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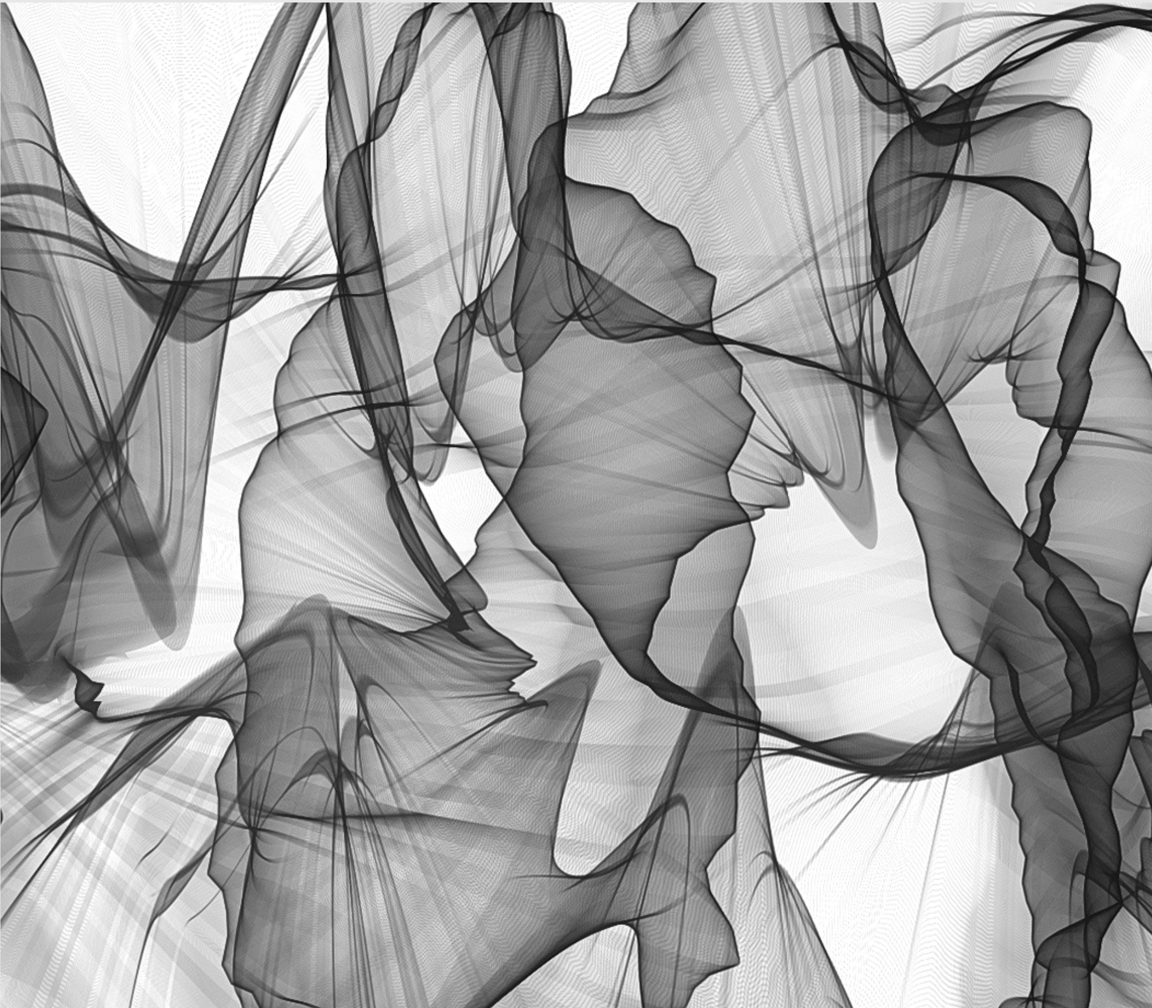

Denise Handlarski, Akanksha Misra, Margarita Levine, Jacqui Getfield, Pooja Bhatia Narang and many more

JACQUI GETFIELD

Black Mothering in the Diaspora: Empowerment in the Caribbean Cradle and Resistance in the Canadian Crucible

Mothering is personal; mothering is cultural; mothering is political. This article explores Black mothering, motherhood, and motherwork within social institutions of health and education. The experiences of Black mothers are the backdrop against which the paper investigates empowered mothers and their negotiations. It posits that the notion of empowered mothering has existed always within Black, African-descended communities. Empowered mothering breeds resistance, and so it has been passed down for generations. In this article which features the ethnocultural impact of race on mothering, I employ the lens of critical race theory and I investigate mothering through Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality concept. Intersecting sites of oppression, such as class and gender, emerge in my analysis of the phenomenon of empowered Black mothering. In this article, I reference the work of scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings, Crenshaw, Erica Beatson, and Delores Mullings as I unpack how empowered Black Caribbean diasporic mothers perform acts of resistance. This article is an extension of a recent presentation delivered at the International Association of Maternal Action and Scholarship (IAMAS) 2021 conference.

