

"It Was Never Made for Us"  
Black Mothers Organizing for Educational Possibilities  
Amidst Anti-Black Realities

by

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## ABSTRACT

Since the genesis of the long experimental project known as the United States of America, the country has invested in the creation, implementation and maintenance of exclusionary policies and practices which have effectually denied whole and equitable access to educational spaces for Black children. These conventions have presented in a myriad of ways from: ignorance compulsory laws, segregation, disparate rates of school suspensions and expulsions, school closures, school funding inequities, denial of access to rigorous classes, burdensome school admissions policies and the disproportionate funneling of Black children into disabled and low-track class designations. Throughout this constant contortion of approaches to educational exclusion, Black mothers have had to guide, cover and encourage their children as they navigate these barriers and dodge the pitfalls of educational removal. This critical ethnographic oral history seeks to investigate the ways that a grassroots community organizing group led by a cadre of Black othermothers, known as the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers, strategize to challenge the educational structures that support pushout and the continued exclusion of Black children from schools. Employing the frames of Critical Race Theory, BlackCrit and Black Feminist Thought, this study seeks to interrogate the following overarching concerns: 1) How does the mothers' standpoint affect their response to school system inequities. 2) What is the influence of their efforts towards school equity? What is revealed is the mothers' ability to employ a strategic wisdom that acknowledges the limits of systems change, perseveres against the intractability of White supremacy and works towards a freer Black education future for their children.

## DEDICATION

For the mothers that allowed me the privilege of holding their stories. You have shared the gift of your knowledge and wisdom with me and for that I am eternally grateful. I pray your journey inspires community mothers and othermothers in Black communities throughout the world to imagine and work toward beautiful new possibilities for our babies.

For my father, who blessed me with so many gifts before he went on to find his peace above. I understand more today than I did when you were here. I see it now- what you wanted to give us, but didn't have the tools at your disposal. I hope that you are proud.

For my mother, who has been my true ride or die. No matter what decision I have made, you have been my rock and my net. I hope I have become even half the mother you have been to me. Clearly understand, my accomplishments are the fruits of your mothering.

For my children-Journi, Jayanti and Zora-you are my everything and my motivation to keep going. My tired can never be greater than my love for you all. Mama loves you and will always fight for you to get what you deserve out of this life.

I love you more than my favorite color. I love you more than pecan-praline ice cream 😊

~DD

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## CHRONICLE 1: FROM CHILD TO THREAT

*Five years ago, I received a phone call from my nine-year-old son's school. "You need to come and pick your son up from the school. He has been suspended." My son had never been suspended and the statement left me shocked, worried and scared. What could have possibly happened? I assumed it was a fight. Since entering the local public school in the middle of the year, he had been complaining of being teased for "being soft", by some of the older kids. My boy, the little Black<sup>1</sup> kid who was into comic books, drawing, jazz and robotics did not easily gel with the prescribed templates of what little Black boys should be. Once I arrived at the school, the principal quickly swished me into her office. She knew who I was from my history of youth and family work in the community. She attempted to use this common assumed orientation to establish rapport between us. I am sure my face told the tale of my displeasure. "He drew a picture of himself shooting his math teacher. That is considered a threat and he could be expelled for that. The fact that he is only getting three days is lenient." She pushed a paper across her desk towards me. "You will need to sign this." I read the paper which stated the purported violation. "Threatening a teacher". I pushed the paper back towards her unsigned. "I am not signing this. Where is my son? Where is this picture?" She looked exasperated, handed me the drawing and left.*

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<sup>1</sup> For the scope of this paper, I will use the terminology of "Black" to reference a global and political understanding of peoples of the African Diaspora. I will use the term African-American when specifically utilized in research or by participants in self-identifying themselves. While the politicization of these terms has been considered in popular culture for some time (Mencken, 1944; Teamebony, 2012) and in various academic arenas (Agyemang, Bhopal, Bruijnzeels, 2005) they are often applied subjectively and acknowledged within the intragroup dialogue of domestic born Black/African-Americans as synonymous. Furthermore, much of the data on education racial disparities utilizes both terms. Notions of race and identity are thick and inherently problematic but are not the purview of this paper.

*While I was looking at the literal comic strip drawing of him transforming into a super-hero to defeat the foe that had given him a poor grade. My son entered the room alone. "Close the door Jay and tell me what happened." He stated he did indeed draw a comic strip at home, of him turning into a super-hero and taking on the super-villain math teacher to destroy her after she gave him an "F" on his math test. Since we had been at the school, he had often complained about her refusal to help him. She actually once told him in front of the class, "It is not my fault you came here late in the year. If you are having trouble, you will need to figure it out!" I had gone to sit in observation of this teacher after that incident. She was the type of teacher that spent more time belittling her students than teaching. There was no relational connection in her approach, and I would have believed her an uncertified instructor that had never been taught age appropriate pedagogy, much less cultural cognizance. I could understand my son's frustration.*

*My son, who sold his comic strip pictures to other students at the school for a quarter, had put the picture he created at home in frustration in his drawing folder. Another student came across it while looking for comic drawing wares to purchase and gave it to the teacher. My son was immediately sent to the office and was suspended.*

*The principal came back in the room. I immediately countered, "If you truly believe my son to be a threat to the teacher, why aren't you offering counseling or some other restorative intervention?" She looked me straight in the eye and said, "We honestly don't have the resources to do that." She pushed the sheet of paper back towards me to sign. I put it in my purse and walked out of her office with my son.*

*I knew the potential impacts that this incident could have on his future educational opportunities. Schools would try to use this to filter him out. I did not actually tell my son he was suspended. I did not want that knowledge floating in his head and creating further self-constructed negative barriers and beliefs. Due to my education and the type of work I did, I was able to take him with me during those three days to work, to museums, to my meetings and community events. He honestly likely had a more educationally rich experience with me than he would have had at school. This only made me think deeper about the realities that parents not privileged by education and position must deal with during instances of school pushout. Still, with all my knowledge, the reality of this single moment would continue to impact us well into the future.*

*The first hurdle came the following school year when I attempted to enroll Jay into the charter school he had previously attended since 1<sup>st</sup> grade. I filled out the enrollment forms and turned them in to the office clerk. The next morning, I received a phone call from the school. “The principal would like to meet with you about Jay. Would you be able to come in today?” I made an appointment for later that afternoon. The principal, whom had known me and my children practically since their time in school welcomed me into his office kindly. There were two other people in his office whom I was unfamiliar with. “Ms. Demps, I am glad to see you. We have some concerns about Jay. He was suspended for threatening a teacher?” I breathed deeply and began to retell the tale of why and how he was suspended. I had to clearly state that no weapons were involved. That my then nine-year-old son had not attempted to physically intimidate or directly threaten anyone. That my son did not give something to the teacher to scare her.*

*That my son had not been aggressive towards this teacher in any way. I was then asked to step out of the room.*

*When what seemed like forever, but was likely only 10 minutes had passed, I was called back into the office. The principal began, “After reviewing Jay’s previous record with us and your statements, we have determined that we will admit him for this year. Please understand this is a probational admit and any referral or write-up could result in his immediate expulsion from the school.” I quickly had to consider my options. I nodded my understanding, while my mind was racing. My son was at the mercy of the teachers and their interpretation. He could risk absolutely zero missteps. No childlike mistakes or adolescent miscalculations. He was no longer seen as a child, but a potential threat. I was doubly tasked with ensuring he knew the protocols for survivance in this minefield while being on guard for accusations, exaggerations, and protestations against his claim to innocence. This was my baptism into the workings of student pushout and exclusion and the spark for my future academic and scholarly passions.*

### **Understanding Exclusion**

Educational exclusion is an inclusive term which refers to the myriad avenues that one is denied access to educational spaces. This term encompasses the practices and underlying policies that lead to Black educational denial. There is a long and torrid history with the practices of educational exclusion of many racialized groups in the United States (Spring, 2016; Valencia, 2012). The adaptable nature of exclusion is evident in the various ways it has been presented and thus preserved. For instance, in the 1600’s laws forbade writing and later reading or even the instruction by any free person

of a slave (Weinberg, 1995; Williams, 2005), lest the teacher be punished (Executive Committee, 1841).

After the Civil War, the funding resources allotted to support schools for the newly freed Black population were quickly reclaimed as Reconstruction efforts were dismantled (DuBois, 1935; Weinberg, 1995). Attempts to build schoolhouses with the funds of philanthropists and the Black community itself were challenged by mobs which burnt them to the ground (America's Reconstruction, n.d; Moss, 2010; Neem, 2017). Jim Crow nurtured a separate and unequal educational system (Riegel, 1984; Donnor, 2013). "Law and order" mandates orchestrated the stripping of federal dollars for post-secondary educational opportunities from formerly incarcerated, disproportionately Black, drug offenders. A war on drugs and quest for capitalist opulence saw funds seized from urban public schools during the Reaganomics era (Simon, 2007). School zero-tolerance policies accelerated already existing racially disparate patterns of punitive responses to school misbehavior pushing kids out of classrooms temporarily and permanently contributing to a school to prison pipeline.

### **The Trouble with Black kids**

Today, we are faced with the reality that Black boys are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their white male counterparts and Black girls are six times more likely to be suspended than their white female peers (Crenshaw, Ocen & Nanda, 2015). These stats have been repeated at various conferences, educational symposiums and organizing conventions ad nauseum. Disparate patterns of student discipline by race, language, and disability status have become a noted trend in schools across the country (Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, & Tobin, 2011; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger,

Simmons, Feggins-Azziz & Chung, 2005; Sullivan, Van Norman & Klingbeil, 2014). These trends are most popularly known as the School to Prison Pipeline (STPP). STPP is defined as the set of policies and practices that effectively force some students, especially those from marginalized groups, out of the school system and on the path to incarceration. Zero-tolerance policies and school expulsion and suspension practices are exemplary of contributing factors to this phenomenon (Advancement Project et al, 2011).

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education's (USDOE) Office for Civil Rights (OCR) released the results of a national data gathering initiative in which researchers sought to capture the state of education equity in these regards (Expansive Survey of America's Public Schools 2014). Findings confirmed numerous accounts of unreasonable incidences of inequitable punitive action across America's public schools. One such data point found that while Black students comprise approximately 18% of the national student population, they account for 42% of all students suspended (Expansive Survey of America's Public Schools 2014). The OCR also noted that these disparities were found, consistently, from preschool through high school.

Considering the mounting evidence that school policies and procedures contribute to the preponderance of exclusionary punishment disproportionately meted out to Black children, the U.S Department of Justice (USDOJ) and USDOE under the Obama administration, jointly released guidelines for school districts to begin to disrupt the STPP (USDOE, 2014). The statement highlighted that district leaders must adhere to already existing federal anti-discrimination mandates. In accordance with these mandates, the USDOE also encouraged districts to report on whether they disparately applied punishments based or influenced by race, color, or national origin.

Many welcomed the recognition of discriminatory discipline and applauded the guidance and reaffirmation of already existing civil rights law (Dooley, 2018). Yet, in 2016, under a new presidential administration, a commission led by the new Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos, recommended that schools rescind the Obama administration guidance for school discipline. The federal report from this commission seemed especially troubled by the tracking of discipline incidents by race stating that under the previous guidance: “even facially neutral school discipline policies may violate federal law if they have a “disparate impact” upon members of certain racial groups in rates of suspension, expulsion, or referral to law enforcement (Final Report, 2018, p. 67). The DeVos report went on to claim that the guidelines had a chilling effect on teachers and administrators resulting in an inability to control classrooms and in turn resulting in an unsafe learning environment. The Education Secretary suggested that school should instead, “seriously consider partnering with local law enforcement in the training and arming of school personnel” (Kamenetz, 2018).

It must be noted that one of the most horrific mass school shootings in US history had also taken place during the second year of this administration at Parkland High School (Chuck, Johnson & Siemaszko, 2018). Some conservative circles pointed to the laxing of school discipline under the Obama administration guidelines, which sought to keep more children of color in schools, as the real culprit for the incident (Boyer & Richardson, 2018; Camera, 2018). Under the weight of the national outcry from yet another school shooting and refusal to acknowledge other contributing factors such as gun laws, school counselors and therapists and cultural competence, this line of logic gained traction and had an influential impact on the newly crafted school guidance for



discipline. Incidentally, the Parkland shooter was white and had already been expelled from the school when he murdered 14 students and three school staff. The dubious connections between the Obama guidelines and the horrendous events at Parkland were a slight of hand to allay accountability while maintaining oppressive practices and policies that disproportionality harm minoritized children.

Anti-racist activist, Tim Wise said, “There are no accidents, only precedence” (Collins, 2016). It is impossible to ignore the propensity of educational policy in this country to crawl towards justice only to sprint backwards towards exclusion on the backs of Black children. The predictability of these patterns lie in this country’s, and by extension educational system’s belief in narratives about blackness that assign vices of violence, lasciviousness, laziness and irresponsibility as the constitutional components of a people deemed not quite human nor capable of civility (Wilderson, 2010). A people whose humanity is consistently misrecogized, both implicitly and explicitly (Cooper, 2018). Thus, all places in which Blacks are present become safety concerns and exclusion from civil spaces becomes ‘common sense’. In this way, the original guidelines which sought to insure equitable and fair treatment for Black children and other marginalized students inside of schools, shifted from an issue of civil rights to a matter of safety in which the common-sense approach is to maintain the untethered and disparate removal of Black children from schools.

### **Studying the Black Family**

In 1965, the Moynihan Report was used to cement the ideology that the “Negro Family” was in fact deficient in its’ ability to mimic the white patriarchal middle-class

family structure model, which the support suggested, contributed to Black people's own demise. "In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well (p. 18).

This is not intended to be an oversimplification of the report as Moynihan does speak to a history of oppression as "three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro" (p. 32) and subsequent poverty as contributing factors as well. Yet for many, the prematurely released report was all the fodder needed to reinforce the notion that the Negro was a slave to his desires and trapped in a "tangle of pathology" (p.30).

In 1967, in response to the rash of race riots occurring across the country in the late 1960's, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed a panel to investigate the causes of the civil unrest. The Kerner Report (1968) was the result of the panel's findings and sparked fierce debate across the country. In what could be seen as a correction to the previous Moynihan Report, Kerner stated, "What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it" (Zelizer & Wilenz, 2019, p. 2). Ultimately, the report was "a blunt indictment of white racism in its many manifestations" (Zelizer & Wilenz, 2019, p. x).

As these findings did not align with a more desirable narrative, blaming the riots on Black people's inherent penchant for violence, the disarray of the Black family or

perhaps communism, the recommendations of the Kerner Report were ignored. Instead of investing more dollars into integration initiatives and aggressive solutions to inequality as the report suggested, dollars were pumped into the creation of the police state and the “tough on crime” legislation of the Nixon years and beyond (Newell, 2013). This ideology excused the over-policing of Black communities, ever-growing incarceration rates of Black men, women and children and concluded that the resultant dismal academic outcomes were inevitable. It additionally ushered in the eventual militarization of schools and the resultant pushout of Black children (Simon, 2007).

### **The rhetoric of the Black parent**

So, in the midst of all this student exclusion and push-out, where are the Black parents? Some would have you believe they are missing in action.

People getting shot in the back of the head over a piece of pound cake! Then we all run out and are outraged, “The cops shouldn't have shot him” What the hell was he doing with the pound cake in his hand? ...We are not parenting...Brown versus the Board of Education is no longer the white person's problem...Five or six different children, same woman, eight, ten different husbands or whatever, pretty soon you're going to have to have DNA cards so you can tell who you're making love to. You don't know who this is. It might be your grandmother. I'm telling you, they're young enough. Hey, you have a baby when you're twelve. Your baby turns thirteen and has a baby, how old are you? Huh? Grandmother. By the time you're twelve, you could have sex with your grandmother, you keep those numbers coming. (Eight Cities Media, n.d.)

In 2004, during a ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board* decision, Bill Cosby, formerly revered, currently fallen Black comedian and community icon, gave his explosive “Pound Cake Speech”. The context of Cosby’s statements could not be more aptly placed, as during this time conversations were occurring in academia and beyond about the failure of the landmark judicial decision to produce similar academic outcomes between Black and White students (Bell, 2004; Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Feagin & Barnett, 2004; Guinier, 2004). Cosby used this occasion to place the blame for the failures of *Brown vs. Board* squarely on the backs of Black parents, most specifically low-income Black mothers. Beyond the apparent classist Black bourgeois tone of his sentiments, they were not new and reinforced long endorsed stereotypes of the fallibility and incompetence of Black mothers and by extension Black people.

Black mothers have long been seen as unfit save their usefulness when caring for white children (Roberts, 1993; Roberts, 2011). This logic frames the complex terms of the relationship between Black mothers and the school system (Ladson-Billings, 2009). The defining features of the unfitness and incivility of the Black mother are varied, yet similarly oriented in the stereotypes weaponized to deny Black women recognition, voice and validity (Collins, 1999; Harris-Perry, 2011) . Regardless of these constraints, Black mothers have fought through the smog of deficient tropes to fight for an equitable educational experience for their children (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Danna, 2003; McClain, 2019; Wilson-Cooper, 2007; Wilson-Cooper, 2009).

## **Purpose of the Study**

This study seeks to challenge master narrations which cast Black mothers as irresponsible, disengaged, disempowered and the cause of the Black educational disparities and the Achilles heel of Black progress. This study will examine the ways a group of Black natural and othermother, known as the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers (ACBM) employ community organizing to respond to incidents of school exclusion as experienced by their children. Thus, the following questions guide this work:

1. How does the mothers' standpoint affect their collective response to school system inequities?
2. How have the efforts of ACBM influenced educational policy?

## **Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to the budding literature which examines the power, influence and agency of Black mothers to move policy reforms while serving as both guide and protectors of their children in this contemporary moment of regularly televised police shootings of black bodies, urban school dismantling and privatization and the dense cacophony of anti-blackness blaring on social media, in the news and evidenced in school buildings. This research investigates the motivating factors, experiential knowledge, and policy impacts of Black community Othermothers fighting school exclusion against this torturous backdrop. It adds to the growing research amplifying the voices of Black mothers confronting educational systems on behalf of their children (Davenport, 2019; Dow, 2019; Edstrom, 2018; Killen, 2019; McClain, 2019) and challenges designations of who should be included as educational leaders. This research

has implications for teachers, school administrators and other education advocates committed to making educational institutions truly equitable spaces for Black children thus, realizing the necessity of an equalized collaborative arrangement, respective of the voices and experiential knowledge of Black parents as integral to that goal.

### **Key Concepts and Definitions**

**Anti-Blackness-** Dumas & Ross (2016) defines it as “cultural disregard for and disgust with blackness...antiblackness marks an irreconcilability between the Black and any sense of social or cultural regard” (p. 13).

**Community Othermothers-** King (2010) defines community othermothers as Black women, both relatives and non-kin, who form mothering relationship with others’ children and foster an interdependent nurturing of one’s own children, other children and entire communities. “Those practitioners whose nurturing activities encompassed commitment and contributions to the collectivity” (p. 78).

**Parent Voice-** according to McKenna (2013) Parent Voice implies not only that parents have ideas and opinions about their children, but also that educators are receptive to this voice, allowing for an open, multidirectional flow of communication (p. 9).

**Parent Agency-** refers to the ability of parents to interact, respond and make choices within a given environment free of restraints to express their power as parents. Such restraints could be realized through lack of information, lack of resources or perceived unwelcoming environments and assistance.

**School to Prison Pipeline-** is a national trend where children, overwhelmingly from low-income or historically marginalized populations, are funneled out of public schools into the juvenile and criminal justice systems via school policies and practices.

**Student Pushout-**policies and practices that effectively remove students from the educational environment temporarily or indefinitely. These practices are most often realized through student suspension and expulsion yet include other means of escorting children out or blocking access to educational institutions such as exorbitant requirements for school admission.

**Student Exclusion-** Inclusive term for the acts or policies that effectively bar a student from educational participation. This term includes the active “push out” of a student from the entire school system, as well as denying them access to particular spaces such as gifted programs, college prep courses, and closing neighborhood schools.

**Natural Mothers-** those who gave birth and share blood to a particular child or set of children.

**Othermothers-** According to James (1993), “othermothers are those who assist blood mothers in the responsibilities of child care for short- to long term periods, in informal or formal arrangements. They can be, but are not confined to , such blood relatives as grandmothers, sister, aunts, cousins, or supportive fictive kin” (p. 45).

