Building Racial Equity in and Across Motherhood
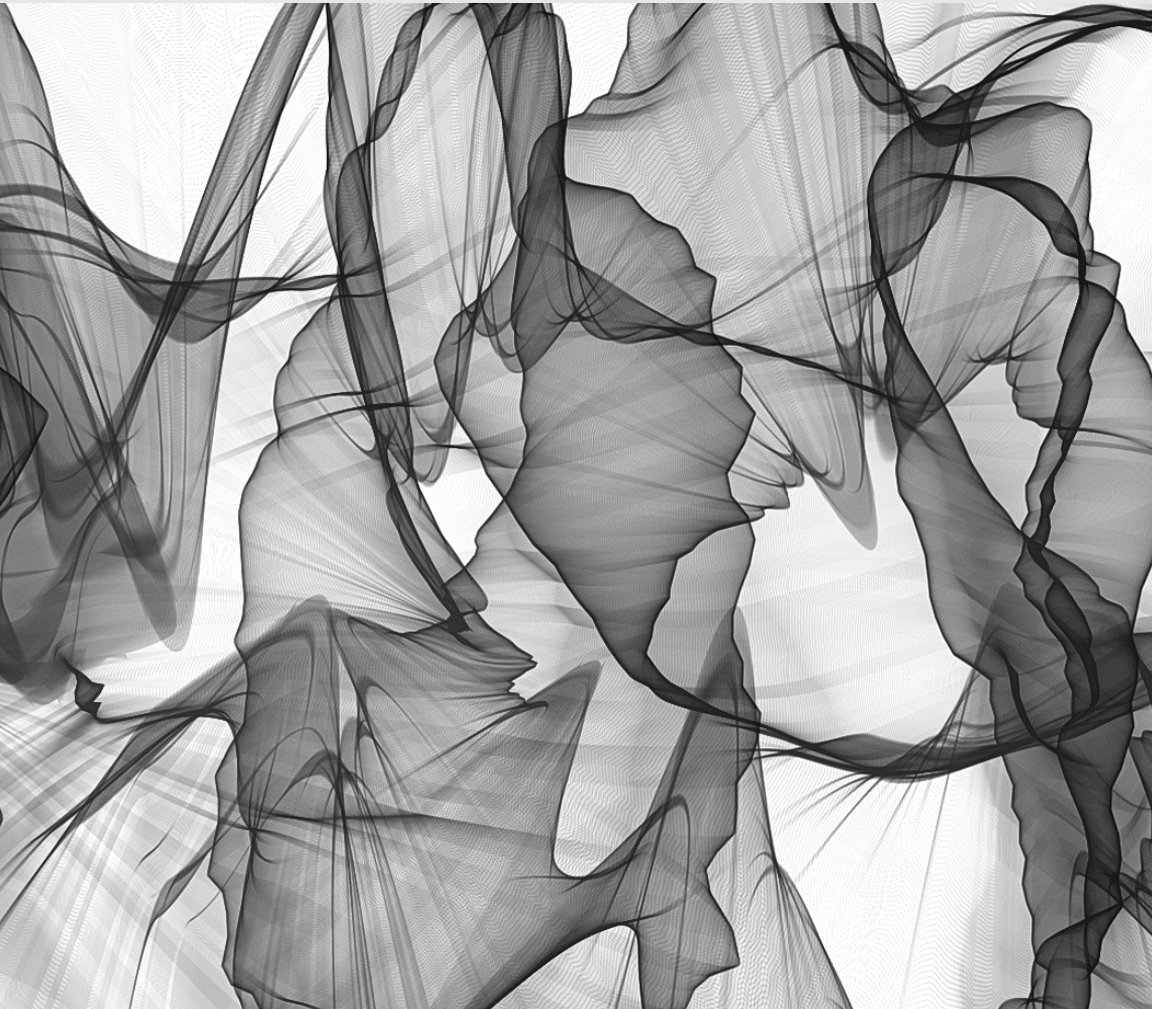
Denise Handlarski, Akanksha Misra, Margarita Levine, Jacqui Getfield, Pooja Bhatia Narang and many more

JANELLE BRADY

Strategies for Resistance: A Study on Black Mothering as Practices of Disruption for the Schooling of Black children

Black student learners in Greater Toronto Area (GTA) schools face a host of barriers to fair and equitable education. Research has demonstrated that Black students have higher rates of suspension and expulsion (James and Turner 35-37), have lower expectations, face more severe punishment and are ultimately "pushed out" of schools (Dei et al. 10). Black mothers have long employed resistance strategies to combat such barriers, such as navigating race and racial microaggressions (Allen and White-Smith 412), racial and class socializing of their children (Turner 248), and developing an overall understanding of how race impacts their children's education (Williams et al. 937). Much of the literature on Black mothers' experiences and effective social and political mobilization comes from an American perspective, and thus further investigation of such action in the Canadian context is warranted. This article draws on findings from a doctoral dissertation project on Black mothering experiences in the kindergarten to grade 12 (K-12) education system. Thirty-three mothers, primarily from the Jane and Finch community in the GTA, participated in three focus groups and three one-on-one interviews. Using a Black feminist theoretical framework, this article focuses on three key study findings: the systemic racism faced by student learners, the intersectional systemic racism faced by Black mothers, and the resistance strategies employed by Black mothers. By analyzing the data emerging from this qualitative research, this article explores the resistance strategies of Black mothers, which open up new possibilities for Black educational futurity.

Introduction: Exploring Education-based Injustices Faced by Black Student Learners

Anti-Black racism is prevalent in the Canadian state as noted by scholars, such as in its historic mistreatment of Black people (such as slavery and

discrimination; Cooper), in media reporting (Crichlow and Lauricella), and in policing (Wortley and Owusu-Bempah). Since the killing of George Floyd, much attention has focused on police brutality and state-sanctioned violence. As demonstrated, contrary to mainstream ideology, anti-Black racism is not, however, confined to policing. It is deeply embedded in all major social institutions, including schools. There is extensive evidence documenting this fact. For instance, in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), Black students face higher rates of suspension and expulsion (James and Turner 35). In Ontario, there is an underrepresentation of Black educators (Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators 11). Furthermore, Black students are not represented adequately in the curriculum (Katawazi). Despite these great barriers Black student learners face in school, Black mothers have continued to resist racism within these sites. However, Black mothers' strategies of resistance in schooling and education, particularly survival strategies, are understudied. In this article, I highlight the unparalleled impacts of anti-Black racism in schooling and education as well as the survival strategies of Black mothers. The article serves as a challenge to oppressive systems and a reclamation of Black mothers' onto-epistemologies. It is written to administrators and educators of Black children, who tend to predominantly occupy white middle-class positionalities, to Black mothers to reaffirm their practices, and to wider communities who can benefit from such a dialogue rooted in disrupting and challenging systems of oppression. The next subsection describes anti-Black racism, the conceptualization of Blackness I employ, and further establishes the context of anti-Black racism in schooling and education.