"Mumma a ashes betta dan Mumma a grave"
—Jamaican proverb

Proverbs or pithy sayings can be interpreted in many ways and so have many meanings. "Mumma a ashes betta dan Mumma a grave" can be interpreted as a warning that we should appreciate the mother who is at the hearth (fireplace or fireside) cooking, and therefore caring for her family. This mumma (mother) is a nurturer and so is to be appreciated while alive. When she is dead, she cannot care for her family in physical ways, and therefore those left behind cannot share, receive, or reciprocate love and care. Upon passing this life, she

will be a memory. There can be other meanings of this proverb—that the mother (mumma) is useful and is to be cherished even though she lives in poverty and even though she may be old and is no longer as strong or as vibrant. This aging and/or impoverished mother, though "in the ashes," is still a wise guide; she has invaluable lived experiences, and she is therefore to be honoured, loved, and acknowledged while she is alive. So, we should not wait until mumma dies to give her flowers (meaning to compliment her or treat her well). The saying reminds us that the mother who is alive is better than the memory of a deceased mother because once she transitions through the grave, the dead woman is no longer accessible in the same real and material ways to her loved ones who are left behind on earth. I begin with this old, but certainly not trite Jamaican saying, which I am told my maternal grandmother would often repeat to her children throughout their lives.

This article seeks to demonstrate how Black motherhood is constructed and how Black mothering is an act that is defined by how it is passed down within and across cultures. This article explores Black mothering, motherhood, and motherwork within social institutions of health and education. Since anti-Black racism is endemic to the Canadian society and since Black women who mother children are excluded and disregarded routinely in everyday situations, it is purely an academic exercise to try to distinguish or separate Black Caribbean mothers from the larger representation of Black mothers. For this reason, I use the term "Black mothers" to include Black Caribbean mothers in this article and elsewhere. In this article, my personal narrative and my perspectives are fuelled by those of the Black mothers in my recent doctoral research, and I urge consideration of the sociocultural context of empowered African diasporic Caribbean mothering (Getfield, *Prescriptive Partnerships*). By "diasporic," I mean nation-states in which emigrants from the same home country make their new home. Living in the diaspora of one's home country is a result of either voluntary or forced migration. In the diaspora, like elsewhere, there is no one essential story. There are many stories and innumerable counternarratives; there are many cultures that comprise the many Black/African communities across Canada. In this article, I contend that the gendered mother role is influenced by mothering practices, which like our beliefs, attitudes, and values are passed down from generation to generation. As a result, it is my belief that motherwork is highly subjective because it is determined or influenced by each person's diverse historical, social, and cultural practices. And these traditional and cultural practices are tied to our ethnic and racial realities. Yet my mothering and my approach to motherwork differ from the one who mothered me in many ways. As Erica Beatson reminds us: "Motherhood is socio-historically specific and constructed based on the ideals of a given culture and society" (74). My mother raised her children in Jamaica; I am raising my children in Canada. These are two nation-states with

distinct social and cultural realities, prejudices, and economic demands. Even though my own mother and I have experienced mothering and motherwork in two different locations, my life in many ways has reflected my mother's, even though I did not consciously plan my life events to mirror hers. Seemingly, my mother's thoughts, actions, and behaviours have been more a part of me than I had realized or planned. How did this come to be?