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## CHAPTER 2

### CHRONICLE 2: NOT JUST A RIVER IN EGYPT

*I first began hearing about the school to prison pipeline around 2009. When I initially encountered the term, I had a pretty good idea of what it meant just from its' nomenclature. I kind of stored it in the back of my mind as something of interest, but not my foremost concern. At the time, I was directing youth and community programming for the Urban League and was most preoccupied with making sure my young people, overwhelmingly comprised of Black teenage boys, had someplace safe to go and weren't getting shot in the street.*

*One cold afternoon, as me and my staff were preparing for our kids to come in with demands of snacks and opening up the gym so they could shoot around before tutoring time, a group of our boys came in an hour before they were expected.*

*"Ms. Dawn, the new principal they got up there just suspended me! For ten days man!"*

*"Wait a minute. What? What happened?"*

*This group of four boys ranged in age from 14 to 16 years old. Rontrell, the one who was suspended, was tall and thin with copper skin and large eyes. At sixteen he was considered, by me at least, the group leader. He volunteered to help around the League whenever we needed it. He was probably the most mature of the bunch and was looked up to by a lot of the younger kids in the program. But the rest of the group was not far behind in terms of their leadership-especially considering how far they had come from when I first met them. Jajuan, Rontrell's little brother, was the youngest of them. He kept a sly twinkle in his eye and was quick to flash a beautiful smile. Robert was considered the most comical of the group. He was very popular with the other little ones*

*in the League including my son. Jay loved to hang around Robert because he kept him laughing and he had a cold flow. Preston, was the smallest, with a recognizable laugh who spoke with a stutter when he got upset. These boys were the first to arrive for programs and events and the last to leave. Whenever we needed an extra set of hands to help keep things moving, they were always willing to assist. Oftentimes me or my staff members would drive them home to make sure they made it there safely when they left the League after dark. I recall when I first met them. One gentleman on my staff, familiar with some of their family backgrounds, discouraged me from letting them into the program. "I know for a fact Robert just got out of juvey for skipping school and breaking into people's houses while they was at work. They just gonna be trouble." That person did not last long on my staff. Regardless, I had grown to trust any one of my boys with my own blood children. What could Rontrell have possibly done to be put out of school for two weeks?*

*"What did you do?" I asked.*

*"Ms. Demps," Rontrell started, "I was getting my coat out of my locker! They said I was skipping class, but the bell just rang and I went to get my coat cause the heat in the school don't even work! The hall monitor gonna say it was truancy! How is it truancy when I am in the school building! Man, it is just freezing in there!"*

*Thornton, the high schools my boys attended, was known as a building long ignored by the district and in utter disrepair. The high school was the last on the Northside left open to serve the city's Northside babies. This was where the lions-share of the city's children reside. This was where most of the poor, Black folks lived in the city. That was where I came up. Yet, in this chocolate city where nearly half the population*

*lived at or below the poverty line, things like a high school heating system in disrepair during the height of winter seemed destined.*

*“Did they give you anything when they suspended you?” I asked.*

*Rontrell handed me a half-slip of paper. On it were categories to be marked for the student violation. It noted when Rontrell could return to school. Scrawled at the bottom was what I assumed to be some school official’s signature scrawled at the bottom with the date and a space for a parent signature. Beyond the ludicrous violation, my attention was drawn to the title of the document.*

*“Denial of Education Participation”*

*I stared at it for a while trying to grasp why that title bothered me so much.*

*Denial.*

*That was it.*

*Denial. It was an intentional refusal. Determined exclusion. The wording brought to mind images of the Little Rock Nine, walking with heads high through screaming white crowds full of so much hate you could practically feeling the spit from their yells on your cheeks just by looking at the pictures.*

*I decided I would go up to the school with two of my other co-workers who were closest with the boys. Jacques and Richard drove with me and the boys up to the school, which was still in session. Once we all went through the metal detectors, the security officer asked our business. I told him I needed to speak with the principal about a suspension.*

*The security guard laughed while pointing me in the direction of the office. Once there, I stood at the front counter for some time with nary an acknowledgment. “How do you not see a whole 7 people walk in here?”, I wondered. “Excuse me”, I start at a slightly*

*elevated volume. "I would like to see the principal. We are here because one of our boys was suspended today."*

*"Oh, okay. Have a seat." said the woman still seated at the desk. She picks up the phone and dials some numbers before speaking into the phone.*

*"Some parents are here to see you about a suspension."*

*She puts her hand over the mouthpiece. "Who is the student?"*

*I answer, "Rontrell Stewart."*

*She repeats his name into the phone. After a moment, she let's us know we can go in. I tell the boys to wait in the seats in the office while myself, Jaques and Richard go into the principal's personal office. We all sit at a small table in his office as the principal walks over from his desk. He is a tall man. He kind of reminded me of my uncles with a balding head and clean-lined goatee. He was decked out in a 3 piece suit and shined high church shoes. He has the air of a senior pastor at one of the churches we have on every corner. He was at least a deacon.*

*I began, "Thank you for your time. We are Rontrell's mentors and work with him down at the Urban League. He is part of our after-school program. We just wanted to figure out what happened today with him being suspended. He told us it was because he went to his locker to get his pullover because he was cold in his classroom. He also told us the heat in the school hasn't been working."*

*The principal responds, "Well, I appreciate your concern, but all the students know once the bell rings, if they get caught during hall sweep that's an automatic 10 days."*

*"An automatic 10 days?"*



*“Yes, I announced at the school assembly on my first day that things would run differently here on out. None of this mess they been getting away with! They brought me in to clean this up and get these kids together.”*

*Jaques jumped in, “But Rontrell is a good boy. He is really involved in our program and I am sure we could do something else.”*

*“Is he? Hmmm. He being running around here part of some gang? Him and those other boys he always hangin around?”*

*Richard counters with a sarcastic smirk, “You mean his brother and cousins?”*

*The principal answers, “Is that what they got yall fooled to thinkin?”*

*I am simultaneously insulted and losing my patience at this point. “We are not fooled. We see that group of boys you calling a gang everyday but Sunday. They literally about live in the same house!”*

*The principal quips, “Young lady, I been doing this longer than you been alive. I see through all their tricks!”*

*Young Lady?*

*Richard, the more short-tempered of us stands up. Jaques stands up and puts his hand on Richard’s shoulder. I am watching this escalate while chewing on the arrow shot at my expertise and my age? At 34- was it my age he was condescending?*

*Jaques begins, “Sir, we just think 10 days is a bit excessive for being caught up in hall sweep.”*

*The principal answers, “Well if it was such a problem, wouldn’t his mama be up here?”*

*The room falls silent. I am stewing inside as I stand up. “You have no idea where his mams is. You just put him out the school to walk only God knows where. You know what*

*is a problem to me? That you think it is okay to have a child lose 2 weeks of school for getting a pullover in this cold ass school. I think it is interesting that you trying to make these boys out to be some sort of gangstas yet when they come to us they are models in the program. Maybe with all your learning past my years, you should come see us and learn some more.”*

*I walk out. Richard and Jaques follow as I walk out the front office with the boys close behind. We all pile back into my red minivan. Big Red is what the kids call her. Once inside, Rontrell quietly asks.*

*“What happened?”.*

*I wait a moment still trying to bring myself down. With my eyes looking straight ahead at the road in front of me I answer, “You are still suspended for ten days. He is just trying to break yall to prove his authority.”*

*The ride back to the League was silent. The only thing that kept replaying in my mind was the title.*

*Denial of Educational Participation.*

*Denial.*

## **Historical, Social and Political Context of Blackness and Education**

This chapter peeks into the history chronicling the conditions under which Black people have had to operate in chase of an education. Analysis without context is conjecture and history provides context. Thus, I start with the early efforts to deny education through practice, laws and policies and the counter efforts of the Black community to resist these attempts. I then examine the literature regarding the varying

strategies parents have engaged to cover their children from the detriments of educational pushout and exclusion. I specifically consider what has been written regarding Black mothers as education change agents leaders. Lastly, I provide a presentation and explanation of the critical theories I have chosen to guide my analysis.

There is a long and fortified history of the exclusion of Black people from schooling and the educational system since the founding of the country. Notable scholars have devoted much of their research towards exploring the depth of this topic; yet still only begin to uncover the complexity of the barriers erected against Black education and the ensuing protests and strategies against those exclusionary efforts (Anderson, 1988; Bond, 1934; DuBois, 1935; DuBois, 2001; Weinberg, 1995; Williams, 2005; Woodson, 2006). Given the breadth of this topic I will focus my efforts on five main areas to examine exclusion efforts and the resultant forms of resistance from the Black community: 1) The creation of the ‘Other’ 2) The Criminalization of Black Learning 3) The Failure of Reconstruction and Creation of the HBCU 4) Backlash to Brown v Board 5) Black Parents: Organizing, Departing, or Getting Along.

### ***Creation of the Other***

Deficit based policies have historically been crafted and put in place to maintain the unequal treatment of students of color in this country (Valencia, 2012). The rhetoric of safe schools and appropriate school behavior was fertilized in the womb of Black dispossession of humanity giving birth to tropes of savage brutes, dull coons and lascivious jezebels. These stereotypes indoctrinate everyone within earshot, Black and white alike, that the essential nature of Black people, of Black children is to engage in

immoral, improper, uncontrollable, and criminal behavior. This reasoning excuses the strong-handed, punitive approaches as the logical response to these inherent traits.

Black people have been castigated and “othered” since Colonial explorers first set foot upon the shores of Africa and came face to face with this new “species” (DeGruy, 2017; Jordan, 2013). During the time of the Atlantic slave trade, these tropes served as the political, moral and economic salve to remedy the cognitive dissonance of deeming an entire race fit for enslavement and to rationalize the colonization of a people in a Christian nation (DeGruy, 2017). By erasing the humanity of Blacks, slavery seemed not only economically necessary but merciful (Dowling, 2009; Faust, 1985). Notions of Blacks as aggressive, immoral, demented, lascivious, lazy, dull-witted and apelike spread to be thoroughly entrenched in the White American imagination (Barthelemy, 2010; Eberhardt et al., Goff et al., 2008).

In 1901, George Winston, an educator and University President wrote with whimsical fondness of the bygone era of close relations between the races during slavery. He queried that this new negro (post-civil war) was lazy only awaiting the benevolence of the government to feed him and was quickly returning to their savage ways without the guidance of their former masters. He went on to write:

When a knock is heard at the door [a White woman] shudders with nameless horror. The black brute is lurking in the dark, a monstrous beast, crazed with lust. His ferocity is almost demoniacal. A mad bull or tiger could scarcely be more brutal. A whole community is frenzied with horror, with the blind and furious rage for vengeance. (p.109)

These stereotypes morphed as time moved forward, suited to the requirements of White supremacy interests. During slavery, a meek and dull-witted creature suited to the hard labor of endless hours of field work was erected. Then after the Civil War, it became the most opportune to create the myth of the Black male predator beset with lustfully ravenous intentions for white women or so shiftless that his mind became the devil's workshop. (Cooper, 2018).

Popular culture propagates these caricatures of Blackness, feeding stereotypes and justifying differential treatment in the streets and in schools (Richardson, 2010). Various tropes have been employed to box and define what it is to be a Black and the required treatment for this position. These archetypes have been modernized but maintain their injurious effect- most effectively on the backs of Black children.

### ***Criminalization of Black Learning and Black Resistance***

The earliest legislatively endorsed iterations of educational lock-out in the United States were realized and enforced through a series of local and state laws that came to be known as compulsory ignorance laws (Weinberg, 1995; Williams, 2005 ). While denial of learning was often the practice of various municipalities, and individual plantations and slave masters, it was not a formal designation of legislatively enforced policy until 1740 in South Carolina (Weinberg, 1995). The context for this legislative action stemmed from long existing fears in the state regarding the increased numbers of slaves compared to the White population (Wax, 1982). In September of 1739, these fears were realized when an uprising of enslaved Africans organized themselves, secured firearms, recruited other slaves to join their cause and began their march across the state towards

Florida, killing plantation owners and their families along the way. This short-lived rebellion was extinguished by local militia forces after resulting in the deaths of nearly two dozen Whites and approximately fifty Black uprisers. The heads of the captured and killed rebels were placed on mileposts along the route of major highways in the state as a warning to other Blacks of the result of attempted rebellion.

This insurrection came to be known as the Stono Rebellion and was the match for the Negro Slave Act of 1740 (Wax, 1982). The leader of the insurrection was believed to have been a literate Angolan slave who may have spread the plans amongst other literate slaves in writing (Williams, 2005). Thus, as an immediate deterrent against future slave rebellions, the South Carolina legislature composed a law that reinforced the chattel status of the Black population and placed further restrictions on the slave's ability to congregate, earn money, grow their own food and to be taught to write. South Carolina's Negro Slave Act became a template for the rest of the British colonies.

And whereas the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconvenience; Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever who shall hereafter teach, or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write; every such person or persons shall, for every offense forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds current money (Weinberg, 1995, p. 13).

Consequently, formal education and the accoutrements of citizenship and social navigation it provided were deemed the soul possession of White males and by extension Whiteness. To maintain this hierarchy of control and privilege there was some debate as

to how to control the enslaved (Woodson, 1919). Some argued that by educating the Negro it could prove useful to their masters by way of increased skills which could be commodified thus benefiting the slaveholder. Yet many believed the enslaved need only know the lessons of Christianity which could help them acquiesce to their enslaved status. Still others championed that knowledge for the slave would mean danger to the system. In Carter G. Woodson's dissertation exploring the education of Blacks prior to the Civil War he notes, "believing that slaves could not be enlightened without developing in them a longing for liberty, not a few masters maintained that the more brutish the bondsmen the more pliant they become for purposes of exploitation (Woodson, 1919, p. 3). Furthermore, any realizations of Black educational actualization would prove incongruent to the prevailing rhetoric of the Negro's intellectual inferiority which was used to excuse their otherness and enslavement (DeGruy, 2005; Kendi, 2017). Thus, it was largely embraced that the benefits of education for Blacks while being of potential benefit to their enslavers, could ultimately prove to undermine White control. This ideology colored most of the approach taken by individual slave masters and later state legislators regarding the topic (Erickson, 1997; Malott, 2010; Spring, 2001).

While exclusionary policies spread through the colonies and were strengthened to various effect until the Civil War, they did not extinguish the desire for the enslaved population to be learned nor the facilitating creativity they employed towards attaining that goal. The enslaved population proved not to be passive vessels awaiting their demise, but active agents often engaging in acts of resistance and covert improvement. Weinberg (1977) and Williams (2005) reveal the efforts the enslaved put forth towards their own educational access.

Amidst various efforts to block educational opportunities from the enslaved, Weinberg recounts the clandestine schools and individual efforts employed to gain the tools for literacy and writing. Tales of Black children convincing their White peers to teach them school lessons through children's games and bribery with sweet treats and homemade toys are found in the pages of the slave narratives. Secret schools established by literate slaves, Freedmen and White allies were hidden in forest brush and church attics throughout the South (Weinberg, 1995; Williams, 2005). Regardless of policies and threats of physical reprimand to death (Executive Committee, 1841) meant to block education from the slave population, these efforts just sent Black sent their resistance further underground (Williams, 2005).

Opportunities for learning beyond the plantation presented themselves in various ways. Apprenticeships proved particularly useful with an oft required addendum of instruction in the "fundamentals of reading, writing and arithmetic" (Weinberg, 1995, p.19). The enslaved would secure these options and bring the knowledge they acquired back to their brethren on the plantation. This did create a situation among Blacks which existed for some time of disparate rates of literacy by gender as apprenticeship opportunities were reserved only for men (Margo, 1990).

Another opportunity for educational improvement was presented once the Civil War began. Blacks began to seek refuge with the Union armies whom were seen as liberators, though the Northern army did not easily accede this position. Once the usefulness of the Black population was realized by the Union armies, the men were allowed to join in battle efforts. These military spaces saw vigorous exchanges of knowledge amongst Black soldiers as more learned Black servicemen helped their peers



with some of the rudimentary and even more advanced skills of reading and writing (Williams, 2005).

After the Emancipation Proclamation and the passage of the 13th amendment which abolished the institution of slavery in the Union (Franklin & Moss, 1998) attempts to assist the newly freed population were put in place. The promise of 40 acres and a mule provided the glimmer of hope wished for the newly emancipated Black population after the Civil War. The educational system for Blacks was temporarily buoyed by the national Freedman's Bureau, which was tasked with serving as a life-line and navigation tool for Blacks acclimating to their new status of freedom. The bureau undertook the establishment of housing, employment services, hospitals, and schools (Franklin & Moass, 1998; Vaughn, n.d.). Political wrangling and a desire to reinforce white supremacy by halting any potential progress of Blacks led to the underfunding and eventual dissolution of the bureau rather quickly (DuBois, 1935).

The Ku Klux Klan and other secret societies seeking to regain the white man's *rightful superior* place in the order of things were backed by politicians and other leaders. Additionally, after the Civil War the proliferation of new stereotypes stoked fears of Black revenge and cemented caricatures of Blacks as sexual predators and lazy sloths undeservedly feeding freely from the government trough (DuBois, 1935). These ideations served as the momentum to halt many government funded attempts to educate Black children at scale. Thus, even in states considered friendly to the abolition of slavery, the idea of allowing Black children to be educated in the same classrooms as white children was not an agenda item advanced by most (Weinberg, 1995).

While the wholesale segregation of schools (and teachers) was not the formally

endorsed law of the land, most segregation was enforced locally through state legislation, criminal statutes and social mores (Houston, Fund, White, Hastie & Spingarn, 2004). Black people and their children were considered genetically, culturally, and morally inferior to their white counterparts. Thus policies were instituted to ensure they were separated from the white masses in communities and in schools (Valencia, 2012). The Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1896, endorsed and codified these trends. This decision, which determined Blacks can be denied entrance into public spaces as long as there was a separate, yet equal accommodation provided, sanctioned Jim Crow laws. These practices were maintained in the South (and in some Northern cities) until Brown v Board in 1954.

### ***The Struggle for Higher Education***

Even in this environment, Black people fought to be given access to more than just rudimentary education. The struggle for access to higher education had been fought long before the Civil War. The first Black person to receive a college degree was Alexander Lucius Twilight in 1823 from Middlebury College in Vermont. The first college to have open admissions for Black students was Oberlin College in 1833 (Harper, Patton & Wooden, 2009; Weinberg, 1995). Still this, was an anomaly in an educational panacea that abided by the denial of Black students to higher education. Many colleges didn't dare admit Black students for fear of losing funds from their white donors. Others, when they attempted to admit black students, did not afford them the equal treatment of their white counterparts (Weinberg, 1995). "Even when Black students attended northern colleges, often they felt tolerated, rather than welcomed" (Weinberg, 1995, p.264). By the end of the Civil War, only 28 Black people had earned bachelor degrees of over 4 million

Black people (Harper et al, 2009).

After the Civil War, discussions of what to do about the growing numbers of Blacks desiring higher education, resulted in the partnership of strange bedfellows agreeing on a singular conclusion, yet for very different reasons. Southern whites, desired to stay separate yet needed to meet the “rule of law” as put forth by the equal protection clause ratified post-Civil War in 1868 (Fitzpatrick & Shaw, n.d.). Anti-racist educators and Blacks, desired an opportunity for higher education and the potential career prospects credentialing afforded. In this presentation of interest convergence, all parties agreed to the establishment of more HBCU’s (Kendi, 2017; Weinberg, 1995) . This was supported through the financial backing of northern black donors, white donors, some white segregationists, Black and white churches and missionary organizations. It was further supported with the passage of federal legislation, known as the Morrill Land Grant Acts (Weinberg, 1995).

The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 was created to provide lands, apportioned by state representation, for the purpose of funding colleges. While Black people were counted in the calculations to determine land allotment for state , they were most often not the recipients of the funds accrued. Backlash from Black education advocates, communities and politicians led to the 2nd Land Morrill Act of 1890. This was to be a course correction for the misappropriation and denial of funds for Black colleges and students (Weinberg, 1995). Although, struggles continued for HBCU’s, their existence undoubtedly changed the trajectory and increased the prospects for countless black people. By the late 1940, 90% of all degreed Blacks had been educated at an HBCU (Harper et al, 2009). “Had it not been for the Negro schools and colleges, the Negro

would to all intents and purposes, have been driven back to slavery” (DuBois, 1935 p. 667).

### ***Backlash to Brown v Board***

Brown v Board (1954) challenged and defeated the “separate but equal” mandate established by Plessy v Ferguson (1896) yet fell short of ensuring protections that access to quality education would be the expectation for every child, regardless of whom they sat next to in the classroom (Bell, 1980; Bell, 2004). Resistance to the ruling was immediate as many districts did not begin to open enrollment to Black students. This resulted in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Part 2 in 1955. It is this case which serves as the reaffirmation of the original ruling but was still vague and left for wide interpretation of how or when to implement school integration (Orfield & Eaton, 1996).

**Evading the Spirit of the Ruling.** School districts were very creative in their slim adherence to the ruling, or their outright refusal. For example, the Prince Edward School District closed all their district schools down rather than be forced to integrate (Brookover, 1993; Turner, 2003). In Flint, Mi, a “community school model” was advanced and presented as a means to build communal bonds. Yet, it had the additional consequence of strengthening and maintaining segregated patterns and exclusion in school admittance (Highsmith & Erickson, 2015).

“Between the 1930s and the 1970s, Flint’s well-documented and extensive community education effort became a model for hundreds of school districts nationwide. Community education casts in high relief the patterns of segregationist joining and splitting at work together in numerous other American cities. Yet members of the Flint Board of

Education, like their peers in many other places, obscured their divisive actions by largely avoiding discussions of race. Even when forced to address racial discrimination and segregation, school officials concealed their policies by blaming de facto segregation, insisting that racial separation in the city's schoolhouses resulted from private housing discrimination. School segregation, they maintained, was both legally and morally innocent" (Highsmith & Erickson, 2015, pp. 565-566).

Flint Community Schools were forced to desegregate by the federal government in 1975 after being deemed "intensely segregated" (Adams, 2014; Highsmith & Erickson, 2015).

**Suspension and Expulsion as Integration Evasion.** Another interesting pattern began to emerge after the *Brown v Board* decision. The Southern Regional Council launched a research investigation into complaints that Black students were being suspended and expelled from schools at extremely high rates (Southern Regional Council, 1973). When the Council finished their investigation, they compiled their findings in a 72 page document. In the introduction of the report they state:

Notwithstanding advances of desegregation in many southern school districts, preliminary inquiries by the Council and the Memorial uncovered the fact that the pushout problem was widespread and in a large number of cases part of a pattern of continuing resistance to desegregation. On the basis of these early indications that some local school officials refused to accept the legal and moral necessity of equal educational opportunity and were resorting to new discriminatory devices to maintain an unequal system... (Southern Regional Council, 1973, p. v).

Two years later, when the Children's Defense Fund (Fund, 1975) released their report into school suspension, the disparity which existed between Black and White

students, seconded the councils report. Regarding a Boston district which had violated a legal desegregation ruling, the Children's Defense Fund (1975) quoted an integration monitor as stating:

“There are racially mixed secondary schools in the United States that are not characterized by these pathological levels of suspension; it is a comment on the pervasive pathology of Boston that school officials and community opinion leaders have made a policy of behaving as if no city has ever desegregated its schools prior to Boston in 1975. The absolute levels of suspensions, and the racial disparities within the suspensions, are both reflections of the continued belief by the Boston School Committee that they can say "Never" so far as adherence to the Constitution of the United States is concerned” (p. 65).

Thornton and Trent (1988) echoed these sentiments in their investigation into increased suspension rates in secondary schools in East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana.

“Such disproportionality often occurs immediately following efforts to desegregate the schools. It is likely to emanate from "ill-defined offenses" that require subjective interpretation; and it is more likely to occur (1) where there is the greatest influx of black students and (2) in areas that lack strong support for desegregation efforts” (p. 484).

Interestingly, little data disaggregated by race was maintained after the Brown decision regarding various realms of academic achievement and school practices. Boozer, Krueger & Wolkon (1992) surmise the lack of disaggregated data collection may have been a defensive strategy to prevent potential lawsuits for non-adherence to the ruling against school districts from parents, civil rights organizations, and student advocacy groups.

## **School to Prison Pipeline**

STPP scholarship has consistently unveiled the continued racial disproportionately of punitive responses by schools to perceived misbehavior which negatively impacts marginalized student populations, yet is most readily apparent among Black students (Morris & Perry, 2016; Owens & McLanahan, 2020; Shollenberger, 2015; Skiba, Arrendondo & Williams, 2014; Skiba & Knesting, 2001; Wald & Losen, 2003). While the breadth of scholarship in the STPP has grown immensely, the actual causes of the pipeline continue to be interrogated. A focus on the “roots” of differential behaviors like poverty, cultural values, family structure and higher rates of misbehavior have been suggested (Ogbu, 1991; Mac Donald, 2018). Yet, these assertions wink at deficit grounded frameworks forged in the fires of racism and anti-blackness and don’t sufficiently complicate the issue of disproportionate student punishment nor outcomes. Furthermore, more disruptive behavior or higher rates of poverty have not been able to explain away the disproportionate allotment of punitive response towards Black children in schools (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O’Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace & Bachman, 2008; Wu, Pink, Crain & Moles, 1982). Scholarship has since begun to probe the matter in ways that consider school culture, and individual and institutional bias (Chin, Quinn, Dhaliwal & Lovison, 2020; Huang & Cornell, 2017; Jarvis, & Okonofua, 2020; McNeal, 2016; Riddle & Sinclair, 2019).

Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson (2002) study investigates the assumption that Black children are more ill-behaved than their white counterparts. Researchers looked at an urban school district of 11,000 middle schoolers from 1994-95. After accounting for socioeconomic status, gender and race researchers found that students were referred to

the office at relatively equal rates, yet the behavior of the Black students were more subjective in nature and perceived to be more serious, consequently resulting in increased likelihood of suspension. Skiba et al. (2011) later cemented these findings in noting that Black students were suspended more often even when exhibiting the same or similar behaviors as their white counterparts.

In 2014 Skiba et al. analyzed midwestern state suspension data capturing over 320,000 student suspensions in a single year. Using hierarchical linear modeling they found school level characteristics were a significant predictor of racial disparities of discipline. They found that schools with the highest enrollment of Black students also had the greatest racial disparity rates of “out of school” suspension. Most notably, systemic school-level policies and practices greatly impacted disparate push-out.

Skiba, considered a lead academic voice on matters of disparate student push-out, has been hesitant to blame discrimination or racism as the cause of uneven student treatment. Yet, he appeared to step closer as researchers (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo & Pollock, 2017) connected the history of slavery, stereotypes, and segregation to the necessary work of calling race out in efforts to dismantle the school to prison pipeline. “...these data suggest that to successfully address racial disparities in discipline, we must acknowledge and work through issues of race” (p. 218).