Anti-Black Racism in Education: In Context

Anti-Black racism centres the specificity of Blackness within the context of systemic racism (Dei, *Anti-Racism Education* 129; Benjamin 60). In this article, I focus on anti-Black racism to highlight the unique location of Blackness within a system of white supremacy. I conceptualize anti-Black racism as part of a project of white supremacy, in which whiteness not only centres race but also ableism, gendered oppression, transphobia, homophobia, citizenship and belonging, ethnicity, classism, sexual oppression, and the dominance of Christian ways of knowing and being. Through this perspective, I engage systemic racism not through an all-encompassing people of colour perspective but rather via a Blackness approach. Anti-Black racism is embedded within the specificity of anti-Black racism, so responses, mobilization, and strategies of resistance ought to be anchored through collective action as opposed to fragmented individual responses. Such fragmentation can perpetuate a divide-and-conquer politic of Black and racialized communities, which can benefit the logic of white supremacy (Brady

122). By employing Blackness as a political space (Dei, *Reframing Blackness* 20; Mirza), I anchor the lived experiences, resistances, and connectedness of Blackness and community in a sphere with differences while in conversation, tension, and existence with each other.

Furthermore, Black students in the GTA face a plethora of barriers, which have been the subject of academic investigation for several decades. For example, George Dei argues that the term "push out" should be used in place of "drop out" when discussing attrition of Black students, as the latter term emphasizes on the individual learner rather than the structural barriers they face, one of which is anti-Black racism ("Drop Out or Push Out"). The TDSB has reported that 54 per cent of all human rights complaints are race related, with anti-Black racism encompassing a large portion of such. This has led to calls from the president of the Ontario Black History Society, Natasha Henry, as well as from anti-racist scholar Dei, for an overhaul of the Ontario curriculum to make it more representative through the inclusion of Black history (Katawazi). Carl James and Tana Turner, in a ground-breaking report, note that Black students face higher levels of discipline and punishment in the Greater Toronto Area. For instance, they are twice as likely as white and other racialized students to be suspended, and almost half the Black student population has been suspended at least once despite only making up approximately 12 per cent of the student population.

One of the educational injustices faced by Black students is the longstanding practice of streaming (Curtis 65), whereby Black students are often placed in limiting programs and infrequently in gifted programs or university-track courses. In 2020, the Ontario provincial government began efforts to do away with this longstanding practice after decades of community advocacy. Despite the common assertion by many white Canadians that racism is only an American phenomenon, it is clear that the school-to-prison pipeline exists in the Canadian context as well (Salole and Abdulle 159). Furthermore, the school-to-care pipeline[1] is also rampant in Canada, and Black and Indigenous children are also overrepresented in the ranks of children in care (OHRC).

The stated documentation of anti-Black racism in schooling has been accompanied by many calls to disrupt and challenge the status quo. However, the role of Black mothers who navigate anti-Black racism within schools has been underinvestigated. Black mothers have long fought for their children and others within the wider community against the barriers posed by anti-Black racism in schools. Black mothers are not simply adult allies to children who face systemic oppression. They are themselves uniquely situated in positions that other them based on gendered, raced, ableist, and classed lines. However, rather than adopting a deficit approach, in this study, the unique positionality of Black mothers is understood within their social-political and historical contexts, in which Blackness is not stigmatized but instead understood as a

site of resistance. By this, I steer from the deficit-based approach that individualizes the plights of Black mothers while removing social, political, and historical context-reinforcing stereotypes and other means by which inequalities are justified and entrenched into various systems. Therefore, reclaiming the unique and important role of Black mothers through a strength-based approach can serve as a form of resistance to anti-Black racism, heteropatriarchy, classism, ableism, and other forms of oppression. Despite these struggles, the strategies of resistance, as demonstrated through survival navigational instances employed by Black mothers, often go unnoticed in academic research and educational practice as do the injustices they face.

Mothers of Black children must navigate institutions, such as schools, in unique ways because of the anti-Black racism faced by their children. This article explores the navigation strategies employed by Black mothers to struggle against the systemic injustices their children face within Greater Toronto Area (GTA) schools. This study also attempts to provide a nuanced understanding of Black mothers' subject positions in the wider milieu of systemic anti-Black racism embedded within various systems of oppression, including patriarchy, racial capitalism, ableist normativity, heteronormativity, and whiteness. This study also aims to highlight what I am calling a "Black mothering" approach as a strategy of resistance to anti-Black racism and to bolster the possibilities of Black educational futurity.

Therefore, in this article I ask, what are the unique social-political locations of Black mothers that position them to resist systemic anti-Black racism faced by Black student learners? To answer this question, this article begins by exploring relevant literature and summarizing the theoretical framework of Black feminism. It then describes the study's research methodology, presents the study's findings, and discusses lessons that can be learned from Black mothering in a study on Black educational futurity.