I begin by unpacking Beatson's quote above: I note how the concept of social location has influenced both my mother's mothering practices and mine. My maternal grandmother was poor; my maternal grandfather was a local fisherman. My mother's mother was formally undereducated, and she did precarious work when she could find it and when she was not heavily pregnant with her nine children. Not being pregnant was very rare for my grandmother during her twenty-year childbearing period starting in the late 1930s. Whether in the ashes (by the hearth) or in the grave (fully transitioned), I believe that our mothers' lives can inform mothering practices for generations to come. Poverty, and the lessons it teaches, seem to have been the best contraceptive for my own mother, who repeatedly explained her resolve to extricate herself from impoverishment by way of a formal education. Her college diploma led to a profession in teaching. She was immensely proud of her professional accomplishment. During the formative years of my womanhood—around fifteen to twenty years old—it seemed to me that my mother seized every opportunity to share with my (female) cousins and me how her life choices were mobilized by her desire to ensure her children's lives were markedly different from her own. My mother's period of mothering began after she had established herself as a professional teacher. In what was then a colonial society where women were marked by the shade of their skin and demarcated by where their family was positioned in the society; poor, phenotypically Black women in Jamaica had to fight hard and long to become a professional. It was only after attending teachers' college, where she established the foundation of her career, that my mother felt she would no longer be at risk of a future marked by poverty and neglect. With this background, let me state my own social location: After amassing two formal degrees and years of professional experience, I took on the challenges of motherhood. I became an older, mature mother who was deemed to be an at-risk mother by specialist doctors.

Migration stripped me of familial support. I left the warmth of my birth country and all that was familiar (including friends and siblings) when I migrated to Canada. In addition to the challenges of settling into a new country, with new rules and new ways of doing and thinking, I was challenged to figure out what it means to be a good mother in my adopted country. On arrival in my new country, I learned mothering practices that seemed so different and foreign. In Canada, for example, I learned that it was customary

for new mothers to be introduced to the social norms of mothering and related parenting practices in prenatal classes sponsored by community organizations, hospitals, and the government, in discussions at individual and group sessions, and through access to countless books on childbirth and parenting. This seemed to be true, regardless of whether the mothers were immigrants, naturalized citizens, or born in Canada. In Canada, it was not hard to find reading material, since community libraries are numerous: in fact, I surmise they are as plentiful as churches and rum bars (also called drinking establishments) in Jamaica, which are seemingly to be found in every community.

In Canada, however, there is a dearth of information about Black maternal health and the realities that exist for Black women in hospitals, and there is not much data on Black women's relations with health professionals either (Mpinga). For this reason, I am among the Black women who depend on their own mothers, relatives, friends, and community organizations to share experiences with racism. They prepare me for possible encounters with professionals in child services as well as in the healthcare, education, and justice systems. As a first-time mother, I began my mothering journey determined to trust the healthcare system and related institutions. I had no choice. I had too many health issues that seemed to require more sophisticated responses; my health issues confounded my mother and my aunts. Plus, it was extremely important to me that I appear to the medical professionals that I knew how (and was inclined to learn how) to be a good mother. In the eyes of systems fuelled and maintained by white supremacy, it has been my experience that being a good mother results from learning the ways of the dominant culture, but such so-called good mothering does not come naturally to me, and it demands constant practice. I self-identify as a Black mother; in the early days of mothering, I desired all medical professionals with whom I interacted to think of me and treat me as though I were a good Black mother. Little did I know, back then, that there were contradictions inherent to the intersecting social identity of being a good Black mother. I certainly did not know that my positionality automatically disqualified me in the eyes of the more powerful other. Being low-income, formally educated at the tertiary level, Black, and single, I did not realize that under patriarchal motherhood, I should not even have dared to hope to be considered a good mother. In my ignorance, I did not know how futile these aspirations were in a country that espouses and privileges middle-class White values, behaviours, and attitudes as well as promotes stereotypes and myths about Black women.

In this article, I engage with Andrea O'Reilly's concept of "empowered mothering" as explicated in Beatson's article that focuses on Black Caribbean diasporic (m)othering under patriarchal motherhood. Mothering, according to Beatson, is anything but natural or innate (74). I have come to realize that good mothering implies there are societal rules and conventions that must be

learned by mothers and then taught to Black children so that they too can achieve the societal expectations of successful citizens. For this reason, some critical scholars include mothers and motherwork among the normalizing forces that maintain the status quo in mainstream society and related dominant cultures (Getfield, *Prescriptive Partnerships*). Furthermore, Beatson explains that society's responsibility is to raise the nation's future citizens, and future citizens are required to display the norms, values, and attitudes of the mainstream culture. And, Black mothers are required to comply. To this end, I sometimes feel as though I am under strict monitoring in institutional spaces. Under constant, heavy surveillance, it is reasonable for me to conclude that immigrant and Black mothers comply by self-censoring and distancing ourselves from our diasporic cultural knowings. If, and when, we Black mothers or our children deviate from society's norms and values, there is no grace—we and our children are quickly reprimanded and disciplined. Seemingly, there is little wiggle room. This suspicion is substantiated by the disproportionate number of Black and Indigenous students who fail the education system in Canadian provinces each year. Black children are disproportionately removed in high numbers from their homes through child protection services as well as the Children's Aid Society. Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* revealed Black women's ultimate fear for our children—the fear of them being removed from society through maltreatment or death. And for breeding and reproducing society's problems, Black mothers are punished in one way or another, continually. I agree with Audre Lorde that we, Black mothers, are fully aware that we must deal with the real threats that are a part of our real-life everyday experiences and those of our children's lives. In the next section, I unpack such terms as good mother, empowerment and resistance, as well as race and racism.