Several studies (Ellawalla, 2016; Gilliam et al., 2016; Gregory & Roberts, 2017) have highlighted the impact of “othering” Black children as a potential cause for uneven treatment in society. Goff et al., (2014) analyzed studies with police officers and university students that looked at various psychoanalytic scales measuring perceptions of innocence, age, bias, dehumanization, and attitudes towards Black people. They found



consistent beliefs that positioned Black boys as older than their actual age by as much as 4.5 years. They also believed these children were more responsible for their actions, less innocent, and possessed more animal like tendencies than other children. “These findings demonstrate that dehumanization of Blacks not only predicts racially disparate perceptions of Black boys but also predicts racially disparate police violence toward Black children in real-world settings” (p. 540).

Desai (2016) expands upon the work of Goff et al. by focusing on a course with preservice teachers in a required diversity class in his University. All of the students were white, while Desai, their professor, identifies as a Black male and father. Using the Trayvon Martin murder as the seeds of discussion and class activities over the course of a year, he identified various instances of the future teachers assuming guilt of Black children and trying to use colorblindness to evade facing the possibility of personal responsibility for racist realities.

Bryan (2017) notes the legacy of caricaturizing the Black male with pre-service teachers and how this contributes to the School to Prison Pipeline. White pre-service teachers develop perceptions of Black boys over years of observing their own teachers and mentor teachers. Bryan credits Lortie (1975) with theorizing this practice of observation and internalization as the “apprenticeship of observation”. White teachers are socialized from birth around how to interact with the Black male. Teaching schools often reinforce deficit frameworks and continue the “othering” process leading to poor teacher to student relationships and contributing to the push-out of Black children out of classrooms.

## **The Role and Response of Black Parents to Exclusionary Practices**

Black parents have had to navigate this treacherous terrain for themselves and their children throughout this contentious history. Parents have employed various strategies to guard their children from the toxicity of a social environment planted firmly in the field of white supremacist ideology. Tenaciously balancing the ends of racial realism for survival (Page, 2014; Whitaker & Snell, 2016) with the hopeful encouragement necessary to be robed for the role of success in the enactment of the American idea (DePouw & Matias 2016). Simultaneously, the master narrative of Black inferiority serves as the backdrop for this unending dance. This is realized as Black parents themselves face a bevy of attacks discounting their ability or willingness to properly engage with the school system and encourage their child's education (Clark, 1983; Trotman, 2001) . While studies have challenged and disproven such claims (McCarthy-Foubert, 2019; Moultrie, 2016; Ritter, Mont-Reynauld & Dombusch, 1993; Toldson, 2019) the beliefs continue to animate popular culture and influence Black parents' treatment in schools. Still, Black parents are committed to being their child's first line of defense against deficit drenched practices and policies. In this effort, Black parents have sought to create safety valves and off ramps for their children to survive the American educational experience. The following literature explores some of the ways Black parents respond to shield, guard and resist against various presentations of school exclusion.

### *Accommodating, Evacuating or Transforming*

**Racial Socialization.** One response to the threat of student exclusion is racial socialization. Racial socialization has been identified as a tool that parents can utilize to help their children navigate the barriers and pitfalls of a racialized society (Thornton, 1997; Peters, 2005; Threlfall, 2018). Lesane-Brown (2006) defines racial socialization as such:

specific verbal and non-verbal (e.g., modeling of behavior and exposure to different contexts and object) messages transmitted to younger generations for their development of values, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs regarding the meaning and significance of race and racial stratification, intergroup and intragroup interactions, and personal and group identity. (p. 403)

According to the American Psychological Association, the messaging parents employ varies widely as parents deem appropriate for situations or according to their resources. The following are the most oft used approaches: 1) Messages emphasizing pride in being black. 2) Warnings about racial inequalities. 3) Messages that de-emphasize the importance of race (sometimes called a “color-blind” approach) and instead may emphasize that hard work will ensure someone can overcome racism. 4) Mistrust of other ethnic groups. 5) Silence about race and racial issues (Gaskin, 2015). The instruction can be “implicit, explicit, purposeful, and unintended ways that parents’ beliefs and behaviors convey views about race to children” (Harris-Britt, Valrie & Kurtz-Costes, 2007, p. 670).

The practices most readily acknowledged through racial socialization are closely linked to those practiced with “racework” (Barnes, 2016). These are the lessons trained

by and passed on from Black mothers to their children on the ways to navigate and ‘get by’. As Barnes realized in his study, this type of racework which subscribes to a form of Black respectability politics can have a devastating effect on the literal bodies of Black women. The stress of performance for acceptance and concern for your home community can be daunting that, as exhibited in Barnes study it can facilitate the loss of the mother’s unborn children.

**Racial Protectionism.** Racial protectionism is another strategy Black parent practice to shield their children from the adverse realities of systemic educational oppression. Mazama and Lundy (2012) describe racial protectionism as a “proactive and protective stance” realized as “an exercise in agency inspired by the desire to defeat racism through physical removal from one of its major spheres of operation, school. (p. 730) Thus, much of the literature has captured this strategy in the practice of homeschooling (Crowe, 2016; Fields-Smith, 2020; Lundy & Mazama, 2014).

Homeschooling is the educating of ones’ children at home, instead of the public, private or charter school setting (Basham, 2001). According to Gaither (2008) homeschooling reemerged in the 1980’s as a response to both conservative and liberal dissatisfaction with conventional schools. The synergy from both ends of the ideological spectrum, from the Civil Rights and Black Power movement to suburban calls for local control, created the pretext for the expansion of homeschooling.

“Given this pan-ideological commitment to local, authentic, private life and contempt for the establishment liberalism, it is not surprising that members of both the countercultural right and the countercultural left reacted, for different

reasons, against the twentieth-century expansion of public education into a near universal experience” (p. 227).

Often viewed as a white phenomenon, the numbers of Black parents whom have selected to homeschool their children, have steadily grown since the 1990’s (Mazama, 2016; Ray, 2010). For many parents this is the only logical response to an educational and social environment that is eternally hostile to Black children. As captured in Llewellyn’s 1996 essay collection of 20 Black families homeschooling their children, “Many black people homeschool to save themselves from a system which limits and destroys them, to reclaim their own lives, families, and culture, to create for themselves something very different from conventional schooling” (p. 13).

Mazama and Lundy sought to provide empirical evidence of the specific motivating factors for Black parents choosing to remove their children from the public-school environment to educate them at home. The parents in their study cited concerns of institutional racism, the school to prison pipeline, disproportionate special education placement, low teacher expectations, lack of culturally relevant curriculum and school violence as antagonistic elements blocking any progress their children may attempt (Mazama & Lundy, 2012; Lundy & Mazama, 2014). Building upon the work of Mazama and Lundy (2012) Stewart (2020) interviewed 67 middle class Black and white mothers, half whom homeschooled and half who sent their children to traditional schools, to provide a direct comparison of the motivating factors each demographic chose to homeschool. She discovered “Black mothers respond to a push out of conventional schools on the basis of their children’s experiences of racial discrimination. In contrast, white mothers respond to a pull toward catering to their children’s academic or

behavioral needs” (p. 255). Her findings reemphasize the role differential treatment, experiences and access to resources based on racialized realities play in the decision to homeschool for Black families.

What cannot be lost in this discussion of homeschooling as a protective barrier for Black children is the inability of all Black households to access this tool. Many things must align to allow the family to even consider homeschooling their child-no matter how badly they may wish to. Homeschooling across all demographics is most realized in middle-class families (Redford, Battle & Bielick, 2016). Furthermore, homeschool households are most likely two-parent led (*ibid.*) and regardless of race, the labor of homeschooling disproportionately falls on mothers (Baker, 2019; Lois, 2006; Mazama, 2016). Therefore, the availability of the mother to lead the child’s learning will depend on other income earners in the home, the rate of income in a single-headed household or the flexibility of the single parent’s job to accommodate the demands of homeschooling one’s children. Additionally, the education of the parent responsible for homeschooling and their own belief in their ability to educate their own children will contribute to the homeschool equation. All said, the barriers to homeschooling can be overwhelming. But, if there is access to a communal kin network, whether partners, grandparents or other community members, the herculean task of homeschooling is possible and fruitful (Mazama, 2016).

I forward that racial protectionism is realized in other forms where parents remove (or children remove themselves) from one racially violent educational space to another believed to cause less harm. Thus, homeschooling is not the only way Black parents seek to protect their children from the spirit murdering they experience in schools

(Love, 2020). For instance, Sojoyner (2017) looks at the ways Black parents and students engaged in acts of fugitivity as resistance at a school in Los Angeles, California. Sojoyner reflects upon the collective 6 years of field data and the structural violence he witnessed as experienced by Black youth inside the school system. From this, he puts forth dueling theorizations of ‘enclosed spaces’ and ‘Black fugitivity’.

‘Enclosed spaces’ are manifestations of state power and the “brutal system of punitive containment and curricular evisceration” (p. 516) practiced inside school buildings and the entire idealization of an American educational system. Black fugitivity is defined as the “disavowal of and disengagement from state governed projects that attempt to adjudicate normative constructions of difference through liberal tropes of freedom and demographic belonging” (p. 516). This escape is a form of refusal and survivance. It is a rejection of the systems of oppression and suffering endured by Black students. Sojoyner situates his study firmly within the historical context of state-endorsed violence towards Black bodies inside schools as executed through the normalized presence of police and ‘draconian’ discipline tactics as necessary (thus acceptable) responses to Black student behavior. Sojoyner follows 3 Black male students from County High School and asks the question: what damage is done by reinforcing a narrative that Black students should not drop out of school?” (p. 516). The young men he follows are full of genius, frustration, rage, and beauty. Discouraged by a system intent upon breaking them, they survive and thrive as best as they can, finding spaces of freedom and resistance.

Sojoyner concludes that Black fugitivity as a response to enclosed spaces may never result in the inclusion of the young men he follows into the ‘liberal fold’.

Therefore, they will either remain forever fugitive, conform to the socially constructed Procrustean bed or be captured in the carceral grip of the state.

Another presentation of racial protectionism is found in the migration of Black parents from local public schools to private and charter schools (Wilson-Cooper, 2005; Wilson Cooper, 2007). Wilson-Cooper's work reveals that the departure is an act of resistance as Black mothers face structural barriers that impede the best opportunities for their children from being captured. The mothers carefully consider all of their options given their prior experiences and positionality to move in the best way for their children. Pedroni (2007) further contributes to understandings of this departure by chronicling the voucher reform movement in Milwaukee and the unlikely alliance between conservative education groups and the Black community. This ethnography highlights the ability of Black parents to seek common ground with unlikely allies to progress the education of their children. The impetus for voucher support amongst black parents differ from that of their conservative compatriots as matters of race, class and access play into their Black parents decision making considerations.

Research has shown that Black parents overwhelmingly support the idea of public schooling but feel disappointed and let down by what that allegiance has historically meant for them (Ellison & Aloe, 2019). Issues of disparate and punitive discipline measures, overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, closures of community schools, discouraging teachers, lack of parent connection and racism move Black parents to look beyond their traditional public school options. Stulberg (2015) situates the apparent allure of charter schools for Black families within the context of a history for Black community's historical quest for community control of their children's education. The



choice movement have utilized this displeasure and service gap to full effect. Stulberg states:

Given tenacious and enduring racial inequality in American schooling and a significant retreat from desegregation in schooling over the past couple of decades (Orfield et al. 2014) and lack of political will to change course on school segregation (Wells et al. 2009), it is not surprising that many have claimed that the charter reform is part of a broader movement for racial justice, a new civil rights movement. (p. 35)

These approaches represent the tension between Black parents' desire to attain equitable educational opportunities for their children and the ends of less noble goals from outside interests. Stovall (2013) suggests a "politics of desperation" is taken advantage of by neo-liberal leaders to cajole Black parents with the promise of pro-choice educational policies to achieve educational equity against the backdrop of failing schools and declining faith in the fulfillment of parity through public education. Charter, contract, and performance schools are presented as improvements over educational conditions in the past (p.39). Yet, these "improvements" occur without the input nor feedback of the communities being most impacted. Additionally, while school choice and charters are heralded as a means to increase access for historically marginalized communities to quality education, they often don't deliver (Patillo, 2015). Barriers of transportation, student grades, dissuasive enrollment requirements and overall lack of good information, insure that these schools preclude the very populations they claim to include. Still, amid such confusion, Black parents commit to doing what is necessary to

position their children into better educational environments. In the absence of an entitlement to quality schools, parents are left to “do what they gotta do,” Black parents will then of course enter lotteries and line up to secure better schools for their children. They surely display individual agency in doing so. (Patillo, 2015).

**Organizing for Change.** The final response Black parents have utilized in response to institutional injustices in schools is organizing. Community organizing as we currently have come to recognize it has a long history in the United States dating back to colonial times (Reynolds, 2009). The contemporary version of community organizing most are familiar with was epitomized by Saul Alinsky during the Great Depression of the 1930s in Chicago and adopted by college activists during the 1960s. Alinsky’s tactics were employed to address dilapidated housing, wages and poor working conditions. His model utilized non-violent confrontation, public pressure and ‘power in numbers’ tactics to help facilitate a transfer of power to the disenfranchised. On the first page of his last book, he made it quite plain for all to understand: “The Prince was written by Machiavelli for the Haves on how to hold power. Rules for Radicals is written for the Have-Nots on how to take it away” (Alinsky, 1971, p.1). It has been retold that when Malcolm X was asked what he thought of Saul Alinsky, he responded, "He's the best organizer in the country today."(Orenstein & Hercules, 1998).

While Alinsky is credited with being the creator of community organizing as we have come to know it, the Black community has long been organizing in various fashion since the first acts of resistance in the 1600’s. They have fought to open gateways to educational opportunity, acquire resources for schools and champion their right to even be educated. As noted in the history above, they have engaged in forms of organizing to

rally resources for the education of their children (Turner, 2003) send students to college (Billingsley, 1994) and work to change institutional policies (Danns, 2003; Freelon, 2018; Theoharis, 2001). What we have learned from this long and continued tradition of Black organizing is that demands placed upon governmental systems by white, middle-class people through organizing is often recognized as an exercise in the privileges of democracy and protected by constitutional rights. Yet, when Black people and other people of color do this, it is considered treasonous, un-American and treasonous (Cullors, 2018).

Nonetheless, Black parents organize to make schools better for their children although school hierarchy tends to favor administrators and teachers and consigns parents to the ranks of cheerleader. Schools focus on increasing parent involvement rather than parent organizing. These type of involvement interactions are usually specific to individual children with little residual effect for the student community at large. Furthermore, they are directed by the roadmap of the dominant culture to define proper engagement (Nakagawa, 2000; Wilson-Cooper, 2009). Even when schools seek to utilize “cultural brokers” in an effort to be more considerate of culture, those actors most often go back to the dominant script of parental normalcy, thus ignoring the values and considerations of the non-dominant group (Ishimaru et al. 2016).

When the school administration and teachers are of a different race, social status, class and language, parent engagement may be problematized and treated paternalistically. Rather than hearing parents’ issues as stemming from genuine concern for their children, they can be perceived as “troublemakers” and hostile (Yull & Wilson, 2018). Yet, there are times when parents from marginalized groups can organize and

utilize their cultural assets to energize their efforts and recast the deficit frames they are often viewed through (Fuentes, 2012; Fuentes, 2013).

The power acquired through organizing can facilitate a more equitable relationship between parents, students, teachers and school administrators (Ishimaru, 2014) This more equalized arrangement can simultaneously usher in a new, more positive attitude of the education system from parents and last beyond the immediacy of the target goal of the organizer's actions (Jasis, 2013).

Fuentes (2012) shares the findings of her critical ethnographic study of a grassroots Black parent (and grandparent) organizing group in West Benton, Northern California. Parents of Children of African Ancestry (POCAA) differed from more traditional reform efforts in that they made issues of race and power central to their organizing. Fuentes focuses on two components of the groups organizing practices to create a theory of action for effective change. She first interrogated the ways the group organized themselves and the larger community. She then highlighted the intervention the group created to further mobilize the African-American community and to address the academic needs of their children.

The author notes that the group's efforts were resisted by the larger community due to ideologies that frame Black parents and their children inside "cultural logics". Referencing Oakes, Rogers, Blasi, and Lipton (2006), the logics are as follows: 1) The 'logic of scarcity' refers to the inability of schools to provide equitable schooling for all students due to finite resources. 2)The 'logic of merit' believes that the system will work for students who work hard and prove their merit. 3) The 'logic of deficit' believes impoverished children and those from "subordinate" cultural and racial groups are

inherently challenged and the school will never be able to address that gap. It is against these narratives that the parents fought their battle.

Fuentes was able to textualize the many ways the group was silenced by system representatives such as school administrators and board members with statements such as ““To think that parents can dream up a working plan over Christmas is ridiculous.”” Another board member went on to say, ““How dare you think you can storm in here and expect us to make educational policy based on your demands!”” (p. 645). The Black parents were presented in the media and throughout the districts as ‘angry’, ‘inappropriate’ ‘racist’ and as uninformed troublemakers.

Simultaneously, the study revealed the effective ways the parents overcame the obstacles put in place by district leadership to galvanize parents and create effective collaborations with churches, organizations and with other racial advocacy groups, to effectively move school policy. Undeterred, the group stayed on message and centered race and inequities.

“By utilizing cultural resources and assets available with the African American community, POCAA worked to shift the lens away from a deficit view to one of collective identity and group consciousness that lead to concrete change. These changes primarily came about by engaging with community around issues that mattered to them” (p. 646).

Yull & Wilson’s (2018) 3 year critical ethnographic study documents the activities of Black parents participating in an initiative known as the Parent Mentor Program which was launched in a school district as an intervention to disparate rates of Black student exclusion via school suspensions and expulsions. The researchers interact

with the parent group employing various components of participatory action research and utilize BlackCrit as one of their guiding theories, “to examine the specificity of Black suffering in schools, and the cultural indifference and aversion to Black bodies within the education system (Dumas, 2016)” (Yull & Wilson, 2018, p. 3).

Like the parents in Fuentes (2012) study, they are faced with various attempts to disregard and silence their efforts. The researchers speak to their initial attempts to take a race-neutral stance to avoid “rocking the boat”. Yet, the parent’s overt experiences with racism helped them realize such a color-blind position was unsustainable. The Parent Mentoring program eventually became a parent organizing and activism group as the changes the parents sought to make in the school usurped the desired changes the school desired to make in the parents. Eventually, the school board removed a superintendent supportive of the parents’ organizing efforts leading to decreased access to the teachers and classrooms the group was dependent upon.

Goss (2015) differs from Fuentes (2012) and Yull & Wilson (2018) as she begins to pull at the particularities of the African-American organizing tradition to understand how the parents organized in schools. She interviewed members of the organically created Parent Empowerment Program (PEP) at a school district in North Carolina to unravel the extent the cultural heritage of the group’s participants informed their organizing work. Goss utilized Bonnie Young-Laing’s African-American Culture Based Organizing framework (2009) to analyze the influence of the culture, the circumstances of community power and the mobilization and change strategies. Laing’s framework provides for analysis of the following criteria: : a) cultural dynamics, b) locus of community power, c) organizing goals, d) mobilization methods and e) change strategies.

The author found that leaders of this district organizing effort leveraged the shared histories and identities of the parents to fight against student exclusion practices which disproportionately affected African-American children in their district. Their commonality grounded in the tradition of African-American women-led efforts during the Civil Rights movement helped to inform their current organizing efforts. This village consciousness insured that the group was focused on the empowerment and restoration of the whole community and not just individuals. Therefore, as participants learned more of the school to prison pipeline and the potential remedies for it, they shared this knowledge for the benefit of the entire community.

PEP's foundation likely came from the requirement that members share this village consciousness. Furthermore, PEP's work likely drew its strength from privileging the community over individual advocacy efforts. Therefore, not only were the participants who shared this village consciousness dedicated to their community, but they also enthusiastically supported interventions—like PBIS—that privileged community (p.813).

I have discussed how parents employ different techniques to ensure their child's safe passage through the treacherous seas of schooling to reach the shore of success. Racial socialization is most associated with accomodationist tactics which seek to ensure children understand the racial hierarchy and take appropriate actions to “get by”. Parents seek to teach their children the “rules of the road” so they can return safely home. This socialization tends not to seek structural change, rather an understanding of how the institution as it is can be made survivable. Racial protectionism is realized through parents finding ways to evacuate, if only for a moment, the racialized environments that

cause physical, psychic and spiritual pain to their children. This response often signals a loss of faith in the institution and unwillingness to further accept abuses and maltreatment. Lastly, Black parents engage in organizing as an effort to move the existing system to honor its' proclaimed obligations or to improve conditions for the benefit of their children inclusive of biological and communal kin.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

In 2008, Jean Anyon, critical educational scholar and researcher, wrote a book dedicated to the role of critical theory in strengthening educational investigation and consequently, educational policy. In it, she defined theory as, “an architecture of ideas— a coherent structure of interrelated concepts— whose contemplation and application (1) help us to understand and explain discursive and social phenomena and (2) provides a model of the way that discourse, and social systems work and can be worked upon” (Anyon, 2008, p.3). Anyon noted that U.S. policy during the George W. Bush administration was guided by research privileging randomized trials and eschewing qualitative studies or work grounded by theory. Of this, Anyon cited Foucault and Mills as to the short-sightedness of such practices. “Data collection of any sort without theoretical guidance is what Foucault called “blind empiricism” (1977) and C. Wright Mills (1959) labeled “abstracted empiricism.” Such research yields data, but very little social explanation.” (Anyon, 2008, p. 1). Anyon goes on to note that though the trend in educational research has been to keep the spheres of research and theory separate, a “theoretically informed empiricism” would be necessary to bring about the structural changes desired by critically informed researchers.



Thus, the critical theories I have chosen for this study: 1) *Critical Race Theory* (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) 2) *BlackCrit* (Dumas & Ross, 2016) 3) *Black Feminist Thought* (Collins, 1990) seek to provide theoretical explanation in concert with the story told through the data collected in consideration of the historical, cultural, social and political contexts of the phenomenon. I additionally chose these approaches to, “embolden youth and community participants from whom theoretical engagement in general has been withheld” (Anyon, 2008. p.3). These theories share a commonality in that they interrupt the silencing of marginalized communities by centering participant stories and letting them lead the way in how we imagine responsive solutions to the inherent inequities baked into the educational system. While their shared qualities help them work together seamlessly, their unique traits are what lend to the thoroughness of the explanatory nature of the analyses. Interweaving these theories afford a frame through which researchers can challenge the deficit frames that normatively package discussions of Black children and effectually, the Black family and community.

### ***Critical Race Theory***

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is born of the critical legal tradition and the work of Derrick Bell to challenge the shortcomings of Critical Legal Studies (CLS) to sufficiently consider the role of race in legal scholarship (Crenshaw, 1988; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Most especially, the penchant of CLS to address class issues void of racial realities, to neglect analysis of the rhetoric around “color-blind” policies, and minimal serious attention to legal redress for past racial injustices (Crenshaw, 1988; Tate, 1997). CLS began in the 1970’s as a movement to challenge the perception that law was inherently

unbiased in its' creation and application (Brown & Jackson, 2013). CRT is recognized as an extension and rumination of the legal advances and activism spawned by the civil rights movement (Crenshaw, 1988). Thus, I will begin by giving an overview of the elements of CRT's legal roots that provide the fertilizer for its extension into education policy and practice.

**Principles of CRT.** The theoretical tenets of CRT in Bell's work from early on held the notion of *voice* in high regard. Voice is understood as the different perspective all individuals possess shaped by their interactions and position in society. It is recognized in CRT to elevate the unique realities of oppressed populations (Delgado, 1989). Voice is recognized through narrative and storytelling to counter and "analyze myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that invariably render Blacks and other minorities one-down" (Delgado, 1995, xiv).

A second theme evident in Bell's work is the necessity of CRT to move beyond scholarship to *activism* (Bell, 1987, 1988). In his book, *Confronting authority: Reflections of an ardent protester*. In it he states: "Few, if any of us could survive in modern society by challenging every slight, every unfairness we experience or witness. I do believe though, that most people are too ready to accept unwarranted and even outrageous treatment as part of the price of working or getting along, even of living. (Bell, 1994, p.x). Bell expands upon the notion, that without consistent nurturing of resistance to civil injustices, social and legal progress is bound to recede.

