health challenges, because of that lapse in communication with law enforcement, and the escalation when people don't do exactly as they're told or they're confused by what they're being told. I think about it a lot. I don't know yet. You know? I mean, I know I'll tell him to be careful, I know I'll tell him, you know, do everything that they tell you to do, and don't move quickly... he definitely won't have any toy guns.

Furthermore, the mothers in my study feel accountable for teaching their children lessons the classroom never seem to emphasize. The experience-based knowledge they pass down to their children illustrates how teaching is a fundamental aspect of motherwork; thus, motherwork is an educational tool. They feel responsible to have "the talk" with their kids,

the talk on how to endure in a country founded on anti-blackness, a talk Black parents are simply tired of having.

C. Meanings of Motherwork

All of the women understand motherhood as a sacrifice and responsibility, yet a rewarding source of inspiration –although having a nuanced perspective informed by individual experiences with motherwork. Below, I provide quotes from my participants when asked the final interview question: What does being a mother mean to you? The pathos evoked from the vulnerable and passionate words expressed from these mothers speaks volumes to the powerful ways mothers conceptualize their social roles and lived realities. The ways in which they perform their roles as mothers remain inextricably linked to their realities navigating between home, work and educational spaces. Thus, these responses elucidate the ways in which the mothers in this study construct meanings around the concept of motherwork.

Meanings of Motherwork Chart

Participant Name	Response
Crystal	<p>“The first thing in my mind is a whole lot of fuckin responsibility that I have. That sometimes, I don’t want. Being a mother, what it means to me, is that sometimes I’m going to be overwhelmed. That I can’t choose me sometimes...that, I’m here not to make my children who I want them to be, I’m here to help shape and guide them to be their best selves. Being a mother means that I don’t get to live vicariously through them...I’m here to teach them to be the best people that they can be. And that, being a mother means that I get to teach them that you are in charge of your life, and what you do now is going to shape the type of life that you’re going to have... motherhood is responsibility. Sometimes, too much responsibility. Sometimes overwhelming responsibility. Sometimes it’s shit I don’t fuckin’ want to do... It’s sacrifice...But sacrifice in a way that I still have to preserve and reserve some of me for me because God put y’all in my life...I am a mother, but I’m still [me].... Because when I die, my casket don’t have no damn bunk bed. It’s just me”</p>

Shaina	“Oh, that’s a good one. So many things, literally, oh I wish you could see what’s inside my head...It means love without conditions and ultimate sacrifice.”
Grace	“Mother means to me, happy mother... how do I say that. It’s very careful. Like, being careful with anyone...as a mother, your heart, you’re very emotional... And, you have more responsibility....I don’t have to think about myself anymore. That’s it. Now you think about your kid. Everything is for your kids... [in America], as a mother, you do everything! ...That’s why they say, ‘Happy Mother’s Day.’ And it’s a big thing.”
Tina	“You know the other day, somebody said, ‘If you had your choice, would you be a mother or a wife?’ A mother always. There are some women, a wife is more important to them.”
Jasmine	“Me, personally, when I was younger...I never fantasized about having babies and stuff. I never did. So, when I finally became pregnant with the first one, it was such a blessing. Like, what a gift? It is a gift. ...That’s what being to mother means to be: it’s a blessing. An absolute blessing. It’s made me grow in ways I never could have imagined.”
Lila	“Oh my God, the whole world. (she chuckles). I don’t know if you heard of this. ‘Anyone can be a mom, but it takes a real woman to be a mommy.’ So, you got to make sure –I don’t care how much big house, little house you have. House is just house. A woman should make her house home all the time... when you become a mother, naturally too, you should just do what you’re supposed to do, which is be home, be there for your family, be there for your kids, especially your kids. Being a mother –I’m not going to say it’s easy because it’s not an easy job. It’s one of the hardest jobs. But, at the end of the day, it’s the most beautiful thing in life. It’s just no money can buy that.”
Sara	“A mother, like, my kids are like...I usually tell them. That’s my life. Sometimes it’s a big responsibility, like you are making some kind of life, you’re making a citizen, that’s on you. The school and the community might contribute something, but mostly what they become depends on you. What you give them, what you tell them, what they watch you doing, everything. So, it’s a responsibility, mostly, it’s like...they are my life. I don’t know. I usually think it’s a God given chance for me to live and to strive. That’s how I see it.”