Good Mother

In Canada, the good mother is widely thought to be middle class, affluent, white, heterosexual and able bodied (See Mullings and Mullings-Lewis 106). In Jamaica, the population is predominantly Black, so considerations of the good mother are nestled in cultural expectation of doing what is best for the child in keeping with mainstream society's rules. In Canada, where the mainstream society and related dominant culture are predominantly white and non-Black, the Black mother is said to be perceived as the antithesis of the good mother, and, as a result, many professionals have sustained and reproduced deficit perspectives of the Black mother (Mullings and Mullings-Lewis 107). In my doctoral study titled *Prescriptive Partnerships: Black Mothers of Disabled Children and Educators in Ontario's Public School System*, (Getfield 85), I showed that diasporic mothers migrate into spaces with their own

cultural understandings of what it means to be a good mother. Therefore, diasporic mothers are armed with cultural practices and understanding passed down from their own mothers: the teachings of one generation of mothers resonate throughout their children's and grand-children's lives. I believe this to be true regardless of whether the mothering experiences were favourable or not and it is irrelevant whether the mothers of diasporic mothers are in the ashes or in the grave.

Cultural understandings and related definitions of the "good mother" in diasporic countries may be similar to or different from cultural understandings and definitions of the "good mother" in the Global North. So, it is up to each mother to decide how she will best support her children's development and growth in their new homeland. In educational spaces, for example, will the Black mother choose to fight a powerful system of regulated professionals or will she choose to disengage from the system altogether in the best interests of her children? Will she cooperate with education professionals even when she disagrees with their decisions just so that she will appear to be a compliant good mother? Will she choose to play along to get along? Are these choices even real when one considers that the more powerful educator can unilaterally decide when to disregard Black mothers (See Getfield, *Prescriptive Partnerships*)? In the next section, I discuss my experiences of empowerment, capitulation, and resignation.

Empowerment

At the time of my children's birth, I had little familial support. Living in the diaspora, I was subjected to increased attention and surveillance from the state. After a rather eventful birthing experience at a large hospital in downtown Toronto, I was allowed to sleep for what seemed like only a few hours. As soon as the nurse woke me up and I had barely opened my eyes, she declared cheerfully yet firmly that she had to ensure I was up and on my feet that day—walking. My body was not ready to comply. Still somewhat disoriented, I was wheeled to the NICU to be introduced to my two babies. The nurse insisted that I had to learn how to bond with my babies, without delay. I had to spend a week in the hospital during which there were lessons on such topics as breastfeeding, how to lift my newborn babies, how to swaddle them, and how to hold and soothe them for long periods. That week in the hospital was no joke; it was emotional and physical work even though I was still in recovery from a Caesarean section. The resident social worker made several appointments with me during which time she quickly brought me up to speed regarding what was expected of a mother of premature twins. This also meant that she skillfully explained in a seemingly nonthreatening manner what the hospital and child protection services deemed to be unacceptable,

and she pointed out the signs of maternal ineptitude and gross incompetence (and therefore neglect). I recall that I kept asking myself if this was the hospital protocol—if all mothers got the same level of attention. I could not figure out if all mothers were duly informed (and warned) in such a manner; I couldn't help but wonder at the amount of money that Canada could afford to spend in its efforts to be so diligent with *all* mothers. But I dared not ask about the hospital protocols. I convinced myself that the hospital staff were being caring and preemptive. I thanked God that I lived in such a rich country that could afford to be so caring and preemptive with every new mother of multiples!