Review of Literature: Documenting and Reclaiming Black Ontoepistemologies

The Survival and Resistance of Black Mothers in Historical Context

The legacies of Black women's survival are deeply rooted in our histories and the challenges we have faced. Particularly when it comes to Black mothers, resistance is rooted in strategies that are employed for survival. For example, as Nioki Wane states, "Black women are survivors and have always played central roles in Black history as the custodians of tradition and values" ("[Re] Claiming My Indigenous Knowledge"18). Black mothers are crucial in the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Such knowledge is a key resource in struggles against white supremacist logic as it is applied to Black children and their wider communities. Toni King and Alease Ferguson postulate the

"motherline" as a process by which knowledge that challenges patriarchy is passed on and affirmed (4). Hortense Spillers describes Black women's interest in engaging in insurgency as opposed to gendered-normative ideals of mothering (80). Here, the insurgency can be understood as sites that disrupt the status quo and unjust systems. For example, racial capitalism perpetuates gendered norms, such as that of ideal motherhood; however, Spillers captures the resistance to such normative tropes of motherhood as a natural extension to womanhood and how Black mothers resist these systems. This is important because Black mothers' race saliency, which is the signifier of race, provides a critical site of resistance to taken-for-granted norms, creating more avenues for an insurgency, which can aptly be captured through survivalism.

To this, much of Black mothers' survival strategies are bound up with their relationships with Black children and their labour of care. For example, Sinikka Elliott and Megan Reid highlight the grief faced by Black mothers while raising children who face "daily assaults on their very being" (51). This is the experience of Black mothers as they engage in racial justice work for their children while navigating the education system. Furthermore, key aspects of Black mothers' care labour are warning their children of the racism they will face and working to instill racial pride (Hill 503). Unfortunately, the education curriculum in many schools often fails to provide opportunities for Black children to learn their histories and identities consistently, so it is often left to Black mothers to do the work of teaching racial pride (Mullings and Mullings-Lewis 111).

Beyond pedagogies employed by Black mothers' lessons, the everyday aspects of survivalism are expressed in Black mothers' othermothering practices. According to scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins ("Meaning of Motherhood"), Shirley Hill, and Wane ("Reflections on the Mutuality"), othermothers are those who extend the work of mothering and transgress the biological confines of motherhood. Through othermothering, Black women feel a level of accountability to all children in the Black community (Collins 5). This practice is captured through the mobilization strategies of women in the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM). In their letter describing the origination of the BLM movement, cofounder Alicia Garza explains that the intent of the movement is to recognize state-sanctioned violence and the killing of Black transwomen and Black ciswomen, whose stories go unnoticed in the wider discourse ("Herstory"). In its focus on the BLM movement, the mainstream media has been preoccupied with the killing of Black cismen, and although BLM's focus on Black police brutality is important, this is not the full extent of the movement's concerns. This example shows how Black women have mobilized for the Black community's children rather than simply assuming responsibility only for their biological kin as divided across capitalist configurations of family in nuclear heteronormative arrangements. Othermothering stems from African

ontoepistemological family configurations, in which the extension of family subverts Western notions of nuclear families to include a broader set of relations, including but extending beyond biological relatives. Through other-mothering resistance strategies, Black mothers do the work of survival not only for themselves but also for wider communities who combat violence, exclusion, and oppression.

The preceding section describes Black mothers' resistance strategies through survivalism, but it is important to highlight that our history does not start with colonization and slavery and to recognize the ontologies and episte-mologies of African Indigenous knowledges as they relate to Black mothering. Nah Dove disrupts a matriarchy-patriarchy binary by employing a nuanced matrix to motherhood that is informed by African spirituality and can help inform current racial struggles (9). Although I have highlighted the influence of African contexts, there is merit to engaging the idea of an Africa beyond the continent to consider what unites those on the continent and in the diaspora (Dei, *Teaching Africa*). In reimagining African knowledge systems, we can see practices such as othermothering not only as responses to anti-Black racism and patriarchy but also as practices rooted in African ways of knowing and being.

Current Responses to Anti-Black Racism of Black Mothers

In current contexts, there are a multitude of forms anti-Black racism takes in schools, and thus Black mothers have employed a range of resistance strategies. In a longitudinal study conducted by Amber Williams et al., seventy-six Black mothers described their perceptions of race and pointed to the significance of providing children with racially diverse contexts and encountering Black educators in their schools. These mothers also shared their concerns about teachers' biases and stereotypical beliefs that could lead to the (mis)labelling of Black children, such as being hyperactive and in need of discipline. They also shared their experiences of microaggressions when advocating for their children. Quaylan Allen and Kimberley White-Smith describe the system navigation strategies Black male youths and their families employ. The mothers in this study saw education as a form of financial mobility and stressed the importance of teaching their sons how to navigate racial microaggressions.

In a study revealing anti-Black racism in school suspensions, Tunette Powell and Justin Coles describe a prevailing assumption that Black mothers are uninterested in their children's education or that they themselves are unedu-cated (86). These women describe efforts to combat such assumptions, including sharing credentials to undermine these stereotypes. At the same time, some participants also describe how they had internalized anti-Black racism by blaming themselves for its outcomes.

These examples illustrate some of the structural anti-Black racist inequities

faced by Black student learners and the resistance strategies employed by Black women. However, each of the studies summarized above took place in the United States. Although there is a similar pattern of anti-Black racism in Canada, the unique resistance strategies employed by Black mothers have not received sufficient scholarly attention.

Theoretical Framework: Engaging Black Feminism to Highlight Resistance Practices of Black Mothers

Black feminism is crucial to fully understanding Black mothers' system navigation strategies and responses to anti-Black racism when supporting their children. Black feminist thought is significant for the study of Black mothers' resistance because it draws on Black women's lived experiences, the connections between historical and contemporary struggles, our self-definition and situated knowledges, and because it has a liberatory praxis orientation (Collins 9). Black feminism offers a challenge to dominant positivist theories that reinforce a modern-colonial orientation to ways of knowing and being. Through Black women's stories, Black feminist thought theorizes our lived experiences and realities. In this study, it is through Black mothers' lived experiences that lessons on systemic racism, patriarchy, classism, and all forms of oppression at intersectional junctures are revealed, even as these women work to create more just educational outcomes for Black student learners. In the following sections, I describe some of the most salient features of Black feminism in relation to Black mothers' resistance strategies, such as intersectionality and the engagement of social location. I then extend the parameters of Black feminism through African epistemologies and ontologies to expand the nuances of Black mothers' effective resistance strategies.