Hailey	<p>“That’s a good one... I think thoughtful responsibility. Meaning...understanding the significance of your role as a parent. Because you become everything. You become the teacher, the disciplinary...You become the comic relief, right? The nurse, the doctor when they’re not feeling good. The friend, right? ...the comforter, basically, right? So, I guess being a mom means ...understanding the critical role you play in your child’s life. Because if you understand how important you are for your child, I think you have no choice but to do what needs to be done. You know what I mean? You figure it out. Whether you’re tired, or whatever the case may be, knowing that the significant role you play, you do whatever it takes. You make sure they get the education you need. You do your best to teach them, to have them learn...it’s just understanding how vital your role is...It’s a blessing, it’s a joy. So, understanding that the importance of that, because if you don’t, you’re not going to act accordingly. You’re not gonna’ figure out ways to invest in your child, and honestly you’re not going to ways to invest in yourself.”</p>
Brittney	<p>“It means happiness. Enjoyment. Exploration. Conquering. Nurturing. You know, carefree, about the things that can be fixed, like writing on the wall. ‘Okay, we will paint over it.’ ...I let them be who they are, of course without them damaging other people or harming other people. For me, if it was up to me, I’d have like six or seven kids. But you know that costs! ...time and money.”</p>
Alyssa	<p>“I mean it means everything... I always knew I wanted to be a mother. It means everything, you know. I mean, it’s been really tough and sometimes I do regret the timing...But, I don’t regret it, and I don’t regret having him! And there were people who said that I shouldn’t have had him, you know, once we found out about his diagnosis. But, he’s the best thing in the world. You know, he’s the most important thing in my life. I feel like he’s like an angel on earth. Like when we interact with people, his smile and his hugs, I think he’s already—he’s only three—I think he’s already changed lives. I think he’s already saved lives. And I am the means by which this exists... So, I love being a mother, and I wouldn’t take it back for anything. And motherhood has been my road back to myself...”</p>

V. DISCUSSION

Black mothers have continuously battled discrimination at the hands of racial capitalism and dehumanization from stereotypical labels that have shaped social science research, public policy, and the American imagination. Dominant ideologies rooted in anti-blackness have demonized Black mothers, ignoring the social structures that have consistently exploited their reproductive and physical labor while profiting from punishing their bodies and their children. Although Black mothers have historically battled the intersections of institutionalized racism and sexism, they have remained the backbone of Black families and communities by demonstrating their remarkable capabilities in balancing and intertwining their roles as mothers and workers. Building from activist scholarship, this study utilizes a Black feminist framework to analyze how Black mothers in Los Angeles perform motherwork while navigating their children's trajectories through educational institutions. It challenges unfounded notions of pathological Black families that supposedly do not value education. Not only do the mothers in this study prioritize the education of their children, many of them also understand the practical importance of education in their own lives.

This study categorizes and examines three distinctive performances of motherwork: transformative, adaptive, and integrative. Transformative motherwork describes when women drastically change their work trajectories by pursuing higher education after they became mothers. Adaptive motherwork illustrates how women stay within their respective employment sectors but make major alterations to their schedules or job positions after becoming mothers. Integrative motherwork conveys when women continue their pre-motherhood relationship with work, making little to no changes in their work trajectories after they became mothers. These concepts help provide an understanding of how becoming

a mother impacts the ways in which some Black mothers engage their relationships with work, thus elucidating how they make meaning of their time spent crossing between and through these public and private realms. I also engage with a concept I define as intergenerational motherwork, which refers to grandmothers actively helping their daughters/sons (particularly those balancing work and/or school) with childrearing responsibilities.