During their second week of life, while my babies were still in the NICU in a hospital near to our home, although no one said it explicitly, it soon became clear to me that I had to attend intensive training sessions to learn how to attend to my two children's needs at night and during the day. The nurses presented these sessions as being optional; they may have mentioned the nurses' shift change time and suggested that I could choose to arrive around that time each night. They did not pose my involvement as a mandated, required, time-sensitive action. So, I totally missed the Canadian language cues. (Canadians tend to frame instructions as options, so they use questions like "Do you think it may be useful to… ?" or "What do you think about doing such and such?) So I thought my attendance at these sessions were at my discretion and availability. The first night I was late because I had exerted myself too much on my first day home, so I experienced severe discomfort later that evening. But I knew I just could not stay away from my newborn babies; I wanted to see them and to hold them. It was only at the last minute that I decided to forgo sleeping in my own bed in order to spend the night with my babies. I quickly made my way to the hospital. When I arrived mid-shift, I could tell the nurses were not amused. They were no longer the friendly conversational crew of nurses with whom I had interacted earlier. It seemed to me that somehow my lateness had confirmed what they knew and expected all along. The problem was that I did not know for sure exactly what they had expected. That night I was under the watchful eye (also known as surveillance) of these health professionals; one nurse after another repeatedly and strongly encouraged me (also known as instructed and reminded me) to sleep at the hospital for the rest of the week so that they could teach me how to care for my newborn twins. My spirit told me to tread softly. Without hesitation, I complied.

That week, to me, they seemed well-intentioned because their instructions were relayed in a tone that communicated sincere care. So I truly believed they would have done the same thing for all new mothers of multiples. For the entire week, the nurses made it a point to come into my room to wake me up so that I could attend to the twins during the dead of night. Under their constant supervision, in the wee hours of the morning for an entire week, I

learned to feed my two babies, burp them, change them, bathe them, and put them back to bed. During that week of recovery, I learned to perform the duties of mothering in a sleep-deprived state as I cared for twins with exceptional needs. During that week, I tried to grab a few hours of sleep during the day when I was allowed to go home. Looking back, years later, eventually it became clear that the training was the test, and the test was the training. As a result of that dichotomous experience during the second week of my children's lives, I felt empowered because I learned the rules of the dominant culture. I had figured out that I could safely break the rules I thought to be unnecessary. That experience prepared me to distance myself from the state policing and child-protection apparatus. Delores Mullings and V. Mullings-Lewis explain: "The socio-political conditionality that helps to create a suspicion of mothers certainly influences the way women mother their children. These contexts are indeed complex, woven with intricacy and detail historical malcontent of women and mothers" (105).

For me, it is important to study the social construction of Black mothers. It is important to investigate societal suspicion of mothers generally, but because of racism (and anti-Black racism, in particular), it is also critical to extend the mothering discourse by gathering Black mothers' personal narratives to learn about their mothering experiences. In this article, an intersectional lens is therefore a critical imperative to analyze Black mothers' experiences along the lines of race, gender, class, and nationality.

Race and Racism

To theorize Black mothering within White spaces, I lean heavily on the introductory chapter of *Critical Race Theory: The cutting edge* (Delgado and Stefancic xvi - xvii) and so I focus on the following CRT tenets/insights, found therein:

1. Racism is [a] "normal, … ingrained feature… [that] looks natural to persons in the culture…;"
2. Interest Convergence "holds that white elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for blacks only when such advances also promote white self-interest…. Change that is too rapid would be unsettling to society at large";
3. Racial oppression can be challenged by storytelling, meaning when racialized people narrate their own life-stories and when "writers analyze the myths, presuppositions and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render blacks and other minorities one-down"; and
4. Every culture "constructs its own social reality in ways that promotes its own self-interest…. Our social world, with its rules, practices and

assignments of prestige and power, is not fixed, rather we construct it with words, stories and with silence"

The idea of a dynamic society that is socially constructed through words, stories, and silence aligns with perspectives offered by Patricia Hill Collins in *Motherhood and Space*. Collins speaks about Black motherhood being a series of constantly renegotiated relationships with other Black women, Black children, the wider Black community, and with the Black mother herself. From the experiences shared in my doctoral study, patriarchal motherhood (meaning normative motherhood) requires us to perform in ways expected by social institutions, including health and education. Although researchers focus on how individual mothers perform and enact motherhood, it is also important to investigate the actions of Black women who resist normative pressure (Getfield, *Prescriptive Partnerships*). Resistance is natural and normal—a salient feature in the survival of Black women. Beatson, Collins, and Mullings are among the theorists who posit that resistance has been woven through Black mothers' ways of being and knowing in white societies. Within the dominant white culture, some mothers are resolute that they and their children must not only survive but thrive (Getfield, *Prescriptive Partnerships*).