A Black feminist theoretical framework draws on the concept of inter-sectionality, which examines the unique position of race, gender, and class colliding as roads at an intersection rather than mutually exclusive experiences (Crenshaw). Because of Black mothers' intersectional subject positions, system navigation, such as that done in schools, is not separate from this positionality. Intersectionality can be understood beyond the three dimensions of race, class, and gender. Black feminist thought aims to unpack the lived experiences of Black women from their contexts; similarly, African feminism is contextual to the experiences of African women. Both theories have overlapped, such as intersectionality. African feminist scholar Filomina Steady describes the intersections of racism, sexism, and the global political economy, which disenfranchises not only women but also men and members of the wider community, and therefore such issues of racial patriarchy and larger lopsided geopolitical forces cannot simply be resolved through individualist interventions ("African Women" 150). Thus, intersectionality can also be a

challenge to so-called objective and scientific ways of knowing and being.

Furthering challenges to so-called neutral ontoepistemologies, the notion of objectivity is challenged by Black feminist thinkers who support the significance of self-definition, which is defining and theorizing one's own experiences to extrapolate the wider issues of racism, patriarchy, classism, ableism, and all forms of oppression. Collins describes this type of theorization through self-definition as situated knowledges (*Black Feminist Thought*). Through the social-political locations of Black mothers, their advocacy strategies and resistances are enacted. Furthermore, we can employ Steady's concept of "socio-centric interests" to understand how Black women's mobilization strategies support humanity more broadly rather than just the interests of women ("The Black Woman"). It is through Black women's lived experiences that these "socio-centric interests" are engaged. This is congruent with the mobilization efforts of Black mothers, which seek to disrupt white supremacist school systems, as these efforts impact the entire school population and the broader communities in which schools are located, creating new opportunities for change.

The possibilities of Black educational futurity are entrenched in Black mothers' ontoepistemologies and mobilization strategies. I am employing the term "Black educational futurity" to denote a space wherein Black children, their families, and their wider communities can engage in education, be it in schooling or not, without the violence of anti-Black racism. I extend Black educational futurity to denote the intersectional experiences of Black community members, which are not simply defined by race but also class, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, place of birth, migration status and citizenship, disability, and language. Put simply, Black ciswomen cannot be free when Black trans disabled children are not. Black educational futurity is reimagining the possibilities for liberation now.

Although some theorists have critiqued Black feminism for reproducing the Global North's hierarchal theoretical dominance (Hudson-Weems), I draw on African women theorists to extend the possibilities of the Black feminist framework. I believe Black feminism has important features for the study of Black mothers' strategies of resistance, but it can benefit from African ontoepistemologies. Monica Coleman et al. refer to Oyeronke Oyewumi's "mothernity," which is "an African communitarian ideal" (105-106). Through this term, Oyewumi challenges Western colonial ideals of motherhood as natural by exploring terms used in various contexts in which people of African descent still engages ideas stemming from African community-oriented ideals of motherhood through language and praxis, furthering the idea of Africa beyond the continent as I described earlier. Just as the motherline includes knowledge transmission and collective ontoepistemologies based on African community-oriented and liberatory practices, the same is the case with

"mothernity" through knowledge transmission through mothers and community-focused ideals, which furthers the concept of resistance in Black mothering. In the following section, I point to some examples of such collective, liberatory practices employed when rooted in African ways of knowing and being.

Another important discourse for capturing Black mothers' knowledge production is described by Sharon Omotoso as "motherism," an Afrocentric alternative to Western feminisms; it is pertinent in African cosmologies and has led to the survival and unity of the Black race throughout time. This is akin to the notion of "socio-centric interests" described earlier; Black women mobilize beyond their individual interests to benefit wider communities—be it around environmental action or mobilizing around unjust structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) in the Global South (Steady, *The Black Woman* 4). Motherism is an active orientation towards resistance and change making, which challenges Eurocentric systems and relates to the struggle for justice in schooling and how Black mothers mobilize around disrupting and challenging the status quo.

This article seeks to further the challenge of the status quo by capturing the knowledge production and labour of Black mothers as they struggle for justice in the school system for their children and wider communities, and their actions for change are often lost and forgotten. The erasure experienced by Black mothers challenging injustices in schools is similar to the erasure of Black mothers' knowledge production in women's liberation movements (Rodgers). The above described the theoretical approaches that informed my aim of understanding the strategies employed by Black mothers to resist systemic racism in GTA schools. This study identified how this resistance occurs at the local school level through Black mothers as knowledge keepers. The next section describes the method employed in this investigation.

Methodology: Black Community Mobilizations and Sharing Practices

This article summarizes aspects of the findings of my 2019 doctoral research, which examines Black mothers' educational system navigation strategies and their intersectional social locations. This research is rooted in Black and African feminisms, is undergirded by African Indigenous knowledges, and takes a decolonial and liberatory approach. My research approach forefronts both the past and current injustices suffered by the researched. Thus, it was important for me as the investigator to adopt an asset-based approach as opposed to a deficit-based approach, so as not to reproduce the unjust research practices Black community members have often experienced, which serve to reinforce lopsided power relations between the academy and the community.

This article focuses primarily on the findings pertaining to Black mothers' resistance and survival strategies.

The study involved Black mothers from the Jane and Finch community in Toronto whose children were in the public education system from K-12, either currently or within the previous five years. Through trust and past rapport with some participants such as Elders, thirty-three participants were recruited to participate. Ethical approval was granted through the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board. As well, posters, both digital and print, were shared by way of community channels and spaces. The qualitative orientation of the fieldwork led to rich data sets, which were analyzed to better understand Black mothers' experiences.

In the project, I had the opportunity to work alongside Elders in the Jane and Finch community, and I was given advice regarding planning focus groups and ensuring invites were shared widely. The Jane and Finch community, named after an intersection in the city of Toronto, is an underfunded inner suburb, which is racially and ethnically diverse. The neighbourhood has received much negative attention over the years, so community members have engaged in resistance practices through various grassroots organizing and political mobilizations (James). Much of this advice was shared in Elders' homes over a cup of tea and a meal. Thus, I attempted to ground my approach in lifelong relationships, which is important for conducting decolonial research (Smith 36). My research approach was also influenced by Joyce King's challenge to ideals of objectivity and neutrality. I intentionally examined my own positionality as a Black woman and member of the Jane and Finch community who went through the GTA school system and faced anti-Black racism. My own experience, as well as the experiences of other Black community members I worked with in a mentorship program I initiated some years ago, is what prompted my interest in this investigation.