As part of this tension between racial progress and regress, Bell begins to probe the connections between property and ideations of racial justice. He

ponders aloud for his readers in his book, *And We Are Not Saved* (1987) how racial justice is exchanged in the chase of material wealth, most aptly categorized as “property”. Harris (1993) expounds upon what evolves into another central theme of CRT: *Whiteness as Property*.

Even after the period of conquest and colonization of the New World and the abolition of slavery, whiteness was the predicate for attaining a host of societal privileges, in both public and private spheres. Whiteness determined whether one could vote, travel freely, attend schools, obtain work, and indeed, defined the structure of social relations along the entire spectrum of interactions between the individual and society. Whiteness then became status, a form of racialized privilege ratified in law. Material privileges attendant to being white inhered in the status of being white. After the dismantling of legalized race segregation, whiteness took on the character of property in the modern sense in that relative white privilege was legitimated as the status (p. 1745).

The *interest-convergence* principle is central to Bell’s analysis of judicial, governmental and institutional decision making. Interest-convergence recognizes that progress through legal or political avenues is only achieved when the objectives of the non-white group’s goals happen to align with the interests and subsequent advancement of white people’s agenda. To illustrate this point, he revisits the *Brown vs. Board* decision highlighting the global context of the United States desiring to be seen as a credible world leader and to counteract the threat of communist rhetoric flourishing in the States and throughout the world, he comments:

“It follows that the availability of fourteenth amendment protection in racial cases may not actually be determined by the character of harm suffered by blacks or the quantum of liability proved against whites. Racial remedies may instead be the outward manifestations of unspoken and perhaps sub-conscious judicial conclusions that the remedies, if granted, will secure, advance, or at least not harm societal interests deemed important by middle and upper-class whites. Racial justice - or its appearance - may, from time to time, be counted among the interests deemed important by the courts and by society's policymakers” (Bell, 1980, p. 523).

Easily flowing from the interest convergence principle is the notion of racial realism and the attending permanence of racism. Racial realism proposes that racism is an intractable problem that will never be fully eradicated. Bell believed Black people are better served by embracing and more fully understanding this reality, to know how to navigate and perpetually struggle against it, even if the struggle is fruitless (Brown & Jackson, 2013). Bell's racial realism is a recall of DuBois's rhetorical question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" (DuBois, 1903). Bell states:

“In spite of dramatic civil rights movements and periodic victories in the legislatures, Black Americans by no means are equal to whites. Racial equality is, in fact, not a realistic goal. By constantly aiming for a status that is unobtainable in a perilously racist America, Black Americans face frustration and despair” (Bell, 1991, p. 363).

He then goes on, as if anticipating the skeptics of his reasoning,

“acceptance of the racial realist concept would enable [Blacks] to understand and respond to recurring aspects of our subordinate status. It would free them to think and plan within a context of reality rather than idealism (Bell, 1991, p. 377).

**CRT in Education.** The themes of voice, activism, whiteness as property, interest-convergence, and the permanence of race became an integral part of CRT as it moved beyond the discipline of legal scholarship and into the field of education. In 1995, Ladson-Billings & Tate introduce the tenets of CRT into the educational arena suggesting it as a lens through which to explain the inequalities endemic to society and education specifically. They acknowledge the problems inherent with theorizing on race such as its' social and ideological bearings and the problem with clean classifications of groups. Yet, the under-theorization of race, especially pertaining to education they proclaim, is exactly what makes CRT so necessary. The article explains at length how whiteness as property, has a persistent negative impact on people of color. Whiteness as property is exhibited in curriculum unrepresentative (or mis-representative) of students of color. It is exhibited through placing demands on students and parents to perform to white norms in order to access resources or to even be recognized. It is exhibited by the negative associations automatically made when one hears the term ‘urban schools’. Whiteness as property is exhibited in the dominant culture’s ability to exclude students of color from educational opportunities and the school system entirely.

The authors go on to lay forth a case for challenging the shortcomings of supposed reform efforts in education that do very little in the way of structural change.

Referencing Derrick Bell's work on the "unfinished business" of civil rights law, they argue:

The current multicultural paradigms function in a manner similar to civil rights law. Instead of creating radically new paradigms that ensure justice, multicultural reforms are routinely "sucked back into the system" and just as traditional civil rights law is based on a foundation of human rights, the current multicultural paradigm is mired in liberal ideology that offers no radical change in the current order" (p. 62).

They continue to make plain the necessity of CRT in education and secure its' affiliation with CRT in the legal realm. "Thus, critical race theory in education, like its antecedent in legal scholarship, is a radical critique of both the status quo and the purported reforms" (p. 62).

The tenets of CRT utilized in educational research are as follows:

- Race is a permanent and premier component of American life
- CRT challenges dominant societal narratives
- Historically marginalized voices are central to understanding phenomenon
- Interdisciplinary and intersectionality are integral to CRT work
- CRT research is committed to goals of social justice

### ***BlackCrit***

Dumas, reflecting on the "decentering" of Blackness in CRT scholarship and the resulting under-theorization of the topic proposes a theory of BlackCrit in education (Dumas & Ross, 2016). He recognizes that the temptation to view CRT as an inherently

“BlackCrit” lies in its’ genesis. Yet, he adds that CRT is a theorization of race and not of Blackness. In relation to the other “racecrits” he goes on:

“...their existence either presumes that CRT functions in the main as a BlackCrit, or suggests that “race” critique accomplishes all that Black people need; Black people become situated as (just) “race,” whereas other groups, through these more specifically named crits, offer and benefit from more detailed, nuanced, historicized, and embodied theorizations of their lived racial conditions under specific formations of racial oppression.” (p. 417)

Further, Dumas makes the case that the current social climate as captured in the #BlackLivesMatter movement demands a “renewed critical imagining and praxis of blackness” (p. 418). He suggests that in this social and political moment there is a need to examine educational policy and pedagogy with an eye to the specificity of the Black reality as revealed through the wide scope of history. Dumas comments that Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) remarked that schoolhouses are spaces that have historically been where Whites enact their “absolute right to exclude” (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p.60) Black children from educational opportunities. In response, Dumas offers BlackCrit to interrogate the motivations, manifestations and prevalence of structural violence, exclusion and suffering visited upon the bodies of Black children and their families in the educational system.

In the field of education, we have countless examples of the dehumanization of Black bodies, from the long legacy of federal, state, and district level policies and practices designed to deprive Black communities and children of educational resources (Anderson, 1988; Anyon, 1997; Buras, 2011; Cecelski, 1994; Rothstein, 2014), to the

absence of culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012), and the maladministration of school discipline policies (Ferguson, 2000; Noguera, 2003; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Specific recent incidents attest to antiblackness in schools (Dumas, 2016):

A teacher in Illinois repeatedly referred to two Black students as “nigger,” even after they asked him not to (Malm, 2014). In Florida, school officials ordered a young Black girl to either straighten or cut off her naturally curly hair, or face expulsion (Munzenrieder, 2013). And in New York, a school principal described Black teachers as “gorillas” and derided their “big lips” and “nappy hair” (Klein, 2013)” (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 418-419)

Dumas proposes 3 guiding ideas for BlackCrit. First, he states, “BlackCrit intervenes at the point of detailing how policies and everyday practices find their logic in and reproduce Black suffering; it is also to imagine the futurity of Black people against the devaluation of Black life and skepticism about (the worth of) letting Black people go on” (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 430). Secondly, he offers BlackCrit to explore how, “Blackness exists in tension with the neoliberal-multicultural imagination” (p. 430). Lastly, he suggests that “BlackCrit should create a space for the Black liberatory fantasy and resist a revisionist history that supports dangerous majoritarian stories that disappear whites from a history of racial domination (Leonardo, 2004) rape, mutilation, brutality and murder (Bell, 1987)” (p. 431). While Dumas eschews the necessity of specific 'tenets' due to the infancy of the theory, I would like to elaborate on the philosophical underpinnings of Dumas' proposition for BlackCrit in education.



Dumas plants BlackCrit firmly in the field of the philosophical thought project known as Afro-pessimism (Hartman, 1997; Wilderson, 2010; Sexton, 2016a). The history, depth and nuances of the philosophy are much too dense to adequately cover here; nor is it the purpose of this essay. But, the most salient aspects of the ideology are necessary to understand Dumas' points of focus in BlackCrit. Afro-pessimism can best be understood as an intellectual doctrine concerned with the relationship between the dispossession of Black people and the resultant ontology of Blackness. While Franz Fanon is referenced as the ancestral seed of Afro-pessimism (Wilderson, 2010), Saidiya Hartman's book "Scenes of Subjection" (1997) laid the groundwork upon which other Afro-pessimist scholars built the house. I will give a brief overview of the components of Afro-pessimism I believe most enunciated in Dumas' articulation of a BlackCrit for education.

**The ontology of Blackness.** Afro-pessimism largely concerns itself with what Blackness is or its' state of being. Conversely, it also comments on what Blackness is not. Wilderson (2010) notes that the *being* of African people did not successfully make the voyage across the ocean during the Atlantic Slave Trade. "Africans went into the ships and came out as Blacks" (p. 38). He further elaborates that this conversion was not just a material one, but a "metaphysical" one. This conversion, facilitated by the grotesque violence visited upon the Black body, saw the removal of the humanity of the African and the making of the Black. The African was metaphysically transformed to become a tool only meant to serve the pleasure of the master. In other words, the slave, and by extension the Black, is a commodity removed from whole sentience.

The relation between pleasure and possession of slave property, in both the figurative and literal senses, can be explained in part by the fungibility of the slave- that is, the joy made possible by virtue of the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to commodity (Hartman, 1997, p. 21).

Hartman introduces the notion of fungibility or replaceability as endemic to the propertied nature of the Black and the subsequent joy via control, projection, manipulation and ownership of the Black, for the master. Wilderson (2010) goes on to elaborate “slavery is and connotes an ontological status for blackness; and that the constituent elements of slavery are not exploitation and alienation but accumulation and fungibility” (p.14). Thus, Black equates to the slave and the slave as chattel, was propertied. Therefore, to be Black is to be commodity and inhuman. The white equated to the Master and the master is human as exhibited by his control and independence. In turn, the Black is dichotomous to human and the antithesis of whiteness and is the foil to civil society (Wilderson, 2010; Weier, 2014). Ultimately, the ontology of the Black is forever slave as it is molded, confined and limited by the mandates, as formulated by whites, of an anti-black world. Of this Dumas, notes,

To the extent that there is ample evidence of the civic estrangement of Black people—their exclusion from the public sphere—one can theorize that the Black is still socially positioned as the slave, as difficult as it may be to use this frame to understand contemporary “race relations” (Dumas, 2016, p. 14).

**Anti-Blackness.** Dumas identifies anti-blackness as the pivotal concern of afro-pessimism and the fulcrum of his theorization of BlackCrit in education (Dumas & Ross, 2016). He defines anti-blackness as a “cultural disregard for and disgust

with blackness” (Dumas, 2016, p.12) “...antiblackness marks an irreconcilability between the Black and any sense of social or cultural regard” (p. 13).

Dumas goes on to examine how anti-blackness is camouflaged in an anti-racist world through the embrace of multi-culturalism. Dumas references Sexton (2008) when interrogating how the presence of non-Black people of color is used to refute claims of racism, inequitable treatment and structural inequities. The logic goes that if non-Black people of color can progress in the United States, even as they too experience historical patterns of exclusion and oppression, then also Black people should be able to progress. When Black people do not progress, it is written off as the fault of their own shortcomings and inherent deficits- the natural order of things.

In this way, schools can be celebrated as diverse despite the absence of Black students in the buildings and/or in the higher academic tracks. Ultimately, the slave has no place in the most privileged and highly-regarded school spaces; the Black becomes a kind of educational anachronism, not quite suited for our idealized multicultural learning community (Dumas, 2016, p. 17).

Hence, anti-blackness does the work of making the violence, dispossession and exclusion exercised towards Black bodies “common sense”. It rationalizes acts of terror and the resultant suffering by reminding viewers that these acts are the expected and justified response towards irrational, only slightly human things. In this way it serves as the cultural morphine and moral corridor through which both micro and gratuitous indignities inclusive of death is ushered and given ease.

**The Requirements of Empathy.** Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, begins with an examination of the horrific violence visited upon Frederick Douglass' Aunt Hester as recounted in his book *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Hartman notes the centrality of violence to the slaves' existence is established by Douglass beginning his book with this memory. Hartman states her refusal to recreate the incident for her readers, "in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body" (Hartman, 1997, p. 3). She challenges the reader to explore whether they participate in such acts of violence as a witness, to reveal the truth of the terror and challenge master narratives or as a voyeur, simultaneously repulsed and stimulated by such acts of terror.

Still, to elicit empathy from those that they may possibly help to dismantle the peculiar institution and redeem the slave of their humanity (and the contemporary Black of their humanness), such acts have been historically displayed in full naked effect. Of the effort to make the viewer imagine themselves in the place of the slave as the requisite for Black empathy, Hartman states, "...the effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to Black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the Black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible" (p. 19). Thus, the grander the debasement, the greater likelihood whites will be able to imagine themselves proxy to Black bodies and Black suffering and thereby compelled to feel empathy. Ultimately, the imagined displacement of the slave by the white body, renders the slave invisible and centers whiteness as the only possible conjurer of empathetic consideration.

Therefore, Hartman chooses to focus our attention on the daily, comparably small, private indignities and terrors often unrealized and under-examined. The inability or refusal to see these daily injustices, lulls the white viewer into complacency believing the slave (the Black) to be otherwise happy and carefree. Only through extreme circumstances is their pain even considered possible.

“The affiliation of performance and blackness can be attributed to the spectacularization of black pain and racist conceptions of negro nature as carefree, infantile, hedonistic, and indifferent to suffering and to an interested misreading of the interdependence of labor and song common among the enslaved”. (p. 22).

Dumas’ insistence on an examination of Black suffering (Dumas, 2014; Dumas & Ross, 2016), responds to Hartman’s demand to view Black pain not solely in its’ grotesquely morbid presentations, but in the agony daily experienced and silently endured by a people grasping for social life in social death (Sexton, 2011) while the shadow of physical death lays in wait beyond every consideration.

**Afterlife of Slavery.** Sadiyah Hartman’s *Lose your Mother* (2006) captures her journey back to Ghana, Africa to discover her lost family history and heritage to “reclaim the dead, that is to reckon with the lives undone and obliterated in the making of human commodities” (p. 6). She tells tale of the ways slaves were tricked into forgetting their past to ensure their passivity and acceptance of their new ontology as resigned property. The various ways the captured Africans were forced or coerced into forgetting, “ended the same—the slave loses mother” (p. 155). They became a people removed from land and memory and strangers even to themselves.

This real and symbolic forgetting is captured by Patterson's (1982) notion of "natal alienation" in his thesis of 'social death'. Patterson describes social death through the presence of 3 markers: Violence, dishonor and natal alienation. Natal alienation is described as the "separation of the slave from biological and cultural ties" (Barlow, 2016, p. 3).

Hartman (2006) seeks a re-attachment to her natal origins but comes to realize this is not possible. The separation and resultant remaking of the African as noted by Wilderson (2010) had repercussions that have reverberated till present day in what Hartman terms 'the afterlife of slavery'.

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery--skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I too, am the afterlife of slavery (p. 6)

Dumas describes how the remnants of the 'afterlife of slavery' appear in American society as evidenced in the police killings and subsequent lifeless Black bodies paraded on social media and in the news. He notes this afterlife extends into the educational system as evidenced in inequitable school resources, hegemonic curriculum, dilapidated school infrastructures, incidences of school exclusion through disparate discipline practices and educational denial.

### *The Work BlackCrit Does In the Study*

Black children are consistently the most punished and pushed-out of any racial group, inclusive of white and non-Black students of color, in schools and districts across the country (Balingit, 2018; Kids Count Data Center, nd; Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014; Skiba et al, 2014; Skiba et al., 2011). The dependability and predictability of these trends suggest something more insidious that has yet to be examined; a problem beyond the racism endemic to U.S. society and the educational system, but an issue with the presence and treatment of Blackness.

“What does it mean to suggest that education policy is a site of anti-blackness? Fundamentally, it is an acknowledgment of the long history of Black struggle for educational opportunity, which is to say a struggle against what has always been (and continues to be) a struggle against specific anti-Black ideologies, discourses, representations, (mal)distribution of material resources, and physical and psychic assaults on Black bodies in schools” (Dumas, 2016, p.16).

These children are the faces at the bottom of the well and Black parents serve as the rescue ladder, flashlight and navigation system. Thus, the strength of this theorization lies in its specificity and unblinking commitment to stare anti-blackness directly in its eyes. This lens will capture the anti-blackness experienced by the children, and the mothers- both actually and vicariously- as they seek to wrestle access to educational opportunities for their children away from the clenched fist of white patriarchal supremacist educational norms.

## **Black Feminist Thought**

*“Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you; we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs on the reasons they are dying.”*

*~Audre Lorde.*

The quote above from Audre Lorde’s classic, *Sister Outsider* (1984), illustrates the stark diverging experiences and resultant concerns between White women and Black women, even when fighting shoulder to shoulder against the sexist norms upheld by the patriarchy. Consequently, the distinctions of each group’s experiences led to a recognition that the formation of feminism as was practiced by White women in theory and praxis, would be insufficient to capture the lived realities of Black women. Building upon the long history of written discourse by Black women forebears like Maria Stewart and Ida B. Wells (Collins, 1989b; Logan, 1995) and organizations like the National Black Feminist Organization and the Combahee River Collective to put forth a theorization of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2009b). Black Feminist Thought seeks to enmesh theory, everyday discourse and actions to unpack the “distinctive set of social practices that accompany our (Black women’s) particular history within the unique matrix of domination characterized by intersecting oppressions” (p. 26). Collins presents Black Feminist Thought (BFT) as uniquely suited to address the particular components of Black women’s oppression in this country. Acknowledging the vast possibilities of terms to capture the same idea-such as womanism or Black feminisms, Collins (2009b) instead chose to focus on the features which ground the theory. She offers six such features.



The first component Collins puts forth is Black Feminist Thought is a decidedly United States. The experience of US Black women are unique for a confluence of factors. Primary, is the attention to the dissonance between the expressed values of the country and the actual treatment of its most marginalized residents. “U.S. Black feminist thought, and practice respond to a fundamental contradiction of U.S. society. On the one hand, democratic promises of individual freedom, equality under the law, and social justice are made to all American citizens. Yet on the other hand, the reality of differential group treatment based on race, class, gender, sexuality and citizenship status persists”( p.23). This discord is “sustained by intersecting oppressions” (p. 22) and creates the very conditions which excuse the dismissal of Black women. Yet, while BFT is outfitted for the analysis of Black women in the United States, it is not disconnected from the oppressions encountered by women of color globally.

The next feature is the recognition that while Black women may have diverse experiences, they still exist underneath a common ecosystem. Black women will not experience every violation or maltreatment the same, nor respond in the same way. Yet, “despite the common challenges confronting U.S. Black women as a group, diverse responses to these core themes characterize U.S. Black women’s group knowledge or standpoint” (p. 23). Collins goes on to state, “African-American women not only have developed a distinctive Black women’s standpoint, but have done so by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge” (p. 252). The standpoint of Black women is central to the theorization. It is an epistemological stake in the ground affirming the value of Black women’s voices, validity of their truth claims and depth of their knowledge.

The next characteristic is that Black women's individual experiences under oppression can inspire action. These actions can be small and individual acts which resist particular instances of injustice. This can look like a Black woman refusing workplace pressures to wear her hair in the style of Eurocentric standards of appropriateness. Or, it is the enslaved Black mother listening in on her mistresses' children's lessons to take what she has memorized back to her children (Williams, 2005). The nature of these changes snowball into larger actions due to the relationship between consciousness and action. "On both the individual and the group level, a dialogical relationship suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness" (p.30).

Collins submits that another ingredient of BFT is that Black women intellectuals must advocate and act on behalf of all Black women. The theoretical trappings of academia should not overshadow the reason for the work. "Black women intellectuals of diverse ages, social classes, educational backgrounds, and occupations consists of asking the right questions and investigating all dimensions of a Black women's standpoint with and for African-American women" (p.33). Black women intellectuals must thereby be intentional in working with Black women in the field doing the work of change and touching hands with the Black women most negatively impacted by oppressions. Thus, theory must be in service of aiding Black women's self-definition to counter the stereotypes assigned them and towards advancing equity goals through the marriage of scholarship and activism.

Another element is that BFT is dynamic and ever changing. Much like the "tools of the oppressor" have morphed to inhabit various shapes to meet the requirements of the

moment, so too must BFT be agile in its' analysis of the changing dynamics of Black women's positions and standpoints, inclusive of self-reflection.

In order for Black feminist thought to operate effectively within Black feminism as a social justice project, both must remain dynamic. Neither Black feminist thought as a critical social theory nor Black feminist practice can be static; as social conditions change, so must the knowledge and practices designed to resist them (p.39).

Lastly, Collins offers BFT not as a self-sustaining struggle, but as one connected to other struggles. The tentacles of oppressive structures link a myriad of marginalized groups under its' weight. On this point, Collins uses the work of Loewenberg and Bogin (1976) to quote Anna Julia Cooper.

We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country, or condition.... The colored woman feels that woman's cause is one and universal; and that ... not till race, color, sex, and condition are seen as accidents, and not the substance of life; not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman's lesson taught and woman's cause won—not the white woman's nor the black woman's, not the red woman's but the cause of every man and of every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong. (Loewenberg and Bogin 1976, 330–31 as cited in Collins, 2000, p. 41)

We are not free if we all don't get free. The ultimate goal of BFT is for the uplift and actualization of all of humanity. BFT understands that if Black women have reached

parity in pay, opportunity, consideration of their concerns and credence of their standpoints, all other groups also will have reached the same status.

**Black Feminist Thought and the Black Mother.** Collins spent time addressing the handling of Black mothers in the literature (Collins, 1987; Collins, 1989a; Collins, 1994; Collins 2005). Specifically, the lack of Black women's voice and own analysis of their mothering experiences-or standpoint. Black mothers are trivialized and castigated as larger than life caricatures in the master narrative. Extremes in all things. Black mothers are simultaneously lauded for their extraordinary care capacity through the mammy trope (Collins, 2000) while degraded for their lack of nurturance and "emasculating" practices through the matriarch descriptive as forwarded in the infamous Moynihan report (Moynihan, 1965). They are oversexualized, irresponsible, lascivious tricksters while also being asexual workhorses devoid of a need for emotional caring. (Collins, 1989; Collins, 2005; Harris-Perry, 2011). Such stereotypes place women, in what Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) calls the "crooked room". She uses this analogy to underscore the myriad of ways that Black women are pressured to contort, either in rebellion or accommodation, in response to the twisted preconceptions of who they are. These stereotypes serve to undermine the actual power of Black women and present them as unidimensional beings. Such controlling images serve at the pleasure of white supremacy to frustrate the forward movement of Black people through Black women. It understands our importance while concurrently pretending that we are obsolete. The characterization of Black women as mummies, overbearing matriarchs or undesirable beings have been created to undermine our efforts to empower ourselves and our people (Collins, 1999).