By placing education in conversation with family and employment, I argue that navigating educational spaces is a fundamental component of motherwork. Even during pregnancy, mothers have to plan their timeline with work, and thus find a resource for childcare. The mothers in my study, however, discuss that they do not merely want a space to supervise their kids, but they also want a learning-based environment for their infants and toddlers while they are at work. While some may have access to Montessori schools and learning-based day care centers, others express how they struggled to find a place they can feel comfortable with and afford. When discussing K through 12 education, the mothers in my study all view their involvement in their child's schooling as a critical component to their conception of motherwork. They all portray involvement as being responsible for making sure their child attends the best available and accessible school, getting their children to and from school, and encouraging and supporting the educational endeavors of their children unapologetically. Many mothers describe feeling overwhelmed with accommodating the demands of their jobs and the educational needs of their children. The mothers in this study also explain that their enactment of motherwork includes being teachers to their children. They understand that motherwork included teaching their children life lessons on how to

matriculate into adulthood, preparing them for the realities of anti-blackness while instilling them with the hope of change and justice.

Although the experiences of balancing work, family, and education faced by the mothers of my study are multifaceted and subsequently require complex solutions, their stories reveal ideological and practical steps I believe we can take moving forward. First, we can begin funding organizations that help mothers create community networks amongst one another that assist with locating local educational spaces and other social resources. Motherwork has provided a plethora of Black mothers with lived experiences within sectors of employment and education that can merge into a collective wisdom that can be shared amongst local communities. Next, we can also invest in our public K through 12 education system holistically, including increasing free and affordable school-based extracurricular activities, after-school programs, and college-bound outreach opportunities for students, particularly students of color. Given that many Black mothers regardless of their class statuses described negotiating intense work schedules and their children's school activities, they all would benefit (along with other mothers) if schools were granted government funding to increasingly provide creative and scientific opportunities for their children. Lastly, we should conceptualize early childhood education as an educational right, and thus begin incorporating it into the framework of free public education. It unfair that access to quality learning-based education spaces, like Montessori schools, for infants and toddlers depends on their economic status.

This study is not intended to be representative of the perspectives of all Black mothers within Los Angeles County. The heterogeneity of Black mothers' viewpoints, along with the views of other racialized women, should never be constrained to a box in our

sociological imagination. Instead, it is intended to provide an in-depth, racially gendered analysis of ten Black mothers and their experiences with mothering in Los Angeles. Due to time constraints, I interviewed participants that I could readily contact given my access. This study, as a result, may not have included some Black mothers with intersecting identities of sexuality, documentation status, and ethnic origins. It also may not cover Black mothers in all regions and cities within Los Angeles.

This study, nonetheless, uses a sociohistorical framework to situate the stories of ten mothers whose lived experiences in Los Angeles uncover the intersections of family, work, and education. It validates and expands Black feminist theories and anti-racist scholarship that reframe our conceptions of Black families in an effort to humanize rather than demonize their behaviors (Kaplan 1997; Kelley 1997; Collins 2000; Vargas 2006). It provides examples of Black women who view marriage as a tactical economic challenge rather than a moral imperative. It builds from Clyde Woods' (2010:345) critical remarks of social science research, "The portrait of working-class African Americans and their communities as deviant and pathological is the product of a deviant and pathological strain deeply embedded in American thought. It is a sickness masquerading as science." Not only does it challenge stereotypical assumptions regarding working-class Black families, but it also dialogues with an expanding literature on Black career women's engagement with family and education (Clarke 2011; Barnes 2016). By exploring the diverse ways Black women perform motherwork while navigating learning spaces, this study reveals how Black mothers conceptualize their children's educational development (within and beyond the classroom) as one of the many fruits of their labor

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