By the term "race," I refer not to the biological grouping of people according to perceived skin colour or complexion (See Ladson-Billings' "Introduction") but the social construction of groups of people that results in disadvantages and disregard being meted out to some minority groups and benefits to the dominant group (Ladson-Billings 44-45). The group that resides at the centre of society is culturally and financially dominant and therefore more powerful. Race is linked therefore to power and domination. Race performs a necessary role in societies that maintain whiteness, as it sorts who is in power and who is dominant in society. The doing of racism, as well as the ordering and organizing impact of race, will influence how transnational women experience services and access support in the Global North. Since race underscores who is dominant and more powerful, it indicates whose ways of being are prioritized and upheld. Therefore, race and racism will result in the celebration of some mothering practices and the rejection of others (Getfield, "Parenting and Schooling in a Pandemic"). Although critical race theory is foundational to my analysis, through Black feminist ideologies, I am able to further develop my understanding of how empowerment and resistance are realized in Black mothers' lives, actions, and thoughts as well as along several axes or sites of oppression (including race, gender, disability, nationality, and class). Black and racialized women are socially constructed on the periphery or margins of society.

Since racism is common and therefore taken for granted in social institutions, I prioritize race even as I gesture towards the equal impact of the other sites of

oppression (Ladson-Billings). For this reason, I have chosen critical race theory as the main theoretical lens to explore and investigate the Black mothers' experiences of empowerment and resistance. The intersectional nature of this study requires that I look at all sites of oppression rather than imply that there is a hierarchy in which race is always first. When Black mothers receive discriminatory treatment, researchers can never be sure if the disregard or exclusion results from the mothers' race, their gender, or their class. However, critical race theorists including David Gillborn and Gloria Ladson-Billings maintain that in a society built upon whiteness, white supremacy, and the interests of a dominant White mainstream culture, racial inequity will result from racist practices, stereotypes, and assumptions.

My doctoral research focused on seven Black mothers and how they possessed a visceral understanding of schooling in Ontario based on how they applied the ideas about education and schooling that they themselves learned in their birth county (or where they were raised as young students at the primary or secondary level). I believe the same is true about Black mothers' experiences with healthcare in the Western world. I posit that transnational women will therefore differently experience the healthcare and education systems in the Western world.

Time and Geographic Spaces

"Immigrants," "diasporic women," "newcomers," "naturalized citizens of Canada"—these are all terms and labels used to set apart and distinguish the experiences of transnational beings. However, it does not matter if the Black mother is a recent immigrant, has been a naturalized citizen of Canada for decades, or is a fifth generation Canadian who was born and grew up in Canada, Black mothers' relationships are being constantly renegotiated and reimagined in physical spaces across Canada. Those who identify as Black mothers are encouraged to focus their attention on the home, in the school, in the church, temple, mosque, or synagogue, and in the wider secular geographical community. For these reasons, by necessity, my approach differs in part from the one who taught me, by example and by words, how to mother. Our mothering practices and considerations differ because of our respective temporal and geographical location. I have been (re)negotiating mothering and doing motherwork in the Greater Toronto Area. And let me state the obvious: Whereas my mother's most active period of motherwork revolved around her children in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, I began mothering towards the end of the first decade in the 2000s. In addition to the different time periods and the different home countries, we also mothered in different ways because of what our children needed. For me, foremost among mothering activities is my children's development—they must be fully and actively aware

of what it means to be a Black male in Canada (James; Mullings and Mullings-Lewis). This awareness of Blackness and the understanding of the power of whiteness is critically important to Black children who live in a white society (Dumas). Education of Black children must focus on race because the success of Black students and mental health of Black children depend on their awareness of Blackness and what it means to be Black in white spaces (Getfield, *Prescriptive Partnerships*; Getfield, "Family Engagement"). Colour-blind educational policies do not include the acknowledgment of race or racism and do not value the Black family's engagement practices, which include child development activities in the home aimed at spirit building, emotional upliftment, as well as achieving and maintaining positive mental health (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler). Therefore, I posit that Black motherwork is critically important in all geographic spaces and at all times.

Blackness matters, and it matters greatly therefore to unpack how institutional racism has resulted in the disregard, marginalization, and exclusion of Black people. To tease out the impact of institutional racism and the resulting effect on Black mothers, I employ the following definition: "Anti-Blackness is not simply racism against Black people … antiblackness refers to a broader antagonistic relationship between blackness and (the possibility of) humanity (Dumas and Ross 429). Putting it all together, then, what does it really mean to be or become an empowered Black mother? In the next section, I will discuss the concept of resistance.