The methods employed were focus group interviews and one-on-one interviews. In the focus group interviews, the seating formation was arranged in a manner akin to nia circles, which are part of African ontoepistemologies, whereby community members sit together in a circular arrangement and engage in group conversation rather than in a top-down fashion with the researcher at the front of the room and participants all facing forwards. Follow-up one-on-one interviews were held with participants who wanted to continue the conversation or had scheduling conflicts with the focus group dates. A total of three focus groups were held at various community centre locations.

For these focus groups, I hosted two of the focus groups, whereas the third was organized via invitation by a community leader, who leads a community centre-based mother's group. She invited me to lead one of her sessions and to hold a focus group with members of this group. I was honoured to accept this

invitation. Often researchers experience barriers that prevent them from gaining access to participants, but because of my years of community work, this stage of the project was filled with generosity and relationality. Each focus group included twelve to fifteen participants and lasted for two to two-and-a-half hours. Two of the one-on-one interviews were held in community members' homes, and the third was done by telephone, each lasting one to one-and-a-half hours. The data were stored using a safe encrypted device. For analysis, I utilized NVivo to conduct thematic analysis (Creswell 166). In the interpretation stage, I worked to determine the feedback provided from study participants (Creswell). A community check-in was held where the findings were shared with seventeen participants through a presentation prior to the writing stage. Check-ins are an important step to ensure that the researcher confirms the findings produced by the members of the study to ensure the participants determined their knowledge was adequately reflected in the results. At the session, members confirmed the findings and provided feedback for changes they wish to see in the schooling experiences of their children. The check-in session was combined with a back-to-school resource-sharing community conversation, in which relevant information was shared with participants as my way of giving back to the community. The findings illuminated key information regarding a study of Black mothering and anti-Black racism in education and beyond.

A key challenge of this research process was that participants would bring additional community members on site beyond the preset registration count because they understood the significance of discussions of anti-Black racism and education as it relates to their children. This led to a higher number of participants than required. In designing the research method, I followed the practice of underestimating turnout and recruiting slightly higher, approximately ten participants per focus group, in case of cancellations (Guest et al.), because the ideal number for focus groups is between eight and ten members to allow for a constant flow of conversation.

During the focus groups, I carefully facilitated the conversation to ensure all members had an opportunity to speak. Fortunately, there were additional informed consent forms, school navigation resources (James and Turner), dinner, public transportation tokens, and gift cards on site which I secured through my Ontario Graduate Scholarship funding to assist underresourced community members to participate. The next section describes the study findings.

Findings

The findings summarized here shed light upon many of the injustices faced by Black mothers, their children, and the wider community, but also the strategies of survival employed by Black mothers. Here, I focus on three main findings: anti-Black racism in schooling and broader contexts, the intersectional positionality of Black mothers, and othermothering practices. The names of all participants are anonymized to protect their confidentiality.

Systemic Racism in the Institution of Schooling

Focus group participants spoke of their frequent experiences with anti-Black racism as they navigated the school system for their children. They also described the anti-Black racism their children experience as they attend school. Mothers described several recurring issues that motivated them to advocate for their children or those of other parents, including streaming, suspensions, unfair discipline, and the condition of schools. For example, Roxanne described implicit streaming practices: "And I remember it vividly when my daughter was entering the high school system. I personally pull[ed] the teachers aside and I asked them … 'What is the difference between the applied and the academic?' [Teacher's response:] 'um, it's better your daughter start[s] in applied … then she can switch.' But that's not so; once you are in applied, you can't switch." Some of the mothers also related their own experiences of streaming. For instance, Sonia stated that although she was an honour roll student, she struggled with grade eleven science. This made her feel like she belonged in the applied stream: "[Back then] it was just applied and academic. So, I put myself in applied, right? And the teacher told me, like, what are you doing here? I need to, like, go back to academic, and I thought I belonged in applied because of the way that the teachers in the classroom made me feel."

Mothers also shared their experiences of their children being suspended. For instance, Rene shared that her child was bullied by a white student, yet the school administrators suspended her, and this happened in more than one school. Sonia also shared that her son was suspended in grade one at the age of six. Mothers in all three focus groups and in each one-on-one interviewed shared that their child had been suspended. One parent, Mona, shared that their son was currently suspended: "now, he get suspended since Thursday to today. So tomorrow he has to go back to school." These are just a few of the instances of systemic racism described by the participants during the research process. As Black mothers advocate for their children, they also face a plethora of barriers.

Black Mothering School Navigation Survival Strategies

In every interview, mothers shared strategies they had used to resist anti-Black racism within their children's schools. The importance of knowing one's rights was raised in each focus group and one-on-one interview. For instance, Roxanne, who takes a leadership role in the community, stated, "If you know your rights—every single day, know your rights. If you don't know your rights? Goodbye." She then went on to stress the importance of parents advocating for their children. Some parents mentioned that they grew up in Ontario and went through its school system and therefore know how to navigate it for their children and the wider community.

Another recurring theme was navigation strategies to combat stereotypes of single motherhood. Shanique described how the stereotype works: "When I was married [but] without my ring, they did talk to me a certain way. And then when I walked in with my ring on my finger, it's like, oh 'Misses,' and I'm like, didn't we talk like two weeks ago, and you were talking to me like I was a nobody, but now when I walk in with a ring, I'm all of a sudden somebody?" To combat the single mother trope, one strategy for navigating the school system that came up in all three focus groups and in two of the three one-on-one interviews concerned having male family members attend school meetings. For example, Jacqueline shared the following observations:

> They look at you different because they label you as a single parent…. They put all kinds of labels on you. But when the parents are there … there is more structure. So, when the kids misbehave and only the mother comes in, they look at you differently. They don't pay as much attention when the man is there, even when they have nothing to say, when you have report (cards), any kind of interaction with the school—even if it's a brother or older brother, uncle or whatever. But be present at the table, they look at you in a different way.