Despite such attempts at subverting Black women's power, Black motherhood has the ability to serve as a site of resistance, facilitating the reclamation of our power and rearticulating the roles assigned to us by others. This resistance harkens back to our West African lineage with practices and value systems that survived the degradation and violence of the Atlantic Slave Trade and helped to sustain the Black community in the United States (Collins, 1987; James, 1993). Rooted to this cultural lineage, Black mothering practices did not readily mimic those uplifted in the "cult of true womanhood" (Craddock, 2015). The job of nurturing and providing were not treated as separate, dichotomous domains. "While the archetypal white middle-class nuclear family conceptualizes family life as being divided into two, oppositional spheres...this rigid sex role segregation was not part of the West African tradition" (Collins, 1987, p.4). Accordingly, caring for the community's children was a communal effort. Additionally, "West African women occupy influential roles in African family networks" (Collins, 1987, p.4). Thus, mothers were held in high regard and central to West African philosophical and social institutions (Christian, 1994).

**Themes of Black Motherhood and Motherwork.** Collins proposes themes to explore the tension between subjugated understandings of Black motherhood to benefit dominant culture and Black women's resistance to designated definitions (Collins, 1987).

- 1) Bloodmothers, othermothers and women centered networks.
- 2) Providing as part of mothering.
- 3) Community othermothers and social activism

4) Motherhood as a symbol of power.

Each theme provides space to explore the interplay between Black mother's standpoint, group knowledge, consciousness and systems of oppression. They further allow us to capture the array of experiences and attitudes amongst Black women in how they view the institution of motherhood, be it liberating or stifling. "The alleged contradictions can exist side by side in African-American communities, families and even individual women" (Collins, 1987 p. 4). The oversimplification of Black motherhood betrays the realities for Black women, even if the stereotypes appear to be a positive rebuke of existing tropes. "African-American women need a revitalized Black feminist analysis of motherhood that debunks the image of "happy slave," whether the White male-created "matriarch" or the Black-male perpetuated "superstrong Black mother" (Collins, 2000, p. 176).

The labor exerted by mothers existing within despotic structures is realized as "motherwork" (Collins, 1994). Collins utilizes this term to muddy the polar distinctions enforced through white middle-class norms of mothering. It envelopes all the efforts put forth by mothers towards "working for the physical survival of children and community, the dialectical nature of power and powerlessness in structuring mothering patterns, and the significance of self-definition in constructing individual and collective racial identity" (p. 375). While these are concerns of all women, it is especially significant for women of color whom have had their perspectives ignored and distorted to fit inside the themes erected by the dominant culture of the mothering experience .

**Community Mothers and Activism.** The definition of mothers in the traditional Black community has never been defined strictly to those who birthed children (Collins, 2000a). “African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible” (p. 192). The term othermothers was created to define “those who assist blood mothers in the responsibilities of child-care for short- to long term periods, in informal or formal arrangements. They can be, but are not confined to, such blood relatives as grandmothers, sister, aunts, cousins, or supportive fictive kin” (James, 1993, p. 45). We see this exemplified when Black children talk about their ‘play mamas’ and how younger Black people may refer to elder Black women as “Aunty” or Mama (insert last name) when they are of no blood relation. James (1993) purports that the practice of othermothering is another remnant of African-Americans indigenous ancestral practices.

Throughout Black history, othermothers have done more than care for the children in their immediate reach, but expanded the grasp of their wisdom, care and nurturing even farther to advocate for the entire Black community. These women became known as “community mothers”. We see this illustrated through the work of the Black clubwomen of the late nineteenth century (Cooper, 2017; Edwards, 2000) . The club movement was sustained by educated, middle-class Black women who leveraged their status and access to resources to address the larger needs of their community. It is further recognized in the efforts of churchmothers, who were not afforded the same recognition of leadership as their Black male counterparts yet were still able to mobilize resources for community need (Edwards, 2000). Black Clubwomen and churchmothers contributed to the fight for civil rights. Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells, Ella Baker and Fannie Lou

Hamer are just a few such examples. Ultimately, community mothers commit to the maintenance and caring of the Black community through their “ethic of care” which inspires them to engage in activism for the benefit of their whole community.

**The work Black Feminist Thought does in the study.** BFT supplies the lens with which to understand the tight-rope Black mothers as community mothers, walk in daring to unsettle assumptions of worthlessness, call out contradictions and demand justice for all their children. It follows the voices of Black women as the experts of their own experiences and requires the recognition that individual standpoints reside in tension with the communal realization of Black women’s designation. BFT makes the “connection between experience and consciousness” tangible as Black women interrogate how their history and present intertwine to create their current reality. It is through this consciousness, this awakening, that Black women are driven to actively challenge structures.

Collins points to historical examples such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Joyce Ladner. Yet, we have an abundance of current examples of oppressive tragedy made inspiration. Examples like Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tomei, founders of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Erica Garner, deceased activist and daughter of Eric Garner who was strangled together on camera by police officers as he foreshadowed what many Black folks feel daily: “I can’t breathe”. Lezley McSpadden who ran for Ferguson City Council after her son was murder by a Police officer, allowed to bake on the cement for 4 hours, then murdered again in the media. Sybrina Fulton, mother of Trayvon Martin whose life was cut short by a racist, self appointed neighborhood watchman standing his ground. These are but a few of the women shining through despair for the sake of their



community. These are the community mothers and othermothers that continue on for a greater purpose despite the ever-tightening grip of fear and degradation. Fear for their children and people. Degradation of their spirits and minds.

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### CHRONICLE 3: FATBACK

*I did not know a whole bunch about my Grandmama's background besides what the family folklore was. She had a beautiful voice. My Granddaddy made sure she never had to work. She never learned how to drive.*

*It is not that I did not see a lot of her. I saw her plenty. My daddy had started his own carpet cleaning business. It was a business of two. Just him and my mama. So when they had jobs, off we would go to grandmama house. When we came in I could guarantee we would find her sitting in her plush living room chair watchin' her stories or her gameshows. Her glasses reflecting what was on the T.V. while she was poppin' her gum. Once we settled in and my parents had left she would ask, "Yall hungry?" Whether we were hungry or not, we would answer "yes". She would get up out her chair, make sure her housedress was pulled down proper, slip on her house shoes and head to the kitchen. She lived in a small house that was one of the first built in this neighborhood after the Tornado of 1953 tore through decimating much of what was standing. My daddy family was also one of the first to integrate the schools. They experienced a lot of overt racism- white folks pushing back hard against letting Black kids into the schools. This was not some stereotypical Mississippi Burning hick-town. This was in Flint, Michigan. Still, my grandparents managed to see all their children, save my father, off to college. He was just too stubborn and couldn't be told anything is what I heard. I can believe that.*

*HmmMmm...It is smellin' so good up out that kitchen...*

*I don't know what it was about my Grandmama house that was calming. Maybe it was the spirit of my Granddaddy who had died peacefully in his bed a few years back. When us*

*kids would walk back to what had been his bedroom, we would poke our heads in quickly and sprint back to the living room. We were half scared his ghost was back there and half tickled that we were getting away with peeking into some sacred and forbidden space. Maybe the fact that grandmama didn't say much but could make everyone fall silent with just a look of her eyes, or a particular snap of her gum and tightening of her lips. Even when the whole family was over sitting around the kitchen table for a super serious game of spades she was silent, but for humming out "Precious Lord". As I got older, I discovered this was her form of "talking over the table" to my Aunt Gerry. But when she won, and she got tickled- her laugh. She would open her mouth wide and joy would jump out of her small body. Loud and melodic. I would laugh with her even though I often didn't know what I was laugh about. It was just contagious.*

*I went into the kitchen to see what my Grandmama was cooking us. Her regular was a simple meal of eggs and grits. Sometimes with bacon, sometimes with sausage. It did not need to be extravagant because I just loved her grits and eggs. For some reason they tasted better at her house.*

*"Grandmama, you need some help?"*

*"Naw. It's too small in this kitchen. I got it."*

*I sat at the table and watched her do her thing. She scrambled and seasoned the eggs in a small bowl. She checked on the grits that were already simmering in a pot on the stove. Then she took out something I didn't recognize. It looked like a slab of white butter. She cut off a bit and put it in the skillet. It began to sizzle.*

*"Grandmama, what's that?"*

*"Well that is just a little fatback. I put it in the pan for the eggs and sausage."*



*That must be it! I had never seen my mama cook with fatback. That had to explain the taste of my Grandmama's grits and eggs. When she had finished cooking she set our eggs, grits and sausage out on four plates and called the rest of my brothers and sister. "Yall come in here and eat!" We quickly rushed in, grabbed a plate, said our grace and got to eating. Eating our fatback, eggs and grits.*

### ACBM Meeting Notes

9/9/18

*One of the first things I notice is that I was definitely in the "Black neighborhood". The first legitimate "party store" I had seen since moving here 2 years ago was located on the corner as I was making my way to the meeting on the corner of Chavez and Martin Luther King Boulevard. I also notice the type of businesses lining the streets. They appear to be more industrial and factory-like. I don't see a Starbucks in sight. Yet, there is a McDonalds on the corner. I turn down the street that the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers (ACBM) meeting will take place and see what looks to be an abandoned greenhouse. I assume this was a project the school initiated that has been forgotten. When I pull into the parking lot of the school which the meeting will take place, I am taken by how old the school looks compared to many of the other schools I have visited in the Greater Star City area. There is a very small parking area and once I find a space and park, I get out my camera so I can get some pictures of the surroundings. I take pictures of the signage at the top of the school building. They all seem to be signs for grassroot community organizations which are housed inside the school.*

*Simmons Academy is a K-8 school in the Jefferson School District. I have been here before, but at night for other ACBM meetings. As I walk towards what I hope will be*

*the correct entrance, I am greeted by an older Black gentleman who is working in the yard next to a small tree. He is picking up leaves and just inspecting the area. He says to me, "Hello". I nod, smile and say hello in return. I open the door of the building and stick my head in slowly. There are 5 Black folks, four men and one woman, sitting around a space having what appears to be meeting. I asked if they knew where the ACBM meeting would be and they all point towards a door at the end of the room. "It will be that way." I thank them, walk through their meeting space as quickly as possible and enter a school gym. The Director of ACBM, Mrs. Lynn Dotson is passing out papers around a group of tables formed into a square in the middle of the gym. There are a couple other women here as well. One looks around 30 years old and the other looked near 50. I recognize the older women from past meetings. Mrs. Dotson put down the papers she was passing out and starts walking towards me with open arms. "Ms. Dawn, it has been a while." We hug and she asks how my program is going. I laugh and tell her it is a lot of work. More than I could have imagined. She smiles at me and responds, "They working you, huh? Well you got this because this is what we have to do." I smile back and answer, "Yes, ma'am. That is the truth." I ask her if she needs any help passing out the papers. She answers she is fine, then states, "I am glad to see so many people arriving early. We will be able to start on time today!" I nod in agreement, then ask her about the signage outside and she tells me that they share space inside the school with multiple local organizations. "Simmons is a community school so they are really trying to have a community presence inside the building."*

*She walks me back towards the space where the people that had directed me towards the ACBM meeting space were still sitting and discussing. She introduces me to*

*the group. "This is Dawn and she is a PhD student. She will be working with us to work on her dissertation. They all encourage and congratulate me. "That is wonderful!"*

*"Well, that is so nice." "I am honored Dr. Demps!" They don't know me from a hole in the wall but encourage me all the same. I get a lot of this. Especially when I am being introduced by the ACBM mothers.*

*We leave and head back to the gym. Mrs. Dotson explains to me that the people from the room we just left are letting her have a makeshift office in their space until the school gives ACBM a room of their own. "They will be giving us our own space very soon. We need more privacy for when we meet with the mothers to talk to them about what they have going on with their babies in these schools." She ushers me back into the gym. An older woman introduces herself to me as Claudia and she asks if this is my first meeting. "Oh no. I have been to a few meetings." She asks me what I am in school for and where I am at. I tell her I am at Boynton State University to get my Ph.D. in Education Policy. "Oooh, now that's nice. I got my bachelors back in the 60s and 70s. You know, during Civil Rights and the Women's Movement and all. I just figured, I need to go do this now, while they letting us do this. You know?" I asked her what school she went to. "Oh, I went to BSU, like you. And it was hard. They were so racist! I had this one professor who no matter what I did he would give me an "F". Just "F", "F", "F". I didn't even think he looked at my papers! So I ended up telling my counselor. So, on this one assignment she actually wrote the paper and had me put my name on it to see what he would give me. Another "F"! He just saw my name and gave me a flunking grade. I don't think he ever read my work. Yeah, he ended up getting into trouble for that. I don't know how it is there now. How is it?*

*"It is alright. They still have issues. Not many Black professors, but you have to find your people. The ones who will support you. I hope it is better than what it was for you."*

*"Chile, me too. You know I thought about going back. Maybe working on a Ph.D. But then I had kids and they grown. I have two boys. One is in engineering and one is in the NFL. I am getting ready to retire now, so I am done with all of that."*

*"Maybe you could go now. During your retirement, you may have a little time to do that. That's if you really wanted to."*

*"Oh, I don't have the time still. That was my moment when I went. You young, so you have got that energy. So you should do that and we cheer you on!" She laughs and touches my hand. "Well it's good to meet you."*

*"Pleasure to meet you as well."*

*As I am seated and waiting for the meeting to begin, another of the mothers approaches me. I remember her from other events and recall her name as Mrs. Thames. "It is so good to see you." I answer, "Good to see you again. How have you been?" She tells me about an upcoming trip she is going on regarding the Congressional Black Caucus. She then goes into the disjointed nature of the Black political scene in Star City. "We don't have any representation and then the so-called leaders, those that have been appointed to be the voice of Black people in the state have no idea what to do."*

*Mrs. Dotson soon joins our discussion. "It is a lot going on. I know we are focused on keeping our Black sons and our Black kids in school, but then all of this other stuff is going on and I have to also pay attention to that." I ask them what the engagement of the statewide branches of Black organizations has been. They both laugh. Mrs. Dotson*

*begins. "First, where are the women? It is a bunch of old Black men thinking they still in the 1960's. There are no women and no young people when they meet. Mrs. Thames laughs, "Yeah, we need to catch you up. We will talk after this meeting."*

*More women file in. Not all of them are Black. Two are white. One of the white women asks if the seat next to me is taken. "It is taken by you" I answer and smile. She sits and introduces herself to me as Amber. The room has filled up quickly. There are approximately 18-20 women sitting around the square now. One white woman and another Black woman have brought their children. The Black child looks to be approximately 7 yrs of age and sits next to her mother. The white child looks to be 4 years of age and also sits next to his mother. He is a little more antsy undoubtedly due to his age. Mrs. Dotson brings the meeting to order and begins with a prayer. All of the women bow their heads as she leads the short prayer. She then instructs all of the mothers to stand to say the "Black Mother's Call". "How many of you have this memorized?" Only a couple nod in the affirmative. Someone states, "I'm working on it." The mothers all chuckle and then recite the words from a paper that is in front of everyone on the table.*

*I am Black, beautiful, intuitive, and strong.  
I am the Matriarch, the stabilizer, the earth's backbone.  
From the beginning, I have excelled.  
I am determined to survive.  
In my womb the seed of trillions through the ages I will provide.  
I am unfazed by obstacles.  
Perpetual is my drive.  
Kings, Queens all royalty alike are inherently in my blood line.  
Against all odds I press on!  
Not a moment does my love wane.*

*I look down through the annals of time and realize I must maintain.*

*My aura of invincibility and my spirit of strength.*

*My disposition is "I will succeed" regardless of the mountainous hills.*

*I am Black, Bold, Beautiful.*

*My strength is personified from birth.*

*I am the Matriarch.*

*I am a Black Mother, the backbone of the earth!*

*When the call has been recited, Mrs. Dotson begins by going over the agenda, which is one of the sheets she was passing out at each seat when I initially walked in. She recaps the events of a local district school board meeting, the Newman District, that many of the mothers were present for. Apparently, there was a lot of push-back against what the mothers were asking of the district. The district had dismantled an Equity Office that was once in the district as soon as the new superintendent arrived. ACBM went to the board meeting to demand it be reinstated. Some of the mothers present are teachers and education union leaders and seem to know a lot of internal information with what is happening in the Newman District. They go back and forth sharing what they each know regarding the removal of the Newman Equity director and the dismantling of the office. Mrs. Dotson said that after the ACBM first appearance at a previous school board meeting for the district, that the "superintendent was sure to be ready for us this time around". She called the people whom she believed to have been purposely instructed to speak publicly at the board meeting in support of the superintendent "planted praise people".*

*The mothers begin to talk about the "anti-blackness" that is so prevalent when they attend school board meetings around Star City. Mrs. Dotson brings up how the ACBM has been chastised for having the term "Black" in their very name. She shares that*

*one parent stated she believed in the work they were doing, but had an issue with the "Black" in their name. During this wider discussion, one of the elder mothers sitting next to me tapped me on the shoulder and said, "There was an actual Black teacher who told us she was uncomfortable with us being called Black."*

*Then the conversation shifts to catalogue the ways "they will use our babies for money, but push them out when they get what they want." They speak of the increased rate of suspensions after the school count day for funding. Some speak of how the Newman District would admit Black kids from out of their boundaries, but then "warehouse them in one of two of their poorer school buildings." "They know what they doing!" said one mother. " They use us and then want us out of the way." Mrs. Dotson closes out this group discussion by saying, "We've got work to do! That is why we are going to continue with part 2 of our training today about how to have critical conversations."*

*Mrs. Thames goes to the front of the room and introduces herself as the presenter and trainer for this portion of the meeting. She begins by referring to her years of experience in corporate America and how she had to learn to most effectively communicate with those on her level and in her charge. She recapped what had been learned during part 1 of the training at their previous meeting. Then, the mothers are given a packet of papers. She asks the mothers to complete a page in the packet exploring our own style for handling conflict. We were then split into two groups to discuss what style of communication we find the most difficult to work with in the workplace or at home. Many of the mothers in my group seem to be educators. Therefore, many of the difficult interactions the reflect on rotate around the work environment in schools.*

*Mrs. Thames walks around observing both groups' conversations. After about 15 minutes she calls the group back together to "report out". Both groups express dismay over the same type of communication styles. 1) Someone who will not listen to the other side. 2) Those that won't speak up but use you to speak for them. 3) Someone who believes only they have all the answers. Mrs. Thames asks the mothers to reflect on how they face these types of folks in the school districts they enter. She seeks out suggestions from the mothers about how to diffuse situations from these types of communicators while making their voices heard and not being run over. We nod in agreement over some of the recommendations. "Remain firm in your voice." "Use the data to speak, not emotion." "Encourage others to speak up." Mrs. Dotson thanks Mrs. Thames for her presentation and encourages the mothers to be at the next school board meeting for the Newman District. Then the meeting is called to a close.*

*This was the first ACBM meeting I had attended after officially beginning the "data collection phase". It is funny that, while I began to take more intentional note of their interactions, I became acutely aware of how being around them made me feel. As a researcher, I am "required" to be disconnected. Yet, how can I be detached to what I am so essentially connected to? The majority of the "mothers" in ACBM are actually grandmothers. Most do not currently have children inside of any school system. I think this contributes to how I am wired to show respect in their presence beyond that of a respectable researcher seeking "data", but as a younger woman in this community of women with experience and wisdom. I do not feel as if I am an "ethnographer" in the general sense of being an outsider coming to live in the shoes of others whose life I am*



*interested in. This research is my life and, in that sense, I am inextricably linked to the data. Linked to these women. This space they have created feels familiar. Feels familial. Feels safe. I recognize that I am from this reality-and it is recognized by this group. I believe that is why they have welcomed me so openly and freely. As a mother, a Black woman and an activist, I feel more like a representative or a speaker that has been chosen by them to tell their story, than a detached voyeur. But more than that, I am treated as a "daughter" among mothers. They are so supportive and proud of me working towards my Ph.D. and readily share their stories with me. I feel like I have gone to my Grandmama's house listening to her share tales of segregated schools in the South. Of her being in a northern city for the first time. The secrets to her large garden behind her small house that the whole family harvests vegetables from. Or her sharing the special ingredient to her grits and eggs. I do not come into this space as merely a researcher. But as one that is received as a daughter chosen to take in what they know and share it forward for progress. Chosen to share their story.*

## **Positionality**

I self-identify as a Black mother, bridge, interrupter, and scholar. I intentionally assert my Blackness in an anti-black world because it shapes how I view relationships and power dynamics. I understand my explicit claim to Blackness as both a social and political act that can be interpreted as a challenge and threat to hegemonic structures organized around white privilege.

My identity as a mother reflects my charge as a caregiver of the lives I have born into this world yet, is also inclusive of my care and concern for all of humanity.

Especially, those that are marginalized, disenfranchised and rendered voiceless. My experiences as a mother of Black children have greatly influenced my research interests and those whose perspectives I seek to represent and uplift. Mothering is also seen as “women’s work” and carries with it the attending burdens of inequitable treatment, gender and sexual expectations and second-class citizenship. Black mothering must contend with the disregard and dismissal meted out in what bell hooks calls the “imperialist, capitalist, white supremacist patriarchy”. I am ever aware of how I reside in the complicated space of blackness, woman and single mother. Even in this though, there is opportunity for mothering to be utilized as resistance work. Sustenance work. Freedom work. It is in these spaces I see my mothering as powerful agency and realization.

A bridge is a person who utilizes whatever resources or networks they can access to assist others to “get to the other side” of discriminatory blockades, social barriers and bureaucratic red tape. Ultimately, I seek to use whatever position I have attained to improve others’ opportunities and life chances, so they can become the best possible versions of themselves. I believe I am obligated to help ensure there is just treatment and equity in the allotment of resources and opportunities for people to achieve their full potential. This belief stems from my history as a community worker and youth advocate as well as my experiences occupying a myriad of non-privileged positions. Where I do inhabit privilege, I seek to interrupt structures of oppression that squash dreams, dismantle pathways and snatch breath. Simultaneously, we should work toward a world where bridges are no longer needed.

As a scholar and researcher, I seek to shine a light on injustices and to be a microphone for the voices that are often silenced. As a researcher, I am obligated to

respect and honor the knowledges that shape how people respond to and resist in their everyday lives. I do not conduct research merely for the sake of knowledge and discovery, but to consider how research can inform our quest towards creating a more just world.

## **Methodologies**

### ***Oral History***

Oral histories are stories of moments gone by, as recalled and told by those present when the moment occurred and accurately captured by story-collectors. An oral history is an approach in which the researcher gathers personal recollections of events, their causes, and their effects from an individual or several individuals. This information may be collected through tape recordings or through written works of individuals who have died or who are living. (Creswell, 1998, p. 49). The story collector may be a family member, historian or social researcher.

Oral histories stem from the oral tradition utilized by indigenous and ancient societies to pass on cultural traditions, lessons, beliefs, and histories (Janesick, 2010; Ritchie, 2014; Turner, 1990). The Africans, captured and forced to endure the Middle Passage and placed into chattel bondage, passed on stories orally due to the prohibition against them learning to read and write. They knew it unwise to put their thoughts and stories down for their masters to potentially find (Turner, 1990). Manifestations of this oral tradition through folktales, spirituals, and proverbs passed on important knowledges and navigational tools through generations of Black people.

**Historical use and evolution of Oral History.** Oral histories, as an extension of this oral tradition, were exhibited in the slave narratives collected during slavery and used as a tool to embolden the abolition movement. Written narratives penned by former slaves such as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (Equiano, 1996) first published in 1789 and *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave* (Douglass, 2000) originally published in 1845, did much to help the abolition effort and simultaneously refute the widespread belief in the inferiority of Blacks. Kwame Appiah writes in the introduction of the reissue of Douglass' narrative in response to these attitudes,

This is why so many of the published narratives have the words “written by himself” (or “herself”) in their titles. It not only assured readers that the authors had experienced the horrors recounted at first hand; it also demonstrates that black people could write real literature (Douglass, 2000, p. xi).

Additionally, capturing the experiences and stories of multiple enslaved and formerly enslaved Blacks, that were largely illiterate, added heft to the atrocities of the peculiar institution while illuminating the humanity, ingenuity, and resilience exhibited by a people deemed incapable of possessing such traits.