Resistance

The purpose Beatson's article titled" Engaged Empowered Mothering" is to examine "how Black Caribbean diasporic women confront patriarchal motherhood (75)." Furthermore, Beatson explains the challenge faced by mothers generally: " Patriarchal motherhood is normalized through the state's investment in its perpetuation (75). She explains that the potential for empowered mothering is in "resistance to the nation state." Beatson (76) cites Erika Horowitz as she asserts: "Empowered mothering utilizes resistance as a strategy to decipher the dominant discourse and provides alternative discourses through a sense of personal agency (qtd. in Beatson, "Engaged" 76)."

Diasporic Caribbean mothering as performed by Black Jamaican mothers or Black mothers of Jamaican descent also takes place in female-headed households (See Bose-Duker, Henry, and Strobl). Some households include extended family; others are sole-parent families, whereas other households are traditional nuclear families. My doctoral research reveals that while Jamaican mothers may seek their husbands' opinions on education matters, they do not consult with their husbands or significant others about their mothering practices. By extension, to my mother, her sisters, my female relatives, and my

friends and their mothers, it would be laughable if a mother in our circles sought approval regarding her mothering practices from strangers in a new society when we do not expect that same mother to seek approval from her own husband. In Black Caribbean, and specifically Jamaican circles, such a mother would be deemed irresponsible and would receive immediate, swift, and harsh responses from peer mothers as well as from people they do not even know.

A shared culture, a common identity, as well as shared goals inspire the resistance we stage as Black mothers in the Caribbean and African diaspora (Beatson). We share a common African heritage, as Black people. Generation after generation, we pass down knowledges through stories and ways of being and doing. For this reason, in the diaspora, some Black mothers are inclined to perform motherhood as they would have done in their home countries. Some of us even reimagine and rewrite history, as we tweak our families' recipes and even our accents and as we choose to assimilate or not. Motherhood is reproduced through negotiation with self, with our children, and with our community. And as Black mothers, we resist daily as we negotiate and renegotiate motherwork. We resist as we teach our children the essence of who they are; we are the conduit of our respective traditions and culture. The homes of Black families are sites of resistance. In our homes, we must teach our children how to respond to various kinds of oppression because as Black mothers, we know that the keepers of the dominant culture within our society devalues and disregards Blackness—relegating the entire Black family, including Black women, men, and children to the periphery.

The Act of Black Mothering

Mothering is a gendered activity; typically, the woman (meaning those who identify as female) performs the role of mother. It is usually the female gender that has been expected, by societies across the world, to assume the responsibilities for the duties associated with mothering, including working as agents on behalf of their children in education and health spaces. Black mothering is an action, not a noun. It is an action that for some Black mothers begins when the child is in utero to ensure the safe delivery of a healthy baby. In the Caribbean and elsewhere, pregnant women are referred to as mothers. Mothering is an activity to which the mother is expected to attend from the minute the mother realizes she is pregnant. For many Black mothers, this action begins even earlier—if or when she plans to become pregnant. It is not the custom in the Caribbean to attend prenatal or parenting classes. Epistemologically and ontologically, as Black mothers, we know what we know and we practice what we know because of our own mothers (regardless of whether these mothers are in the ashes or in the grave) and because of

female and male relatives who have mothered us. Black mothering is familial, in that family members, not just the individual mother, contribute to the act of mothering. As an engaged Black mother and as a researcher who investigates Black mothering, I have discovered that Black Caribbean mothers regard and define themselves as good mothers. Black Caribbean mothers resist the Western notion that the label "good mother" is reserved for white, middle-class, and married mothers. The Black women I interviewed for my doctoral research deemed themselves to be good mothers.

Black Caribbean mothers engage in resistance when they disengage from ableist and racist educators and decide to instruct (teach) and repair our children in the home. In so doing, they resist the oppressive interaction between home and school—when the school has abandoned or continually disregarded Black students. Some Black mothers also ensure their children attend church, the mosque, or the temple so they learn to grow in their faith, learn religious beliefs, and know where to turn to when the racist and ableist world turns on them. For many Black mothers, including those in my doctoral research, we opt to teach our children values, beliefs, and attitudes that will help them to surmount challenges and therefore have a chance to thrive in a racist society. Faith groups serve several purposes; they are also places where many Black mothers feel a sense of belonging.