Jacqueline's observations generated much discussion. Some mothers felt that her claims reinforced patriarchal norms about what a good family is and challenged the notion that white educators are not also members of single-parent households. However, Jacqueline clarified that although she does not agree with the assumptions contained within her observations, the strategy of bringing a male family member to meetings has helped her and other parents navigate the school system. Barbara and others supported this position but suggested that those accompanying you need not be male by stating the following: "It's not only if you have a gentleman, but if you have an auntie—like me, in my case, I go with Rene…. If they [staff and school administration] see you alone and don't see anybody else backing you up they treat you differently. They do." In Barbara's case, she is involved in caregiving and support for another Black mother participant in the study—Rene, who lives in

Barbara's building. Barbara does not have biological children but assumes an othermothering role for relatives, neighbours, and members of the community. Thalia elaborated on this point in a separate focus group interview: "I would show them (educators and administrators in schools). I may not be married. But I do have support. And that's the thing that they often think people like us Black women—we don't have support." I now focus on some of the instances of survival strategies employed by Black mothers in the study.

Othermothering and Community Parenting Practices

Though not using the term, participants described othermothering practices as forms of resistance employed by individual mothers to meet not only their needs but also the needs of the wider community. For example, Thalia shared her experience of having to remove her son from a school due to his being suspended in grade three and being placed into a separate classroom for children with behavioural issues, all of whom were Black. This move occurred without her knowledge. In response, she drafted a letter in which she spoke not only for her child but also for other Black children in the school. She stated: "And although my child is my responsibility, I also felt a responsibility for those children that we were leaving behind. So, in writing my letter, I obviously touch base on those other children that were potentially being affected like that, too." Thalia removed her son from that school and placed him in a French immersion program, but she felt it was important to advocate for other Black children by writing a letter to the school board.

Othermothering practices also took the form of mutual support between parents. For example, some mothers shared how their friends would intervene in heated situations so they would not signify in ways that resemble the "angry Black woman" trope. For example, Gabrielle stated" "Because of your colour and because the rage that I'm in, and I'm upset, she [her friend] said don't go to the school. So …calm yourself." Othermothering is also carried out through fatherhood, whereby Black men—be it uncles, friends, family members, or brothers—also assume mothering work when they support parents by sometimes having a conversation with the children or acting as a representative in the schools, as highlighted by Jacqueline earlier regarding advice on visiting the school as a Black mother.

Knowledge Transmission of Black Mothers

Participants in the study also engaged in knowledge transmission to resist racist systems and a lack of Black students' adequate reflection in the school system (e.g., curriculum, educators, and pedagogies). Naomi shared her experience: "There was never a time that my son learned anything about his history, or his culture, [so] … I'll supplement at home…. I'll take him to stuff in the community, you know, I'll do that extra work myself. But … there's only

so much supplementing you can do.... So that he didn't get any of that in school." Similarly, Shelly-Ann stated the following: "I don't necessarily totally depend on the [school] system to teach my children about themselves.... [School] doesn't reflect who they are. It doesn't reflect their interest. It doesn't reflect the community interests…. I'm a teacher to them in their own sense of giving them their own purpose, making sure that they're involved in what they need to be."

In terms of providing a sense of self, many participants in the study shared their advice and teaching to their children, such as Christine who stated: "You can't take that away…. You are going to go into to the world and let them know you are a Black child. And that's why you're different." Passing on key lessons on Blackness for their children was a prevalent theme in the study and happens despite a lack of such education provided in the schools, as described by mothers in the study.

Discussion: Reclamation of Black Ways of Knowing and Being through Black Mothering

Although Black mothers and Black student learners face a number of barriers based on their intersectional social locations, the findings presented here suggest that Black mothers employ a number of strategies to navigate a school system steeped in anti-Black racism. However, although race is salient, the Black mothers in this study faced repeated injustices when navigating the education system as a result of their multiple intersecting identities, such as through the single mother trope. The results also suggest that Black mothers are often silenced and told not to engage in advocacy, and when they do they face unjust consequences. Despite these barriers, Black mothers engage in a range of survival strategies, including drawing on community support, othermothering, knowing their rights, and supplementing missing curriculum for their children when that is lacking in schools.

The findings reveal that some mothers were careful to avoid presenting themselves in ways that might lead them to be stereotyped, such as being seen as the "angry Black woman," or to help fellow Black women avoid this trap. This points to the larger issue of Black mothers being judged through apolitical and ahistorical tropes and the resulting strategies they employ to avoid such stereotypes. For example, Williams et al. quote a participant who described thinking that an educator was hesitant to share key information at a parent-teacher conference about her daughter's progress because she was Black: "I think the reason why she didn't bring it up to me earlier is that she felt like a Black parent was probably gonna go in there and go crazy" (942). In this example, the sexist trope of the hysterical woman is intensified when combined with race leading to an ableist trope—"crazy." The relationship between Black

mothers and the school community can be fractured through these stereotypical ideas. Schooling injustices and assumptions of Blackness colour Black mothers' interactions within such institutions, create various survival strategies to reduce the chances of such barriers hindering their school navigation.

As noted above, othermothering was repeated across all focus groups and interviews in the study. It is a set of practices by which Black mothers can disrupt Western notions of motherhood and nuclear family arrangements. Othermothering, however, should be seen not only as a response to anti-Black racism but also as being rooted in African Indigenous ontoepistemologies. Thus, othermothering is not simply reactionary to oppressive historical systems, such as slavery or current conditions of poverty and inequality. Rather, it is part of African ways of knowing and being, and affirming this highlights that our histories did not start with colonization and slavery. Throughout the study, mothers would invite community members—such as male-identifying partners, relatives, and friends—to join them in their interactions with schools for support and to demonstrate that they were not alone when advocating in schools.