There were governmental efforts to acquire the stories and testimonies of people utilizing oral history practices. The American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission was created in 1863 to collect testimony from former slaves and other witnesses to determine how to effectively plan for the potential of a free Black population (Blassingame, 1977). In the 1930's as part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal legislation, the Works Projects Administration and Federal Emergency Relief Association hired unemployed

writers and scholars to travel throughout the country to collect the stories of Americans to “portray the quality of life of a people, of revealing the real workings of institutions, customs, habits” (Sharpless, 2008, p. 11). They sent Black scholars and writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Alaine Locke South to collect stories from formerly enslaved Blacks (The WPA, n.d.; Turner, 1990). The folklorist, Benjamin Botkin, who oversaw the collection of slave narratives stated in the introduction of the resultant book *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery*, “From the memories and the lips of former slaves have come the answers which only they can give to questions Americans still ask: What does it mean to be a slave? What does it mean to be free? And even more, how does it feel?” (Sharpless, 2008, p. 11).

Oral histories were not recognized as a formal methodological tool until 1948 when Allan Nevins, created The Oral History Project at Columbia University. Taking advantage of a new discovery, the wireless recorder, Nevins and his students began recording interviews of their study participants and transcribing them as able (Sharpless, 2008). The recording of interviews and subsequent transcribing became important components of the methodological processes associated with oral histories.

As the academic community debated over and crystallized standards and ethics of practice for the new methodology, oral histories continued to memorialize the story of America. The Doris Duke Project on Native American History captured the diversity and pains of a people deemed visitors on their own land. Howard University’s Civil Rights Documentation Project, Alex Haley’s *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Theodore Rosengarten’s *All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* and Alex Haley’s *Roots: The*

*Saga of an American Family*, are all seminal works in oral history that provide a glimpse into the lives of Black people in America (Sharpless, 2008).

### ***Ethnography***

Ethnography is a methodological practice which stems from the field of anthropology. It is a process which employs the researcher themselves, as a tool, to provide deep descriptions of environments and observations of people within their cultural habitat. Schensul. LeCompte & LeCompte (1999) define it as, "...a scientific approach to discovering and investigating social and cultural patterns and meanings in communities, institutions, and other social settings" (p. 1). To come to thoroughly understand the nuances and meanings groups ascribe to experiences, the researcher immerses themselves into the culture through fieldwork (Bhattacharya, 2017; Van Maanen, 2011). Fieldwork is a process in which the researcher participates in the day to day workings of the people being studied.

**Historical use and evolution of Ethnography.** Ethnographies have a problematic history regarding subaltern groups (Isoke, 2018; Murillo, 1999; Sibeud, 2002). Anthropological ethnographic tales of the lone researcher setting aboard his ship to observe the wild natives abound. "Ethnography is a loaded term. It is loaded with the heavy cargo of slave ships, military invasion, and cultural annihilation. Ethnography invented the other. It made the other "dirty", "savage", "wicked", "lascivious", "backward," "uncouth." (Isoke, 2018, p. 153). This "research" was used to otherize indigenous populations, justify the possession of Black bodies and the stealth of native lands.

The term “ethnography” is a combination of the Greek term “ethnos” meaning people or tribe and “graphia” which means writing. Thus, it is literally “the writing of other people”. Yet, Jones (2010), digs further into the connotative use of the Greek. “‘Ethnos does not just literally mean ‘people’ but implies a particular category of ‘people’, namely ‘non-Greeks’; thus the ‘other’ or those that are not ‘us’. Europeans would use the derivation ‘ethnic’ to refer to ‘heathens’ or ‘savages’ and all those neither Christian nor Jewish” (p. 13-14).

The voyeuristic fascination with the other has been a central concern of the method given its anthropological roots. Many early ethnographies were conducted for the sole purpose of forwarding an ideological claim rationalizing colonial expansion and the wholesale dispossession of entire populations. Therefore, it is hard to divorce the origins of the methodology from its’ racial politics (Jones, 2010). “Ethnographic inquiry is most appropriate when it places events and people in the social, cultural, and political history and contexts in which they are constituted. It can never be innocent nor neutral since it is embedded in a political and moral process” (Murillo, 2004, p. 7).

In light of this troublesome history, critical scholars began to “reinscribe” critical consciousness into the methodology as a form of resistance and freedom (Noblit, Flores & Murillo, 2004). They constructed a form of ethnography intentionally cognizant of the ways that structure, history, and politics impact the meaning and responses of groups to a phenomenon. Critical ethnography is ethnography that leans into the causes and impacts of the social inequities that encapsulate the realities of groups. Bhattacharya (2017) remarks that one of the distinguishing features of critical ethnography “is that any kind of social documentary of human lives is embedded in various power relations and

inequities. Therefore, ethnographic tales cannot be told without including the ways in which power functions in those tales” (p. 25). Carspecken (2013), further notes that researchers engaged in critical qualitative research, inclusive of critical ethnographies, share a value orientation concerned about “the nature of social structure, power, culture and human agency (p. 3).

### ***Ethnography and Oral History: Working Together***

Creswell (1998) states that good qualitative research employs one or more traditions of inquiry (p. 51). I see oral history and critical ethnography as complementary methods. While they have components that are similar, where gaps exist in one, the other can help to remedy. Still, there is no perfect mode of inquiry, thus the layering of approaches has the potential to give a truer picture of the cultural, historical, and agentic ecosystem under which the mothers in this study operate under.

Both methodologies are committed to the work of uplifting the voices of often muted populations and require intimate interactions, largely dependent upon the oral narratives of the populations being explored (Di Leonardo, 1987). Both Di Leonardo (1987) and Dudley (2002) site the differences in the approaches such as the differing constructions of the field site, the nature of data collection, the incorporation of artifacts and other documents, the role of informant anonymity and who is the true author of the final written account. I do not belittle these methodological contradictions but believe that the approach Leonardo (1987) and Dudley (2002) took in their analyses of ethnography and oral history was comparative and not collaborative. The synergistic



employment of each can provide a much richer picture of the phenomenon when their strengths are put into proper use (Ingersoll & Ingersoll, 1987).

For instance, one of my points of interest is in the connections and potential impact the prior childhood educational experiences of the mothers may have had in how they approach the work they do contemporaneously. For this charge, oral history is most appropriate. According to the Oral History Association, oral history interviews are, “distinguished from other forms of interviews by its content and extent. Oral history interviews seek an in-depth account of personal experience grounded in reflections on the past as opposed to commentary on purely contemporary events” (Oral History Association, 2009). In this study, the oral history interviews will focus on the experiences of the interviewee with the educational system, family value systems and resistance work during their childhood and motherhood, seeking to highlight moments of perceived exclusion and resistance. In turn, critical ethnography is most suitable to analyze how those past experiences may be reflected in the current efforts of the ACBM leadership and members as they consider how to respond and negotiate their current position in the power hierarchy and the context of the social and political environment in which they must operate.

Troubling the boundaries of ethnography and oral history acknowledges that time, experience and context are not neatly ordained designations. Instead, these concepts bump into each other without rules or prediction. The past informs the present and the current moment demands reflection on history.

### *Site Selection*

**The Star City Landscape.** Star City is located in the southwest United States and considered one of the largest and fastest growing metropolitan areas in the country. According to data from the United States Census Bureau, the city population is over 1.6 million and the metropolitan area has nearly five million people. The racial composition of the metro area is 58% White Non-Hispanic, 29.8% Hispanic of any race, 5% Black and 2% Native American.

Children and families in the state are served by over 200 public school districts not including a robust charter school market that adds another 430 “charter school districts”. Star City is in an open enrollment state, which allows parents to place their children in any school of their choosing granted there is classroom space available. The educational climate of the state has seen contentious wrangling given the expansion of the state’s take on vouchers, the expansion of charter schools, the underfunding of public schools and dismal pay rates for teachers. The state ranks near the bottom of the country regarding countless academic and school quality indicators (McCann, 2020).

This educational climate brewed into a storm where 2,500 teachers and education advocates staged a protest on the state capitol steps. Caught up in a national groundswell that was sweeping the country, the education protests came to be called the #RedforEd movement (Blanc. 2020). Many Star City educators joined rallies demanding higher teacher pay, a restoration of education funding, competitive compensation for support staff, permanent pay structures and no further tax cuts. The #RedforEd movement legitimated their demands by connecting what is best for teachers, as what is best for

students. “Red For Ed is a movement of educators who will put everything on the line to make this dream a reality for every student, regardless of zip code” (Red for Ed, 2021).

Meanwhile, statewide data reveal significant academic outcome gaps between white students in the state and students of color by “as much as 44 percentage points on achievement tests”. Additionally, data from the National Center for Education Statistics gathered from the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights reveal that Black students in the state are three and a half times more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts and two times more likely to be expelled.

### ***Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers***

This study follows the efforts of a grassroots parent organizing group known as the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers (ACBM) in the large metropolitan sunbelt locale of Star City. On the ACBM website the mission of the group is stated: “We are a focused group of dedicated mothers of Black children who have come together to stop the bloodshed in our community. We believe that all children regardless of color, origin or background have opportunities to fulfill their dreams and preservation of their lives”. The ACBM was founded in 2016 as a response to multiple police shootings of Black men in Star City. The Star City Police Department has been noted for having the highest rates of civilian shootings in the country. Various social justice and historical Black organizations such as the NAACP and #BlackLivesMatter have responded to the preponderance of police shootings and violence, speaking especially to incidences where unarmed Black men have been murdered.

The founder of ACBM called together active Black women in the community to

brainstorm around possible responses to these shootings. During these initial meetings, the group began to explore the inequitable treatment of Black people in Star City and the state overall in a number of realms. It is during these meetings that the group decided to continue convening and address oppressive practices and policies as expressed in both the policing of Black communities and the education of Black children. The group committed to learning all they could about state legislation and policy creation, the history of the Black Freedom Struggle in the United States, how education decisions are championed in the state and understanding how to dissect statistical evidence and school district policies that contribute to the school to prison pipeline.

### **Design and Methods**

This study utilizes the tools of oral history and critical ethnography to examine the ways Black mothers employ community organizing to respond to incidents of school exclusion as experienced by their children. It further investigates how the mother's own historical experiences with schools inform their choices and how they interpret the significance and reception of their efforts. For the purposes of this study 'Black mothers' refers to those who self-identify as racially Black and/or African-American women. 'Mother' in this investigation is a term inclusive of natural mothers and community othermothers. This study seeks to address the following questions:

1. How does the mothers' standpoint affect their collective response to school system inequities?
2. How have the efforts of ACBM influenced educational policy?

### *Data Collection Strategies*

I selected methods that aligned with the methodological spirit of the theories guiding my investigation. Additionally, I sought to strengthen the trustworthiness of the conclusions through triangulation. “Data-source triangulation involves the comparison of data relating to the same phenomenon but deriving from different phases of fieldwork, different points of respondent validation, the accounts of different participants (including the ethnographer) involved in the setting” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 198).

While many sources of data acquisition are inherent in the configuration of ethnographic research, the intentionality of the methods I selected sought to make “a strong statement about undoing ways of seeing the world that lead to social injustice” (Holliday, p.731) adhering to the criticality of the study. Ultimately, I approached the collection of data with an eye towards revealing a complete story reflective of the lived experiences, decision considerations, treatment of and impact of the ACBM.

**Fieldwork.** This inquiry employs both ethnographic and oral history techniques. As noted above, one of the central features of ethnography is fieldwork. “Fieldwork asks the researcher, as far as possible, to share firsthand the environment, problems, background, language, rituals and social relationships of a more-or-less bounded and specified group of people. The belief is that by means of such sharing, a rich, concrete, complex and hence truthful account of the social world being studied is possible” (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 3).

I engaged in preliminary field-work for nearly two years before beginning the investigation (Caine, Davison & Stewart, 2009). This afforded me the ability build rapport

and comfortability. while earning the trust of the group participants that would be necessary for an immersive fieldwork experience through participant observation (Schensul et al., 1999). Participant observation is an oft used method in ethnography for gathering information about a culture ‘on the ground’ and in the natural setting in which the participants normally operate (Schensul et al., 1999).

I received the approval and blessing of ACBM leadership and members prior to the initiation of my study (see Appendix A). Formal data collection took place from April 2019 until July 2020. During this time, I constructed fieldnotes documenting my experiences, interactions, and observations (Van Maanen, 2011). Notes were taken during group meetings, community actions, school board meetings and other community events in multiple forms inclusive of photography (Edwards, 2016; Loughlin, 2013) and the creation of an electronic diary (Tam, 2017).

**Interviews.** 2 sets of semi-structured interviews took place.

**Set One.** This set of semi-structured interviews was only for key informants and comprised of the lead organizers or members of ACBM. ‘Set One’ participants participated in the three-interview protocol as put forth by Seidman (2006). The first interview was dedicated to the mother’s life history with emphasis on their educational histories. What is most distinct about oral history from other forms of narrative collection is its ability to allow for the narrator and the narratee to connect the dots across ripples in the river of one's' life to see the converging influence of moments to create the current reality (Portelli, 2006). Thus, the oral history interviews catalogued the mothers’ recollection of childhood family values-especially as pertaining to education. Special

attention was also paid to memorable societal events and other interactions they recalled with the educational system as children and young adults (see Appendix B).

The second interview explored their involvement with ACBM and interactions with the community and school system through their advocacy efforts. The third semi-structured interview was a reflexive exercise to “address the intellectual and emotional connections between the participants life and work” (Seidman, 2006, p. 10). (see Appendix C and D)

*Set Two.* A second set of semi-structured interviews were conducted for individuals selected as community representatives who have supported, observed or otherwise engaged with ACBM. ‘Set two’ participants only took part in a single in-depth, semi structured interview. The concern of these interviews were to get a pulse of how the work of ACBM is interpreted and received outside of the organization. These interviews also contributed to understanding the local climate regarding matters of educational equity. (see Appendix E).

All interviews were digitally recorded simultaneously using two (2) instruments to ensure accurate capture and to safeguard against loss of information due to equipment failure. Each interview lasted an average of 63 minutes.

**Document Analysis.** Archival data was collected from meetings, organizational documents and communications inclusive of email and social media posts. Documents were coded to look for themes emerging which addressed the research questions.

**Artistic Expression Collection.** Methodologically, art has been used in several ways from, reflexive exercise, data collection and researcher interpretation (Lawrence, 2015; Wang et al., 2017). For this study's aims, the process of creating art was a reflexive act of resistance and power (Faulkner, 2018) as well as a source of data. After the second interview, the key informants were asked to create art expression pieces in response to the following prompt: *How would you describe the relationship between your children, the school system and yourself?* The mothers were encouraged to use whatever form of artistic expression they were comfortable creating. They created poems, wrote prose, and created visual collages. I collected each mother's piece prior to her final interview. The works were then used to elicit discussion during the third interview between myself and the mothers.

Additionally, the expressive pieces of all the mothers were exhibited during the parent cypher, noted below, for group discussion elicitation (Bagnoli, 2009) "At the heart of arts based inquiry is a radical, politically grounded statement about social justice and control over the production and dissemination of knowledge" (Finley, 2008, p.72). Ultimately, the expressive art pieces served as a counter-narrative to the master script of the problematic Black mother (Davis, 2018).

**Parent Cypher.** This portion of data collection utilized a process I call the "parent cypher". This technique is like a focus group in that it allows the researcher to "take advantage of additional insights that such intra-group comparisons might yield" (Barbour, 2007, p. 7). Where parent cyphers differ from focus groups is that they are not wholly led nor constrained by questions from the researcher. Much like the tradition of



the hip hop cypher, the parent cypher begins with a single topic or “spark” being “dropped” into the circle. Participants, like lyricists, do the work of creating what will fill the void with their organic thoughts and feelings as they “come from the dome”.

The parent cypher was conducted via video conferencing. At the start of the digital gathering, the mothers were presented with artworks created by Black children who have experienced school exclusion. They were then shown and given time to read as necessary, each of the artistic expression pieces created by the mothers in the process noted above as a final form of visual elicitation. I encouraged the mothers to view and reflect on what they had seen and read silently. I then “dropped the spark” into the circle by asking the mothers to discuss the following question: *Since first beginning to advocate for Black children with ACBM or elsewhere, how have your views morphed/grown regarding the possibility of changing schools for the betterment of Black children?* After I verbalized and posted the question into the video chat box for their reference, I closed my own video screen to allow the mothers to discuss amongst themselves, uninhibited by my visual or verbal presence. I never intervened in the discussion, save using the chat box to alert the mothers as they neared the stated meeting end time. The parent cypher lasted over two hours. The video conference was recorded and transcribed.

**The “Autoethnographic Turn”.** Throughout the data collection process, I maintained reflexive journalings of my responses around the research as well as my own experiences as a Black mother navigating academia while covering my own children in schools not attendant to their needs (Matias & Nishi, 2018). As a form of check in and transparency, researchers should “incorporate a reflexive account into their research

product by signposting to readers ‘what is going on’ while researching” and “bring to the research product, data generated, a range of literature, a positioning of this literature, a positioning of oneself, and moral socio-political contexts” (Koch & Harrington, 1998, p. 882). Simultaneously, this process will ‘keep me honest’ in the checks and balances of my own inclinations as a researcher as “There is no neutrality. There is only greater or less awareness of one’s biases (Rose, 1985, p.77).

### *Participants*

Key informants among ACBM members were selected for in-depth interviews using purposive and criterion sampling (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). As I had been actively engaged with ACBM during my pre-field engagement, I was naturally connected with potential interview participants. The key informants eligible for the three-interview protocol needed to self-identify as Black or African American, identify as a natural mother or othermother, be over the age of 18, and be a member or lead organizer of ACBM. All the key informants were biological mothers at some point in their lives, but for the purposes of this study, those with school -age children currently in their homes were categorized as “natural mothers”. All others were identified as othermothers.

Table 1

*Key Informant Demographics*

Name (pseudonym)	Mother Identity	Racial/ethnic self-identification	Age	Education level	Household income
Akua Sampson	natural	Black/African	46	BA	Over \$100,000
Chatterla Davis	other	Black	65	Some Coll.	Over \$100,000
Cubby Nolan	other	Black	71	Some Coll.	\$20,000-\$34,999
Jai Owens	other	African-American	63	MA	\$50,000-\$74,999
Karsyn Rogers	natural	Black/ Hispanic	33	MA	\$75,000-\$99,999
Lynn Dotson	other	BI/African-American	55	MA	\$75,000-\$99,999
Michelle Thompson	natural	African-American	38	Some Coll.	\$20,000-\$34,999
Sandy Thames	other	African-American/ BI	63	MA	Over \$100,000
Simone Scott	natural	Black	48	Some Coll.	\$35,000-\$49,999
Violeta Serano	natural	BI/ Afro-Caribbean	46	Professional/MD	Over \$100,000

The average age of the key informants was 52 years. This group was more educated than the general population and averaged above the median household income for the state.

Participants for a second set of interviews specific to community members outside ACBM were selected through purposive sampling. As I observed the interactions between ACBM and the wider community, I noted individuals who collaborated with, were assisted by, could be impacted by, or were otherwise targets of the group's organizing efforts.

Table 2

*Community Rep Demographics*

Name (pseudonym)	Position	Race/ethnic self-identification	Age	Education Level	HH Income
Akeem Collins	District Administrator	African-American	42	Doctorate	Over \$100,000
Assata Wilson	School Board Member	Black	39	Some Coll.	Less than \$20,000
Bobby Gates	Public Servant	Black	34	MA	Over \$100,000
Desiree Lyons	State Administrator	Black	50	MA	Over \$100,000
Jessica Valley	School Board Member	Black	35	MA	\$50,000-\$74,999
King Milner	Community Advocate	Black	44	BA	Over \$100,000
Leonard Jones	School Board Member	Bi-racial	33	Some Coll.	Over \$100,000
Lester Sullivan	Researcher	White	68	Doctorate	Over \$100,000
Lucy Huddleston	Community Organizer	White	44	MA	Over \$100,000
Myopia Stewart	School Board Member	Black	58	BA	Over \$100,000
Olga Nettles	District Administrator	Black	53	Doctorate	Over \$100,000
Vanessa Kamara	District Administrator	Black		Doctorate	Over \$100,000

**Participant Recruitment and Procedures.** Both key informants and community representative interview participants were recruited by me or the ACBM founder. I was able to make participant recruitment announcements during ACBM participant and leadership meetings and spoke to potential participants during other events. If initial in-person contact peaked interest in an individual, I followed-up by sending an email invitation giving a short outline of the study protocol and scope. Once participants confirmed their willingness to participate, they received consent forms and a link to schedule a date, time and location of their choosing to have the interviews<sup>2</sup>. Interviews

<sup>2</sup> The onset of Covid-19 in January of 2020, had an indelible impact on how interviews were conducted, and field notes collected during a portion of the study. A state of emergency and semi-lockdowns were instituted, including the closure of schools. Instead of meeting in person for interviews, they shifted to Zoom. Additionally, ACBM events and organizing meetings had to be held virtually. I had to recalibrate the ways I conducted interviews and consider how this may change the relational ethos of the interviewee/interviewee exchange. I considered deleting portions of my study design protocol, believing the inability to connect on a personal level would irreparably impair the study. I was concerned that the technical limitations placed upon how I would have to gather data would negatively impact the substantive elements I desired. While some components of the study were made virtual, I found that the interactions were still rich and synergistic, save technical difficulties when they occurred. Furthermore, I experienced that some protocols became easier for the participants, as they could interact with me in more convenient modes. Still,

took place in homes, workplace offices, libraries, restaurants or virtually through the video conferencing platform, Zoom. Some participants emailed their signed consent forms back to me prior to the interview. Regardless, at the beginning of the first meeting with all interviewees, I went over the consent forms with participants to insure they had clarity and were comfortable with the process.

Each study participant, both key informants and community representatives, completed an intake survey form prior to the start of their respective interviews. They were able to select their own pseudonym to be identified throughout the study. Key informant intake forms gathered demographic information including whether children and/or grandchildren resided in their home and their rate of involvement with ACBM (see Appendix F). Community member intake forms also collected general demographic information (see Appendix G).

### **Study Analysis**

I utilized a hybrid approach for the thematic analysis of data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Saldaña, 2016; Swain, 2018). This technique explicitly acknowledges both inductive and deductive influences on a researcher's analytical considerations. Armat et al., note that it is "fallacious and misleading" (p. 220) to suggest any analysis of qualitative research is cleanly inductive or deductive as the researcher is always informed by what is already known while seeking what is yet to be discovered. Thus, the hybrid

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what may have been lost was the intimate sense of connection that the entire world was missing during this moment

approach considers the theoretical frameworks and research questions while simultaneously allowing the data to speak to the topic.

Audio and video fieldnotes and memos were transcribed and all fieldnotes were read “as a data set” (Emerson, Fritz & Shaw, 2011). Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then read line by line in a process of open coding which is the use of “tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles and Huberman 1994: 56).

Codes from this first round of coding were compiled into an excel spreadsheet where they were printed out and cut up (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) to be sorted into code families (Swain, 2018). The code families were titled and given definition and guiding examples from the dataset for the creation of a codebook (DeCuir-Gunby & Marshall, 2011) reflective of both theoretical and inductive derived groupings. All transcripts were then uploaded into the computer assisted qualitative data analysis software NVIVO (Bernauer et al., 2013) and coded according to the codebook.

Once this second round of coding was completed, the study research questions and sample texts from the data set were compiled and given to the mothers to review over the course of one week. I directed the mothers to read through the sample data set and take note of patterns and themes they may see emerging (Friere, 2000) according to the research questions. A virtual meeting via Zoom was then organized with all the mothers to discuss their findings. The grouping was a mix of key informants and mothers who had not previously been involved in the study. We all discussed what was believed to be the most conspicuous motifs arising and identified themes. After this meeting, I went through the entire corpus of the coded data and finalized the themes.