Although some diasporic mothers do not, at first, have a sense of belonging to our new adopted homeland, this feeling of belonging develops as the years go by, as we build communities of support. Within these groups, we form bonds of belonging outside of our own families and relatives in our adopted home, in Canada. As empowered Black mothers, whether we were born in Canada or migrated to Canada, we confront patriarchal motherhood on many fronts. The job of Black mothers is to repair the harm perpetuated against our children in the public school system. When the school system derides and punishes Black students because of what the teachers and administrators perceive to be misbehaviours, the Black mother must take all the time necessary—sometimes weeks and months—to help the student to rebuild their confidence and self-esteem. In keeping with O'Reilly's definition of empowered mothering, some Black mothers have defined themselves as advocates while others have embraced motherhood as "a political site wherein the mother can effect social change" (Beatson 77).

Conclusion

This article has focused on the experiences of Black Caribbean mothers through the personal narratives of one mother. There is no one essential story, and so this article is not intended to be the full story about all Black mothers or all Black Caribbean mothers. Certainly, this article does not wish to

generalize about all Jamaican mothers. However, it shares alternative mothering practices and related struggles of resistance. This one story is subjective, and it privileges the storyteller's experiences, but since the personal is political, this one story is to be seen as a credible source of knowledge that has political implications, since it reverberates and gives voice to the struggles and resistance of many ordinary Black and Black Caribbean mothers who live in the diaspora of their home countries. This single story sheds light on similar stories, but other stories still need to be told, both in Canada and beyond. This one story can be powerful, since it gestures towards possible ways in which change can be manifested in the healthcare system and in schools, specifically in Ontario.

I interpret my story thus: When a mother is single, an immigrant from the Caribbean, Black, and outside of the normal age of mothering, she is considered lacking by Western normalized standards. Such a mother is assumed to be lacking because she does not fit the normal, standard expectations of who and what a mother should be and do. Such a mother transcends and deviates from Western ideas of what a mother is able to do. She is abnormal, and therefore she (and her offspring) is to be set apart. Her ability to mother is questioned. The mother is to be treated with suspicion and is to be watched.

In my case, the prevailing thought was that as a Black mother who must care for premature twins born in Canada, and who may themselves be deemed to have special health needs that fall outside of the norm, I had to be put under surveillance because I might harm them, intentionally or unintentionally. My ways of knowing how to mother (based upon my country of origin) were viewed as foreign, unfamiliar, and therefore suspicious. I had to be trained and then tested by regulated professionals to understand how care must be delivered in Ontario and how mothering is to be practiced to meet hegemonic and normalized expectations of mothering and motherwork. These professionals assumed I did not have the required community cultural wealth of knowledge to help my children.

Anti-Black racism continues to have serious consequences for Black mothers. Going into a hospital can yield serious negative consequences for Black mothers who may say or do what they consider to be normal or natural. For diasporic or immigrant Black mothers, such natural actions could be to their detriment. What is normal in one culture can be pathologized and therefore deemed unacceptable in another. For the Black mother, hospitals and schools can become sites of disablement, and professionals within those settings can become catalysts of disabling conditions when they pathologize Black mothers and disregard Black mothering practices.

This article raises the question: Within a White society that is marked by anti-Black racism, is Blackness by itself enough to raise suspicion? Or is

suspicion raised by the disabling nature of intersecting oppressions, including Blackness, disability, class, country of birth (nationality), and gender? The immigrant mother who lives in a diasporic community will experience motherhood differently from the mothers who were born and raised in Canada, even though all of them are women. Some mothers are othered not just because of their skin colour but also because of their citizenship status. Other mothers experience disadvantages and prejudice based upon their multiple identities. Their foreign-based knowledges and practices contribute to them being othered and feeling othered in a racist society. To compound matters, they do not have the same support of their family members and relatives as they would have had they been back home in their birth or home countries.

For the first ten years of my children's lives, my own mother was a great help to me physically. In real ways, she taught me how to care for my babies and showed me how to guide and guard them as they grew. For ten years, she attended to her earthly mission. Now that she has transitioned, her teachings, her lessons, and her life guide me through many decisions that I must make as a mother (and in other roles) as my children progress through the elementary public school system in Ontario.

So, I end as I began: Mumma a ashes betta dan mumma a grave! But does the physical location of Black Caribbean mothers matter? I conclude in this way: The grave is inconsequential. Black motherwork is never done; it carries on, in, through, and beyond the bloodline. Black mothers continue to love, care, and work beyond the grave.

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