I think of Black mothering as active and not passive, and a possible avenue of disruption against systemic anti-Black racism in schooling, as demonstrated through the survival strategies of mothers in the study. Despite the barriers to be vocal because of their intersectional subject positions, Black mothers find creative ways to resist unjust systems in the community, such as reaching out to nonbiological family members for support. Black mothering practices include knowledge transmission passed through mothers through what King and Ferguson call the "motherline," Oyewumi refers to as "mothernity," and Dove labels "the nuances of motherhood," which was prevalent in the study by way of the knowledge transmission strategies employed by Black mothers, who supplement with their own teachings when the school curriculum and experiences lack histories and current realities that are relevant for Black students. Black mothers consistently describe a lacking in the education system; as a result, they work to provide a sense of awareness of Blackness for their children through an acceptance of difference, which is contrary to colour-evasive tropes bolstered in mainstream education. Moreover, participants consistently centre the embeddedness of Blackness within community contexts, which is a space for Black children to learn more about their identity in an interconnected frame, as described by both Naomi and Shelly-Ann in how they pass on race-positive knowledge. This is consistent with the community-oriented attribute of Black feminism that goes beyond the individual level (Collins 10). Participants in the study shared their examples of othermothering practices to care for and respond to issues related to the wider community, such as the letter Thalia sent to the school regarding a behavioural class with only Black students. Othermothering is a resistance strategy not

only for individual survival but also for wider community goals. Added to this, Black mothers' knowledge transmission serves as a form of filling in the gaps for racist systems, which omit Black histories and present realities in the schooling system; however, Black mothers find a creative ways to instill Black pride and sense of self for Black children, as evident by Christine's example of her advice to her child and to all Black children—"You are a Black child"—as well as Naomi's and Shelly-Ann's supplements for education, which lacks Black ways of knowing and being through curriculum and pedagogies.

Many of the methods Black mothers employ to navigate racist institutions are strategies for survival, which may sometimes uphold the very norms that they seek to challenge. For example, Jacqueline's advice of having a male partner accompany Black mothers in school meetings and interactions can be read as a form of heteronormativity. However, Barbara noted that support can also come from other community members, such as aunties. The designation of "aunties" is not included in the bureaucratic inertia of school official registration forms but is important when engaging African ways of knowing and being, which points to another mismatch between the school system and Black mothering practices. This response reinforces the intersectional social locations of Black mothers, which is a challenge to the stereotypical assumptions of single parenthood Black mothers are labelled with navigating school systems. The strategies employed may not be the same as mass forms of activism, such as demonstrations and marches, although these are also part of many Black women's experiences, but rather the transmission and sharing of knowledges and active advocacy strategies are important means of combatting systemic violence.

What I am referring to as Black mothering can move beyond survival strategies to also include activism, as was evident in this study as othermothering, advocacy, and sharing. Black mothering can also take up an intersectional orientation, which challenges assumptions of mutually exclusive markers of identity. Who is to say that a community member cannot be Black, queer, and disabled? This study shows how race, gender, and class are at the intersection of Black mothers' experiences, and this is nuanced with other markers of identity. Disrupting and troubling what it means to be a mother—a concept which is rooted in social reproduction practices that are foundational to the capitalist nation-state—are essential in community justice work. The participants' responses make clear that a transgressive orientation to motherhood already exists but is not clearly ascribed to Black mothers who challenge and combat complex systems. According to Steady: "Qualities of motherhood, perceived as being nurturing, compassionate, and protective, were considered essential to female leadership. In many ways, motherhood is a symbolic, ideological, and structural concept that cuts across gender and is, as well, a marker of individual attributes and characteristics" (*Women and*

Leadership 22). Motherhood can be a transformative space that cuts across classed, raced, gendered, and ableist positionalities. For instance, Jacqueline's thoughts on bringing a male-identifying person into the interviews can be read as counter-fatherhood as well because she does not specify that they ought to be a biological father. Barbara added that they can be an uncle, an auntie, or a friend, which troubles the notions of biological and gendered mothering but demonstrates that it can transgress these ideals. Thalia also stated the importance of having support from other people besides her partner, despite being married. Black mothers trouble the configurations of mothering through othermothering practices, wherein it takes a community to raise children. Thus, Black mothering is a practice that can transgress gender binary configurations of motherhood. The apolitical and ahistorical accounts of Black motherhood serve to reinforce the status quo. Through capturing Black mothers' rich resistance strategies, both past and present, Black educational futurity can be reimagined. For instance, a broader understanding of, and appreciation for, othermothering practices can disrupt notions of single parenthood, since Black mothers are then situated within the contexts of their families and wider communities as described in the findings.

Black mothering can serve as a site of disruption to unjust systems through new orientations to understanding the complexity of Black mothers' survival strategies employed in the schooling and education of their children and communities. If schools' staff and administrators and the wider community were to understand the complexity of Black mothering practices, as demonstrated through their survival strategies, it could result in new perspectives of Black mothers and wider communities and help to enrich the experiences of Black children in schools. Such an understanding can help create more just systems and enhanced Black educational futurity, not only for Black community members but for all communities.

Conclusion

In this article, I have described the educational injustices faced by Black children in GTA schools, the intersectional inequities faced by Black mothers in advocating and supporting Black student learners, and the resistance strategies of survival led by Black mothers. I situate the paper in Black feminism, which explores Black women's lived experiences in challenging wider systems of oppression. And I have called for a Black mothering approach, which provides insight into anti-Black racism in schooling and education and highlights the possibilities for Black educational futurity. Not only is futurity about the here and now, but it is also about better futures for Black children, families, and communities who have been disenfranchised through normative approaches to schooling and education. Centring the specificity of Black

mothering develops new orientations to learning and unlearning oppressive practices embedded within and across multiple systems, while providing opportunities to disrupt and challenge the status quo in education and beyond.

Endnotes

1. The school-to-care pipeline is a system where Black children are removed from their families and placed in care systems such as Children's Aid (Ajdei and Minka).

Works Cited

Adjei, Paul B. and Minka, Eric. "Black Parents Ask for a Second Look: Parenting under 'White' Child Protection Rules in Canada." *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 94, 2018, pp. 511-24.

Allen, Quaylan, and Kimberley White-Smith. "'That's Why I Say Stay in School': Black Mothers' Parental Involvement, Cultural Wealth, and Exclusion in Their Son's Schooling." *Urban Education*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2017, pp. 409-35.

Benjamin, Lorna A. *The Black/Jamaican Criminal: The Making of Ideology*. Dissertation. University of Toronto, 2003.

Black Lives Matter. "Herstory." *Black Lives Matter*, blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/. Accessed 16 Sept. 2022.

Brady, Janelle. "Education for Whom? Exploring Systems of Oppression and Domination." *Journal for New Scholars in Education*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2017, pp. 116-26.

Coleman, Monica A., et al. "Roundtable Discussion: Must I Be Womanist? (with Response)." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2006, pp. 85-134.