## **Trustworthiness**

Seidman (2006) notes that the structure of the three-interview process lends itself to internal and external validity as the interactions take place over an extended period. Furthermore, my consistent and long-term engagement with the key stakeholders layers assurance of authenticity and confirmability (Gill, Gill & Roulet, 2018). The thick description required for ethnographic work and multiple avenues for data collection help to further insure the credibility of the study (Patton, 1990). Credibility is additionally established as I applied two avenues for member-checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The first instance was during the parent cypher as I sought any salient issues missed in my analysis to that point. Next, the mothers were invited to process a portion of the data to discuss patterns and potential themes they saw surface (Friere, 2000). Lastly, the autoethnographic turn and reflective notes on the progress of the study also contribute to the study's credibility (Gill, Gill & Roulet, 2018).

## **Study Design Alignment**

Patricia Hill-Collins espouses that there is a “set of principles for assessing knowledge claims” (Collins, 2000, p. 256) that those claiming to adhere to a Black Feminist epistemology should be informed by. Methodology is an extension of this epistemological stance and serves the researcher by providing the guidelines of their investigation. It is “the theory of how inquiry should proceed” (Schwandt, 1997, p. 93) which in turn, dictates the methods or processes of data collection. Yet, methodology does more than provide guideposts; it connects with theory in very meaningful ways.

Whereas theory provides the governing principles of a study, the methodology provides the treasure map to your destination. The choice of each will be informed by the other. Therefore, the methodology, epistemological sensibilities and selected theory should align in a sensible fashion (Madison, 2011). Both ethnographies and oral histories exhibit philosophical orientations which center voice and experiential knowledge while acknowledging the value of political, social and historical context.

While the methodologies may intuitively lend themselves to centering voice, the role of the researcher as the conductor of the orchestrated research design cannot be overemphasized. In 1994, Fine considers the various presentations of the agency of researchers and how it is expressed in every decision the researcher makes regarding research design. No decision is innocuous or without consequence for the group being studied. In this way, as the researcher desires, methodology can have an aphonic effect, rendering the participants invisible and inconsequential; or an intensifying effect, respecting the participants and their realities as the grounding point of analyses, consideration, and action.

Thus, the value and necessity of the participants' points of view must be illustrated by allowing the participants to speak for themselves. The methods I utilized provide multiple ways of presenting the participants own truths and knowledges. The heft of this responsibility is further addressed by this study design's insistence on self-reflection, check-ins and the "auto-ethnographic turn". My status "in the space between" as an insider-outsider (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) does not preclude me from the necessary work of analyzing how my positionality will influenced how I see and hear the treasures I was entrusted with. Fine (2006), invoking the work of Sandra Fine, suggests researchers



“work aggressively through their own positionality, values and predispositions, gathering as much evidence as possible, from many distinct vantage points, all in an effort not to be guided, unwittingly, by predispositions and the pull of biography” (p. 89). The composition of this study makes such an attempt.

In 1927, Zora Neale Hurston began upon her journey to collect the stories of the “last known survivor of the American slaver--the Clotilda” (Hurston, 2018, p. xiii). This “last cargo” was known as Cudjo Lewis, formerly called Kossula in his home tongue. Hurston, an accomplished sociologist, and oral historian beyond her writing prowess, made multiple trips over 3 months to collect his stories. In the introduction of the resultant book from those exchanges, Hurston reflects upon the ways the stories of the enslaved have been told throughout time. “All these words from the seller, but not one word from the sold. The Kings and Captains whose words moved ships. But not one word from the cargo” (p. 6). Oral histories and ethnographies, when used with an intentional commitment by the researcher to uplift the voices of disenfranchised and “discarded others” (Fine, 1994, p. 17) provide an opportunity for the lions to tell their story; for the cargo to speak.

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## Chronicle 4: Pareidolia

Portion of Jay's police report [Image]

Offenders											
Seq. #	Type	Injuries	Residency Status			Ethnicity					
1	INDIVIDUAL	None	Resident			Non-Hispanic					
Name (Last, First, M)						SSN					
DEMPSEY, JAY R. (JUVENILE)											
AKA				Race	Sex	DOB	Age	Height	Weight	Hair	Eyes
				B	M		15	5'11"	210 lbs	BRO	BRO
Address						Secondary Phone		Primary Phone			
Employer Name/Address						Business Phone					
Scars, Marks, Tattoos or other distinguishing features:											
Physical Characteristics:											

Suspect Details

Charges									
1	Charge Type	Description	Statute	UCR	<input type="checkbox"/> Att <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Com				
	State	NARCOTIC DRUG-POSSESS/USE	13-3408A1	35A					
Alcohol, Drugs or Computers: Used		Location Type	Premises Entered	Forced Entry	Weapons:				
<input type="checkbox"/> Alcohol <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Drugs <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Computers		SCHOOL-ELEMENTARY/SE		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	1.				
Entry	Exit	Criminal Activity			2.				
		PROCESSING/ CONCEALING			3.				
Bias: Motivation		Bias: Target	Bias: Circumstances:		Hate Group				
2	Charge Type	Description	Statute	UCR	<input type="checkbox"/> Att <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Com				
	State	DRUG PARAPHERNALIA-POSSESS/USE	13-3415A	35B					
Alcohol, Drugs or Computers: Used		Location Type	Premises Entered	Forced Entry	Weapons:				
<input type="checkbox"/> Alcohol <input type="checkbox"/> Drugs <input type="checkbox"/> Computers		SCHOOL-ELEMENTARY/SE		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	1.				
Entry	Exit	Criminal Activity			2.				
		PROCESSING/ CONCEALING			3.				
Bias: Motivation		Bias: Target	Bias: Circumstances:		Hate Group				

As I read over the police report, I noticed the officer had put Jay down as 210 lbs. 210 lbs.? He was barely 160 soaking wet. How could folks trained to eye and describe individuals, while under duress, be so wrong about someone by 50 lbs.? The other thing that I noted was that my 15yr. old son was being charged with two felonies!

How did we get here?



*At the end of December, before winter break, the principal from Jay's high school called to tell me Jay was being suspended for smoking a vape pen in the boy's bathroom. So many things were flying in my head. "How did he get a vape pen? How long would he be suspended? What is the appropriate response to my son?"*

*It was like déjà vu' all over again. I went into the principal's office and Jay was already seated. The principal began, "You, know, Jay has never been a problem. This is unfortunately his first time ever being in my office."*

*The principal went on to tell me how the school security officer had gone into the boy's restroom to do his morning sweep before the bell rang and found a group of about 10 boys in the restroom. Apparently, the boys quickly left the premises, except Jay, who was in the stall. The security officer saw Jay receive "an unknown object" from underneath the stall from a boy in the stall next to him. They found the pen "on his person" and sent him to the office where Jay was told to "write a statement" detailing that he was caught with the vape pen.*

*I turn to Jay, who is sitting next to me silently,*

*"Did you have the vape pen?"*

*"Yes ma'am."*

*There is silence for a moment as I turn back to the principal with a tight smile. He continues,*

*"This is a mandatory 10 day out of school suspension. We can count today as..."*

*I interrupt him, "Actually, it is really funny. But you know what I am going to school for?"*

*The principal shakes his head, “Well, no.”*

*“It just so happens I am working on my PhD in education studying this exact phenomenon. The pushout of students from schools. Of all the people in your office.”*

*He laughs, uncomfortably, “Yeah, that is something.”*

*I take out my cell phone to pull up the school’s student handbook that I had hurriedly scanned through when I was on my way to the school. I had this little trick drilled into my head through the ACBM Know Your Rights trainings I had participated in and observed.*

*“Go through that student handbook and know it. It is boring, but you need to know it and use it in your favor,” Ms. Thames would say.*

*“Your handbook actually says that it is to your discretion and in consideration of other factors, like students being a danger to the campus, how long they should be suspended. Now I will not argue that he should not have consequences for what he has admittedly done. But you said yourself that he has never been an issue. All his teachers like him and think well of him. I am going to have to push back on that ten-day out of school thing.”*

*The principal looks down at the incident papers and back at me.*

*“Okay, well we can do 5 days out of school and 5 days in-school counting today.”*

*I quickly consider and answer, “Okay, that is somewhat better. I want to be sure he is not missing any work as it is the end of the semester.”*

*“I will make sure his teachers get him a packet together. But he will have to take part in our drug diversion program.” The principal motions for someone to come into the office. A police officer walks in and stands next to the principal’s desk.*

*“This is Officer Hernandez. He is our SRO. He runs our drug diversion program.”*

*The officer shakes my hand and explains, “It is a series of classes he will take. When he is done, we will not pursue prosecuting him.”*

*“What do you mean prosecuting him?”*

*“Well, for illegal drug use in school. But if he completes the diversion program, there will be no further action on the part of the school.”*

*I respond, “Well do we actually know what was in the pen?”*

*“We will get it tested to find out exactly what was in the pen and cartridge.” Officer Hernandez states.*

*This all sounded like a lot of judicial talk for a “first time ever being in my office” student caught smoking in the bathroom! Was it possible they would really press charges against him? I quickly imagine the diversion program like the sort of classes we used to take as part of the failed “Just Say No” campaigns of my childhood. My head was spinning. How bad could a class be? I agree that Jay will take part in the school’s drug diversion program.*

*“We will send you paperwork to let you know when they will begin.” the principal says. I hardly hear him. I walk out with Jay fuming to my car. Once we get in the car, I tell Jay,*

*“Don’t you ever in your life write down any statement or sign anything without me present. Do you understand?”*

*“Yes ma’am.”*

*We head home in silence.*

*I give Jay every form of punishment I can think of. He has dishes for 3 months. I take away his phone “until I feel like you ready to have it back”. I take away his laptop. He is banished to his room for a month. I make him start running 2 miles every morning before school. I preach to him 13 different versions of the same talk. “You should not have done what you did. Peep how all your little white friends who were in the bathroom with you all got out. What about the boy who gave you this mess? Only you stuck holding the bag Jay! That is the society we live in. You can’t make those type of mistakes because they waiting to gobble you up whole. Waiting for you to get out the stall! Watching to put you out the school! You can’t afford bad decisions! They can cost you everything!” I am sure I sounded like a mad woman to him. I just desperately needed him to understand that he can’t be a kid anymore. It felt like a psychologically abusive, developmentally inappropriate, but sadistically necessary conversation.*

*On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, Ahmaud Arbury was murdered while taking a jog. February 24<sup>th</sup>, I start getting up in the morning and following Jay in my car as he does his punishment jog. Jay later told me that he believed I was following him in my car to make sure he ran the assigned distance. I wish it were so light.*

*February 28<sup>th</sup>, I receive a “notice to appear” in the mail from the city police department detailing that Jay was to meet with a probation officer at the Superior Court’s Juvenile Division where he must “admit responsibility for the offense in order to participate in the diversion program.” This whole situation occurred before Christmas, but I am just receiving this follow-up about the diversion program? Additionally, this is*

*no classroom diversion program as I had believed it would be. He has to report to a probation officer! I realize this is a whole different ballgame. I call Mrs. Dotson to ask her if I can meet with her after the next ACBM meeting.*

*I take Jay with me to the next ACBM meeting and bring the letter I had received from the Superior Court and the paperwork detailing Jay's suspension back in December. After the meeting once all the members leave, Mrs. Dotson asks me and Jay to sit down at a table where Mrs. Thames joins us. I give them all the paperwork, outlining the incident, Jay's suspension and the letter informing me of his meeting with the probation officer. They write down some notes as they are reading through everything. Mrs. Dotson starts,*

*"Why didn't you tell us about this whole situation earlier?"*

*"I thought I could handle it." In my head I added, "And I was ashamed...embarrassed." Even with these mothers whom I knew would not judge me and had seen it all before. But fear superseded all pride when I recognized these folks were really trying to catch my son up in the judicial system.*

*"Don't ever do that again. You should have told us about all this in December. Don't think you have to do this alone. I think Simone may be able to go with you to this meeting with the probation officer. But just in case, we are going to go over some things you need to do before the meeting."*

*They instruct me to write down questions for the officer in advance regarding the program. They also direct me to pick up the police report. I didn't even think about there being a police report. Mrs. Thames lets me know, "If they have the charges listed on this*

*paper and have assigned him a probation officer, there is a police report." They also offer to pay the \$50 fee that I am being charged to put Jay in the diversion program.*

*They give Jay a good talking to. A gentler variation of the same talk I had given him multiple times in the last three months. They hug us both and we leave. When we get home, I go to my bedroom and cry.*

*The day of the meeting arrives, and we drive to the Juvenile Detention Center in silence. I remember I kept looking over at him while I was driving. He had on khaki shorts and a dark gray polo. His untamed hair was saying what he wasn't. What he couldn't. His knobby knees caught my attention and I decided to use that to make small talk.*

*"Did you push lotion on honey?"*

*"Yeah, Nana bought me some."*

*Thinking of his sensitive eczema prone skin that he has dealt with since he was a baby, "I need to get you some more Eucerin." He nods in agreement.*

*Another long hallway of quiet.*

*I tap his knee, my voice shaking, "Mama is just scared for you, okay?" My eyes welled up and Jay grabbed my hand. "I know mama."*

*More silence.*

*After a couple minutes Jay notes as I wipe tears from my eyes, "But let's keep your hands on the steering wheel, so we can be safe."*

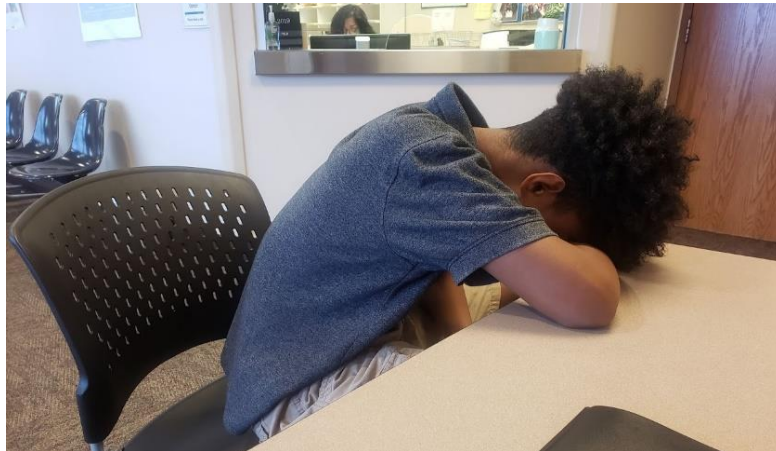
*We both bust out laughing. Jay had successfully broken the tension. Until we pulled up to the detention center parking lot. We silently pull in.*

*Parking Lot Sign for Juvenile Detention Center. [photograph]*



*We head into the building where security takes my purse as we walk through metal detectors. We are directed upstairs to the office where our meeting will take place. The woman at the desk directs us to sit in a lobby area. While we are waiting, it seems like the heaviness of the situation drapes itself over Jay's back. He set his head down on the table as we waited to be called in.*

*Jay seated in waiting area. [photograph]*



*We are eventually called in to see Officer Jodi. She makes clear that Jay must complete all the steps in the diversion program to avoid being sent before a judge and a potential trial. The plan included the following steps: Weekly drug testing, complete an 8-hour drug education class at the detention center, write an essay on life goals, attend five 12 step meetings, and I had to complete a parenting class. Because...you know...I must need a parenting class. During this time, if he does anything wrong-all bets are off and he will be sent before a judge.*

*I heard a BBC story some time ago discussing a trick of the eyes-or maybe the mind- that makes us see things out of what is not actually there. Like our ability to see castles in clouds or Jesus in a piece of toast. This tendency to incorrectly perceive of what is right before our eyes is known as pareidolia. It is normally a perfectly innocuous natural occurrence. But what if the reimaginings are always monsters? I think often of how my son is perceived by those around us. Do these optic manipulations bring some type of twisted comfort to the observer? Like how an officer can see a child 50lbs larger than he is. The murderers of Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Botham Jean, and George Floyd described their victims as scary, monstrous-even “demons”<sup>3</sup>- in some way. How society may perceive of my son brings me nightmares. A constant worry that today may be the day a misstep ends poorly for him. That instead of my dear, sweet boy who brings me breakfast in bed, and makes sure I take a break from working to eat a meal- they will see a tall, black abomination that must be locked away- or killed. I*

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<sup>3</sup> Boswell, F. (2014, November 26). In Darren WILSON'S Testimony, familiar themes about black men. Retrieved January 24, 2021, from <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/11/26/366788918/in-darren-wilsons-testimony-familiar-themes-about-black-men>



*imagine these are normal thoughts for the mothers of Black children. But it should not be this way. We have grown accustomed to adapting to this suffering. Living with this ominous fear. Like “the talk” we all have in some form or another with our babies, this persistent cloud of foreboding is psychotic trauma for survival on daily repeat. A 12” vinyl skipping over the same scratch in the song. Yet, we can’t just put on a new album. We don’t hold the records.*

*Black mothers must hold one image in each hand of their children. We must grasp how they are seen by the world in one hand. In the other, we hold tightly to who they actually are. We can never let loose of either hand, lest we are caught unprepared for what always comes. We must love them hard and prep them harder.*

*“We gotta arm warriors we pray only ever see peace.”*

*~MamaSol<sup>4</sup>*

## **Introduction to findings**

The group of women central to this study represent a myriad of backgrounds and experiences though they all identify as Black or African American and as mothers. They were drawn together to begin organizing in response to the murders of unarmed Black men in the Star City Metro area by police. These coordinated efforts blossomed into a grassroots organization with multiple focuses to improve the conditions of Black people in the area. They eventually, settled the lion share of these efforts on combatting the school to prison pipeline. 10 mothers from the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers

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<sup>4</sup> MamaSol is a national spoken word artist, lyricist, single mother and humanitarian who hails from my hometown of Flint, MI. She said this at a community event in 2011. See <http://mamasolmusic.com/>

(ACBM) were identified and agreed to be key informants for this investigation.

Additionally, I interviewed 12 community members who had worked with or been impacted in some capacity by the work of ACBM. In this chapter I will give an introduction of each mother to provide more intimate detail of their background and insight into their standpoint. Contributing to this understanding, I will present each mother's artistic expression piece responding to the question: How would you represent the relationship between yourself as a Black mother, Black children, and the school system?

I then provide portions of narratives from both the mothers and community members that attend to the research questions either explicitly or implicitly. Using the theoretical lenses of Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), Black Crit (Dumas & Ross, 2016) and Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1990) I will address the following research questions:

1. How does the mothers' standpoint affect their collective response to school system inequities?
2. How have the efforts of ACBM influenced educational policy?

I will additionally incorporate my fieldwork observations and archival data to weave a connected story of the motivation, impact and treatment of these inspirational women in the Star City educational environment.

*Lynn Dotson: A Call from God*

I first met Mrs. Dotson at a local education conference focused on Black educators. We were both giving presentations in the same room and began to connect. I was familiar with her through other people in Star City who spoke of the work she was doing around the school to prison pipeline.

Mrs. Dotson was born in Topeka, Kansas in a multiracial community. Both her parents are Black and married young. They both attended college for a couple of years. Her father began on a basketball scholarship but did not finish and her mother shifted her focus on a trade skill in key punching which was “at that time it was a big deal” and got her associates. She recalls fond moments during her early preschool and elementary years in her hometown. But that ceased when she entered the third grade.

I had a third-grade teacher named Mrs. Leets, old white woman with grayish blue hair with them little pointed cat, eyeglasses. She was horrible. She did not like me. And at the time I didn't realize it was because I was black. But now that I look back on her class, I was the only one sitting in the middle of the room that was black in a sea of white children. And she always targeted me. I couldn't talk, I couldn't breathe. I was always in trouble. My mom was always being called up to the school saying that I was defiant of her. And I guess I was but I wasn't trying to, you know, I just knew that I was being singled out and my mother was always upset at school with her, targeting me putting me out of class and all of that. And then we had a black boy in my class named Hollis and she made him out to be, you know, now that I look back on it, he was always in trouble. He never fit in into her class and that was really interesting. I also was always after school having to write, I will not talk in class. I will not talk in class 500 times. So I was always in trouble for saying a word, like, I couldn't say a thing or else I would be after school. So I did a lot of after school time in third grade.

She recalls this moment and seems to simultaneously recognize the role racism may have played not only in her own treatment, but also the treatment of young Hollis. Mrs. Dotson moved on to a new school in Topeka that had a more diverse group of children and better

teachers. Yet, the experience of her third-grade teacher left an imprint long after she had moved on.

I had great experience with my fifth-grade teacher, my fourth grade teachers, they were really cool. But that one [Mrs. Leets] that kind of stung me for a little bit. And then I was scared to talk, didn't say a word. And I was just kind of feeling my way out, you know, in that school.

Later, her parents divorced, and her mother moved Mrs. Dotson and her little sister to Denver, Colorado. It was here that Mrs. Dotson's realized the importance of education to her aspirations when a guest speaker came to an afterschool program she participated in.

A woman came to our school, black woman, first experience I had with a woman who had a degree. She was as an audiologist, never heard of what an audiologist was, but she came and spoke to our girls after school. And she explained to us that we could be anything we wanted to be ... and that's the first time I ever met a black woman with a doctorate. She was a doctor and she looked like me. Like she was fair ... And I was sitting in that room, it was a whole bunch of girls and I was just sitting in the middle and I was just intrigued by her because she was a single mom, like my mom. She had five kids, five kids and she went through school.

This visit showed young Mrs. Dotson what possibilities could be made available to her through education regardless of single motherhood. During this time, Mrs. Dotson took on more responsibilities in the household taking care of her little sister to help her mother, who often worked two jobs.

Because my dad left, I became the oldest sister and I had to help my mom. So I did take on my sister. I became her second mom, made sure she had everything she stood in need of. And so now I'm taking on more adult roles in the house, making sure dinners cook for her, making sure she gets home from school, make sure she does her homework. Um, making sure we do the housework.

This was also a memorable time as she starts to witness the abuse of her mother at the hands of men she dated.

Her date life was somewhat ... turbulent. She had domestic violence, um, in her dating experience. And with that, I got to see that through school. So that even enhanced me wanting to be in control of who got close to me. I was like, well, I'm not putting up with none of that. I would not put up with none of that. And I

wouldn't let anybody do that to me, but my mom allowed it and I didn't understand why she allowed that, right. Even still today I don't understand why she allowed them to put their hands on her, but she would fight back ... it'd be stuff flying. But I would say to myself, okay, you, you beat him up, that's good. He's got some marks on him too, but why does he get to come back? Send him on his way.

Her calculus for the value of an education included the ability to “control who got close to me” and create a better life. She did not want to be trapped in any way to poor treatment or circumstance. The message of the necessity of an education for personal improvement was reiterated by her mother.

My mother, she didn't get her full education. But it was very important to her that we got a degree and that we got good jobs and we get educated so that we can create a better life for ourselves and not want to struggle. So, she definitely did not want that. She always wanted us to do better than her. ... I was the first one to get through college and the first one in my family to get a degree. Okay. My mom and my grandmother didn't have one.

Once Mrs. Dotson became a mother herself, she had incidences with her only child, a son, where attempts were made to deny him access into a gifted program. This effort went so far as to put him back a grade.

You know, they were trying to, to label him ADD or ADHD. And so, what they did was instead of him going to third grade, they put him in a first, second grade type situation. Which was ridiculous. So, they excluded him from going to his next grade, being with his peers, which caused him great angst and caused him to be very traumatized by that ... . Ended up getting our doctor, Dr. Winters at the time, to review their report. He said our son did not have ADD or ADHD and he actually just needed to be more challenged. The reason why he was behaving the way he was behaving in school, which was to them disruptive, was because he was bored. So, they did, initially did not want to give him the gifted test. We had to push for that. And we finally got him tested for the gifted program and once he tested into that, we were able to get him moved into his right grade, third grade.