Collins, Patricia Hill. "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships." *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1987, pp. 3-10.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2000.

Cooper, Afua. *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montréal*. University of Georgia Press, 2006.

Curtis, Bruce. "The Origins of Education Inequality in Ontario." *Our Schools/Our Selves*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2014, pp. 41-76.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 1989, no. 1, 1989, pp. 131-67.

Creswell, John W. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. SAGE, 2007.

Crichlow, Wesley, and Sharon Lauricella. "An Analysis of Anti-Black Crime Reporting in Toronto: Evidence from News Frames and Critical Race Theory." *Media, Crime and Racism*, edited by Bhatia, Monish et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 301-16.

Dei, George J. S. *Anti–Racism Education: Theory and Practice*. Fernwood, 1996.

Dei, George J. S. *Teaching Africa: Towards a Transgressive Pedagogy*. Routledge, 2010.

Dei, George J. S. *Reframing Blackness and Black Solidarities Through Anti–Colonial and Decolonial Prisms*. Springer, 2017.

Dei, George J. S., et al. "Drop Out or Push out? The Dynamics of Black Students' Disengagement From School." *Internet Archive*, 1995, archive.org/details/dropoutorpushout00deig. Accessed 16 Sept. 2022.

Dove, Nah. "Defining a Mother-Centered Matrix to Analyze the Status of Women." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2002, pp. 3-24.

Elliott, Sinikka, and Megan Reid. "The Superstrong Black Mother." *Contexts*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2016, pp. 48-53.

Guest, Greg, et al. "How Many Focus Groups Are Enough? Building an Evidence Base for Nonprobability Sample Sizes." *Field Methods*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2017, pp. 3-22.

Hill, Shirley A. "Class, Race, and Gender Dimensions of Child Rearing in African American Families." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2001, pp. 494-508.

Hudson-Weems, Clenora. *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. Bedford, 1993.

James, Carl E. *Life at the Intersection*. Fernwood, 2012.

James, Carl, and Tana Turner. *Towards Race Equity in Education: The Schooling of Black Students in the Greater Toronto Area*. York University, 2017.

James, Carl, and Tana Turner. Jean Augustine Chair in Education Community and Diaspora. *The Engaged Parent: Navigating the School System for Black Student Success*. Faculty of Education, York University, 2019.

Katawazi, Miriam. "Ontario Government Urged to Add Black History to Education Curriculum." *CTV News*, 26 Feb. 2021, toronto.ctvnews.ca/ontario-government-urged-to-add-black-history-to-education-curriculum-1.5326049. Accessed 16 Sept. 2022.

King, Joyce E. *Dysconscious Racism, Afrocentric Praxis, and Education for Human Freedom: Through the Years I Keep on Toiling—The Selected Work of Joyce E. King*. Routledge, 2015.

King, Toni C. and S. A. Ferguson. *Black Womanist Leadership: Tracing the Motherline*. SUNY Press, 2011.

Mirza, Heidi S. *Black British Feminism: A Reader*. Routledge, 1997.

Mullings, Delores V., and Renee Mullings-Lewis. "How Black Mothers 'Successfully' Raise Children in the 'Hostile' Canadian Climate." *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2013, pp. 105-19.

Omotoso, Sharon, A. "When the Rains Are (Un)Stopped: African Feminism(s) and Green Democracy." *Ethics and the Environment*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2019, pp. 23-41.

Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators. *Voices of Ontario Black Educators: An Experiential Report*. Turner Consulting Group, 2015, onabse.org/ ONABSE_VOICES_OF_BLACK_EDUCATORS_Final_Report.pdf. Accessed 16 Sept. 2022.

Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC). "OHRC Releases Report on its Inquiry into the Over-Representation of Indigenous and Black Children in Ontario's Child Welfare System" *Ontario Human Rights Commission*, 12 Apr. 2018, www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news_centre/ohrc-releases-report-its-inquiry -over-representation-indigenous-and-black-children-ontario%E2%80% 99s-child. Accessed 16 Sept. 2022.

Powell, Tunette, and Justin A. Coles. "'We Still Here': Black Mothers' Personal Narratives of Sense Making and Resisting AntiBlackness and the Suspensions of Their Black Children." *Race Ethnicity and Education*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2021, pp. 76-95.,

Rodgers, Selena T. "Womanism and Afrocentricity: Understanding the Intersection." *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, vol. 27, no. 1-2, 2017, pp. 36-47.

Salole, Abigail, and Zakaria Abdulle. "Quick to Punish: An Examination of the School to Prison Pipeline for Marginalized Youth." *Canadian Review of Social Policy*, no. 72-73, 2015, pp. 124-68.

Shadd, Adrienne, et al. *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop, Toronto!* Dundurn, 2022.

Smith, Linda T. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books, 2012.

Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 64-81.

Steady, Filomina C. *The Black Woman Cross–Culturally*. Schenkman, 1981.

Steady, Filomina C. "African Women: Re-Centering the Issues in the 21st Century." *African in the 21st Century: Toward a New Future*, edited by Mazama, Ama. Routledge, 2007, pp. 133-53.

Steady, Filomina C. "The Black Woman and the Essentializing Imperative: Implications for Theory and Praxis in the 21st Century." *Race, Gender and Class*, vol. 14, no. 1-2, 2007, pp. 178-95.

Steady, Filomina C. *Women and Leadership in West Africa: Mothering the Nation and Humanizing the State*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Turner, Jennifer L. "Black Mothering in Action: The Racial-Class Socialization

Practices of Low-Income Black Single Mothers." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 2020, pp. 242-53.

Wane, Njoki N. "Reflections on the Mutuality of Mothering: Women, Children, and Othermothering." *Journal of the Association for Reflections on Mothering*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2000, pp. 105-16.

Wane, Njoki N. "[Re]Claiming My Indigenous Knowledge: Challenges, Resistance, and Opportunities." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2013, pp. 93-107.

Wortley, Scot, and Akwasi Owusu-Bempah. "The Usual Suspects: Police Stop and Search Practices in Canada." *Policing and Society*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2011, pp. 395-407.

Williams, Amber D., et al. "Black Mothers' Perceptions of the Role of Race in Children's Education." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 79, no. 1, 2017, pp. 932-46.