As a mother to a son, who has grown up to become a college graduate, pursuing his dreams. Mrs. Dotson was very affected by what she was seeing in the Black community around regarding police shootings and inequality in general. Mrs. Dotson, who is also a

minister, turned to spiritual guidance for direction on how she should focus her efforts to address what she was troubled by in this regard.

I kept hearing, the mothers. And I was like, the mothers, what am I doing with the mothers? Never came to me. Then it came to me- call Sandy Thames. It's like the Lord was like call Sandy Thames. I hadn't seen Sandy Thames in years, like 10 to 12 years. And it was low and behold an email popped in and Sandy Thames sent me an email. Clear blue sky. And I said, "Sandy, I'm supposed to talk to you about something ... I am supposed to talk to you about black mothers. I don't know what I'm supposed to do with black mothers, but you do". And she looked at me and she said, "Let's get something to eat cause I don't know what you're talking about. So, then we start to eat and then she says, I know why you're supposed to meet with me. I'm gonna start a book club ... And we're starting a book club on *The New Jim Crow: The Mass Incarceration and Black People* by Michelle Alexander.

The book club group were challenged to do something with their new knowledge.

I thought that the men would do something with it. And we'd just team up with them. It took months. Natasha Debbs [another book club member] called me every month and she was saying, "Lynn, I'm gonna need you to do something with the black mothers. The men are not doing anything. You need to do something". I said, Nellie, what am I supposed to do? ...I finally get the nerve ... I forgot how many emails I sent out. Anyway, didn't get much response. I was like, well, I'm going to still show up. I reserved a big room in the library for 50 to 60 people. I hadn't heard from nobody.

Mrs. Dotson originally believed that Black men in the community would lead on efforts to combat the travesties revealed during the book club. Conversely, women in the book group encouraged her to depend on her own skillset and "do something". She continued to seek confirmation from God and others in her circle that she was on the correct path towards what she should do "with the mothers". Then a sequence of events occurred that had implications on the effect of the upcoming meeting.

Well, two weeks before [the scheduled meeting] there was a shooting. No three weeks before that, there was a shooting of a black boy in the back in Star City by an off-duty cop. ... there was a town hall meeting held right after that at Reverend Thompson's church. And that meeting was a week before my meeting. And Sandy was at that meeting. ... I heard it was a lot of black women that showed up

because they were upset about this young man being shot in the back and that no one was doing anything about it. And they want to know what the church was going to do. What these Black leaders going to do? Anyway, the media is there and Sandy said the leaders, all the different ministers commenced to get up and giving sermonettes. And all the women were like this, what in the world? I thought this was a town hall. So, they do these sermonettes. Then after the sermonettes they say, now we're going to open it up to questions from the audience. So, they said all of these black women stood up. Prominent black mothers in the community, stood up, you know, and they commenced to talking and they were shut up. They were silenced by the male pastors saying, "Hold your questions. We want to get the media first. Then we'll deal. Then we'll talk to you." And from what Sandy told me, the whole room erupted. The women went off because they were being silenced and their voice wasn't being heard. So that is I guess what preceded my meeting. Now my meeting is going to become that place where the mothers can talk.

This silencing of the Black mothers in deference to media attention by the Black male pastors during this town hall insured that Mrs. Dotson's meeting ended up with an overflow of mothers hoping that this would be a safe space in which their concerns would be heard and respected.

Each woman got a chance to yell it out, scream it out, talk it out. And we allotted two hours for that. After that meeting, I asked the women, I said, was this good? And they said, "Yes, this was absolutely necessary. We don't trust that our men have our best interest at heart." The mothers didn't trust them. And they said, "we want more."

Here we see the disappointment of the mothers from what they believe to be the inaction of the Black men in their community atop the previous dismissal they endured during the community town hall. There is a belief that the men may not have the same investment in the concerns of the Black community as the mothers. Furthermore, they believe their voices are deemed unnecessary regarding the topic of police killings in the Black community. During Mrs. Dotson's initial meeting, it was agreed that the mothers would continue to gather to learn about different issues disproportionately impacting the Black community of Star City. Thus, the birth of the ACBM.

*Mrs. Dotson's Artistic Expression Piece [Image]*



Mrs. Dotson created a visual artistic expression piece representing the ethic of care (Collins, 1989) as the mother holding the Black child is proxy for the organization's care for all Black children. Then a sledgehammer is wielded by the silhouette of a woman. It is appearing to hit the tube or pipeline the Black boy is being thrown into by white hands from the schoolhouse doors. The picture shows the pipeline connected to the "State Penitentiary". Of this creation, Lynn said, "That's exactly how I feel. We holding our babies, we are now playing this game with the school to prison pipeline. We are just, we want to dismantle it. Demolish it. But if we keep bumping our head against a wall, we may need to leave."



*Sandy Thames: The Necessity of the Village*

Sandy Thames was born in Detroit in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement. Her family moved to Chicago when she was just 3 years old. Coming up she was surrounded by many different cultures and ethnicities and a lot of family.

We stayed in that brownstone because at that time, families were doing collective living. So, my grandparents lived on the first floor, we lived on the second floor, my uncle and aunt lived in the basement. And so, we all worked together to purchase that home and to care for that home.

Her family also were entrepreneurs and business owners who provided her with a wide array of learning opportunities.

I was always doing something related to education, whether it was because we also came up through the civil rights era. So, learning and understanding, organizing, understanding how to work with organizations and committees. And leading those types of efforts. So, education was a very broad experience in our household.

She came up understanding the education was not relegated to the four walls of a schoolhouse, but in the experiential knowledge she acquired in her neighborhood and in her family. Thus, her education was a communal effort. Part of that communal message was encouraging her to always move her education to the next level.

It was never any doubt in our minds that college was the route. And so, we talked vividly about educational aspirations and achieving education at the highest possible level. As a matter of fact, my father's philosophy was every time a milestone occurred, eighth grade graduation, even if you graduated with honors, high school graduation, graduating with honors, his philosophy was that's wonderful. That's great. And next. So, it was never any doubt in my mind that college was the route that I would go.

In addition to the academic encouragement she received, community engagement was another lesson she obtained through the modeling of her family.

My parents and my grandmother in particular, like to work with women that didn't have a lot of education, nor did they have a lot of access to resources. So, some of the first work that I remember us doing was organizing a food pantry in the community and also organizing a resource bank which allows the mothers and

the women in the community to know where to go for help. Whether it was health, whether it was abuse. Whatever they were dealing with actually.

Although Ms. Thames was an excellent student, she was very aware that not everyone was afforded the same educational circumstances or familial environment as she. One fellow student in particular left an indelible impression.

Celila was probably six feet tall when she was in middle school. And then you had me who was like four 11 feet, right. And we just became allies. But Della, Della would get these whippings and beatings at home. And I just became an ally of Della's. And she started coming over to our house and she found solace and peace I think, coming home with me, and realizing that life didn't, wasn't that way for everybody that was Black. ... But it was something within Della about school, where she was lacking confidence. Of what I learned; Della couldn't read. Della could not read. So that's why Celia was doing what Della was doing in school. And so, she and I would talk ... I became her tutor and her mentor in terms of helping her to learn, to read.

Once in college, Ms. Thames had an incident with a STEM professor who taught an advanced course, in which she was enrolled. When roll was being called, her presence was questioned by the professor for several suspected reasons-although her name was on the roster.

I remember him delaying the class for a few moments to confirm that and double check it and looking at my schedule. And he said, well, you know, I..I've, I've never. And so, there were two black professors on campus. One was Dr. Young and he became my mentor and my guide through that experience, thank goodness. Because he let his colleague know that not only is she in your class, but she's going to be successful. And so that helped tremendously.

Ms. Thames was a Black woman in an advanced STEM course, thus, the assumption was that she must be in the wrong place. The Black professor taking her under his wing and making sure she was successful helped her acclimate in an environment that was not the most welcoming. This support encouraged her to become more involved on the campus in other ways.

I was already in tune with the civil rights era, but I really became rebellious in terms of understanding, going totally with the Afro and questioning what was going on. I became president of the black student union. And also became an advocate on the West side of Bloomington, Illinois, where black families lived. Because I wanted to find out where are our folks in this town that I'm going to school here, that looked like me.

Ms. Thames came to be involved with ACBM through the culmination of calls from Lynn Dotson and frustration of her involvement with another community organization that was more comfortable treating her as “a note taker”. She decided to devote her community engagement energies elsewhere. “We realized we were doing some of the same work, so we started collaborating on some things and I kind of decided at that point I would shift my focus to work with the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers.”

*Ms. Thames Artistic Expression Piece [Image]*

**IT IS NO ACCIDENT THAT I AM IN THIS PLACE!**

It is Because of God's amazing Grace, For He  
Allows you to enter a space no matter  
How hard you resist, He is there to insist, that you make a way,

Carry on, and, run with dignity. Learn New Things, Prepare, Connect, Collaborate.  
He wants to see if you endure the race, overcome your fear and persevere.

A race that is granted & appointed just for you, and be very ready as the race becomes  
A quickened pace in an unchartered place and at times when you least expect haste and you don't want to waste,  
your blessing! Are you ready?

The race for change so that others can spread their wings, allows even failure to be a way of learning better ways  
of doing things.

Allowing a way for others to pursue their dreams, no not to be kings or queens but to be included in the ring,  
where decisions are made, and learning is the song I sing.

So, If, this is my destiny, my calling, my fate then let me go out and educate, the  
Doves, The symbol of love and freedom of the heart & soul! The Eagles that take flight, so that others my Soar to  
new heights! The Geese that have rhythm, and understand the importance of position in flight, knowing when it  
is time to fall back, rest & renew, allowing a new leader to the front of the Crew!

LEADERSHIP HAS NO TITLE, ONLY ACCEPTANCE & COURAGE! I AM Ready, Take Me!



Ms. Thames utilized poetry for her artistic expression piece. In it she highlights her belief in the spiritual importance of her change efforts. She describes it as an irresistible calling and sacrifice worth taking. This call is in service of others so they can “spread their wings” or “pursue their dreams” unimpeded. Thus, this work is for the uplift of her community. Lastly, she references the importance of doing this work and knowing when to uplift someone else as a leader. This is a reference to the organizational change in leadership from Mrs. Dotson to Ms. Thames. Of this piece, Ms. Thames commented,

I had really just started to embrace what I was doing with Lynn [Mrs. Dotson] in terms of moving into this interim role. What does that look like? And look, you're talking about, you know, two alpha women that's sharing a space, in love and, and in sisterhood. ... And so it's a journey for us that we're really happy to take together. We're able to sit, talk, we love one another, and our vision is the same. And she knows, as my little sister and thought partner, so I was like, I tell her, it's like, we can just keep it real with one another. And I think that's important. You got to have a safe place.

### ***Simone Scott: The Stain of Denial***

Simone Scott was born and raised in Star City with her mother and father. When the multiracial neighborhood she had come up in began to change during the onset of the crack epidemic her family decided to move to the Star City suburb of Rancho. Once there, she begins to feel very uncomfortable about her new school environment.

I started going to school in the Newman district and that was... for me, that was third grade. And, um, it was different. I always went to school with mostly white kids, but this was a different kind of feel to it. It felt different, you know, you're eight years old and you can feel the difference in how people are around you. During her elementary experience, teachers were not mean or rude to her, but the students were the root of her unease that she could not quite put her finger on. Then in middle school that dynamic began to change.

I didn't start having issues with teachers until junior high school. And that was where, um, some of my insecurities came up because I was always in honors. And of course, always the only black kid in these classes. Junior high school, I'm testing for the same honors classes I've been taking, you know. Thinking, it's nothing, just doing what I normally do. And my math scores came back like right on the border of going into the honors class. And they told me that I couldn't get in. So, and my parents didn't fight for that. And I was devastated because I was like, I know this and it made me feel like, I didn't know. I was like, wow, what has happened? It changed who I thought I was. I thought it was a smart kid. And that made me feel like I was no longer the smart kid.

Simone was not automatically accepted into the honors courses of her new school and instead had to retest for entrance. When her results came back on the borderline, she was denied entrance. Additionally, her parents did not advocate for her to be put into the courses. The entire incident made her question her intelligence and who she was as a person. Once, she entered high school, Simone had found a new way to exercise her intellect through exploring Black history.

I think it was my freshman, freshman year. And I had to do research and on a figure in history and I was like, well, I'm thinking about going into medicine, so I figured I would do Dr. Charles Richard Drew. Did my report on him. And I was told with that report that I needed to find someone that was well known in history. Can't be him. I'm like, well, he is well known in history. Well, no, he's not because the white teacher didn't know who he was. So all throughout high school, I took on the charge of educating white folks on black history. That's what I did. Every time I had to do a report, it was going to be on something black or someone black. So I was doing a whole lot of research and learning our history and our culture and, I learn I have some ties to the black Panther party through my parents that I didn't even realize I had, I didn't know that whole history until I started researching it. Because they never shared it. And I'm like, why don't y'all share this stuff. This is stuff we need to know. So I, I got very involved in all of that information and got labeled as militant. But I wasn't really, I was just like, look, this is... if you are wrong, I will let you know, you were wrong. I was all about educating people on the history of things. And so that's what I spent my high school years doing.

Simone went on to an HBCU on a scholarship. She had a strong desire to leave the anti-blackness of the Star City area and experience an environment that celebrated Black life.

Simone became a mother of 3 children and moved back to Star City. Her son went to the same district she did growing up, as it was still regarded as a “high performing” district. Although her son was also “high performing” academically, his inability to sit still in his seat during lessons caused her son to almost be suspended.

I wasn't going to let that happen, but I could see it, a start to it. ... my son, he's the oldest and so he was in Newman when this happened. And what was interesting was that his was in middle school and the teachers were black. Both of them, the only black teachers he's ever had, ... out here, the only black teachers that he had and what I found out from Olga, actually, once I started working with ACBM, because she was a part of that group that was working at Newman. She told me that the black teachers were being pressured or their jobs were being threatened. So they couldn't show any type of favoritism or anything towards black students. ... so they just made life miserable for my son. I don't know how many times I went up to that school and had to check [those teachers]. I will never forget them. ... But it got to a point with him that he stopped handling his own business. So I pulled him out of school for a semester. Until he got his grades back up, I took him... every day to central Str City to a science academy.

Her dismay that Black educators would cause her son so many problems, moved her to speak with another Black educator about the issue. That is when she learned that Black educators were being discouraged by the district from appearing to relate to Black students lest that be misinterpreted as favoritism. In the end, Simone chose to pull her son out of the district and drive him to an academic intense charter school 45 minutes away from her home to get him back on track.

Simone first learned of the ACBM during a racially charged school incident in a Star City school district that made local and national headlines. When she first saw the group, she was impressed and wanted to join their efforts.

I saw Lynn speaking about that case. And I went to a board meeting to find out what was going on. And I introduced myself to Lynn because I was really interested in what was going on. I was like, who are these Black women coming up in here and talking to people and handling stuff. And so I introduced myself to

Lynn, and I came to a meeting and then from that first meeting, they were going to a meeting at a church that same day. And I was like, I'm going. So I got Lynn's phone number and I met her up there and we just been connected ever since then. The imprint left on her seeing Black women unafraid to be vocal, speaking truth to power structures and “handle stuff” convinced Simone that this was an effort she needed to get behind.

### ***Violeta Serano: Illusions and Realities***

Violeta Serano was born in Puerto Rico, the eldest of four girls, in a solidly middle-class household. From her first days in pre-school the academic expectations from her family were high.

I was four when I started kindergarten, but then I knew how to read already. It was my grandma who taught me. And so they, you know, I skipped a grade and my dad was super strict and there was no room for mistakes. ... I didn't have room for mistakes because he, you know, early I had this huge IQ and they had expectations that they had, he had in particular, on me were very high.... We were going to college. There was no if, ands or buts. My parents are actually both, first generation cause my grandma, my grandparents didn't went to college. Certainly, my grandmothers, I don't even know if they finished. I think my both like sixth grade or something like that. So, but yeah, but there was like, this is how it works. You're going to go to school.

As Violeta presented a strong aptitude for academics, a lot of pressure was put on her to achieve at the highest levels. Violeta continued to be an excellent student and made it into medical school. After completing medical school in the Caribbean, she applied for her medical residency in New York and got in. Once in the contiguous States she was faced with defining who she would be racially.

When I moved to the United States, honestly, that was when my racial awareness really kind of like kicked in because in Puerto Rico, we are Puerto Ricans, you know. People would tell me you're Black and it's like, no, I'm like Puerto Rican. And a lot of people, they make fun of that. Now, I'm pretty sure that people don't understand why I identify as Black [now]. Right. Um, but then when I moved to

the United States, I was like, I have a story about that. I had to write, you know, we have to fill out this paperwork for the hospital I was working at. And they are asking about race. And it's the first time in my life at 24 that I'd been asked about my race. So I called my father and ask my dad, "They are asking about my race." I knew at that point I was like, I don't think I'm White or Black. What am I, you know? And my dad, bless his heart. He told me to "Put White". And the reason he told me to put White is because my grandfather was in the military and lived in Germany. They now live in California, what not. And he was a victim of a lot of racism. And he was like, "No, you put White because if not, it's going to be a problem". I put White, but I remember thinking I'm really not white, but I don't think I'm Black, but I'm not really White, but I don't know. It was very confusing. But I know that he did it to protect me because he will talk, to this day he will say that the most racist place in the United States is California.

The confusion over how she was to racially identify was the result of being seen only through the lens of ethnicity in Puerto Rico, where the identification of a racial reality was evaded. Still, race and the meanings associated with it, was ever present in her upbringing.

We are being bombarded by like, 'pelo bueno', 'pelo malo' you know? Good hair and bad hair. And like. "Aaah no pelo bueno". And listen in Spanish it's like 'Ella es negra pero bonita' which is, 'she's black, but she's pretty'. 'Nariz es fina' or 'she has a fine nose'...you know, traditional European nose, the lips, they have all this stuff that they're derogatory terms for every African feature that you may have. Derogatory term for the hair, derogatory term for the nose, derogatory term for your ass for everything. So that's how we are. And you don't want to be this dark. Right.

Violeta, as the darkest of her siblings with self-identified "Africanesque" features, much like her father, was mindful of these judgements coming up. While, she did not at the time attribute these judgements to racism, she had some sense of the colorism in her community. Once Violeta met and married her Ghanaian-American husband with whom she had 3 children, she became more acutely aware of the impact of the racial illusion.

I make very sure that they [the schools] see my face constantly. ... however, I know that when my kids may feel like, you know, this is not right. And then they can feel it. Even this little, because they're black, something like that. Teachers



get very defensive, you know, they can get very like, “No” and just in their White feelings because you know, they don't feel that they are doing anything wrong. And I'm like, no, no, but my child is telling you. You're just saying this because he's black. Why is this happening? Then, they started coming at me with this nonsense about, I don't see color crap. And you know, so there, there's still a lot to be learned. But they [teachers] haven't [learned it], you know, because they're not Black. I think that sometimes that there is unconscious bias which I'm very quick to call out.

Violeta, who works part-time as a physician, makes a point that the school “sees my face constantly” so the school is aware they are not alone. Even when the teachers want to dismiss what her children tell her about how they feel and their treatment, she is there to ensure their voice is heard. She is upset with the evasion tactics of White teachers to deny or claim colorblind as a reason for their inability to treat Black children poorly. Still, she reconciles these responses with the teachers lack of racial connection or implicit bias. These school matters concerned Violeta and she looked for ways to volunteer to improve things. She first got acquainted with the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers through her work with another organization working to challenge student pushout judicially and legislatively.

*Violeta Artistic Expression Piece [Image]*

Hoping and wishing  
for my own babies.  
The chubbiest cheeks and the curliest hair,  
The deep brown sugar skin  
Surely people will see your beauty, your smile, your intelligence.  
But they were born in a world where they're considered the exception, not the rule.  
A world where in preschool they were teaching them about emotions.  
Red mad!  
Green envy!  
Brown...brown guilt.  
I am brown, am I guilty mamá?  
A world where if they're loud they're disruptive and persistent means stubborn.  
A world where if they use their hands to talk, they're disrespectful  
and if they get upset they're aggressive.  
But I don't see color! They said.  
And I saw red. Red fury.  
If you don't see color you don't see my babies. Who they are, their story, their struggle.  
But I'm not Black mamá,  
they tell me, looking at their little arms.  
I am brown.  
I laugh and say true, but Black is stronger, deeper, richer.  
Black is beautiful.  
Black is good.



Violeta told me that she was very emotional when she came up with this poem as her artistic expression piece. It appears that the young woman who left Puerto Rico where she was raised to not explicitly recognize the significance of the illusion of race, came to intimately understand it's import in the contiguous states. She described the inspiration for this piece as such.

The teachers with "I don't see color" crap....They just come at me with that so many times. And I'm like stop saying that, you need to stop saying that. Cause you know why? You need to see. You need to see in your classroom that you have little boys and little girls and you know, you need to see your classroom that there may be actually a little boy that doesn't even identify as a little boy. You know, we need to see these nuances. Because this is people's reality. All of these differences are good. And that's what kills me. I mean you can see that my kid is not White, like these other damn kids! I need you to see that. And I remember, cause when my kids are like, but I'm not black. That's something that, you know,

kids are so literal. They're like I'm not black. You know, this is not black. I was like, I understand that. But listen, it is good being black. You know, I want you to understand that. And especially that nuance.

***Cubby Nolan: “I didn't trust the teachers”***

Cubby Nolan grew up in south Star City. is historically identified as “the Black part” of Star City. Thus, her community coming up was “pretty much all Black” and very tight-knit. Her parents both migrated to Star City from Texas. Her mother quit school in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and her father in the 8<sup>th</sup>. Her mother went on to do housework to make money while her father worked in a cotton gin and “hustled” to make ends meet. She largely enjoyed her school experience but remembers a particular moment where she was excluded from representing the school for the City Spelling Bee.

Ms. Nolan: I was winning the spelling bee but was denied because I was rolling my eyes. And so they said I had an attitude. And rolling my eyes was something I wasn't conscious of doing.

Dawn: Okay, but you won it?

Ms. Nolan: I won it. I spelled the word right. But they didn't allow me to represent the school.

The action of “eye-rolling” was perceived and interpreted as her having “an attitude”.

Since, everyone has an attitude, the inference is that hers was that hers was somehow inappropriate. This perception of an uncivil attitude cost Ms. Nolan the chance of representing her school in the citywide competition. Still, Mrs. Nolan was such a good student that she was able to skip the seventh grade.

They[her parents] did value education, but they didn't discuss it a lot. And I talked a lot, I read a lot. I used to tell people what they didn't know. And so I was the know it all. And so they didn't really encourage that. And then I found out that my dad really couldn't read. And so that was a part -because when they offered, when they were going to skip me, he said that he didn't know if he would sign [the

paperwork] because he thought I was too young.... He didn't think it would be a good thing for me, but he did. Guess my mom talked him into it.

Ms. Nolan's father's hesitancy to sign the paperwork for her to skip a grade was from an abundance of caution that she may be overwhelmed and potentially set up for failure. His own literacy problems likely contributed to his complicated relationship with schools and eventual need to hustle. Ultimately, her mother was able to convince her father that skipping a grade may be beneficial for their daughter although Ms. Nolan also had a negative relationship with schools.

My mother was - she grew up on a farm and she pretty much hated White people. She didn't like to be around them. And she pretty much was very conscious of being from the country, you know? They'd [school representatives] call people country and stuff. And so what I did, I registered all my brothers and sisters for school. She [her mother] had no interaction. That, I remember. Once we were so happy, she went with my sister to a Maypole dance. And she went to that and that was basically it. Um, they really didn't have parent-teacher conferences or anything. The only time she would come to the schools is if they sent a note home. I don't think she even came then. They used to send her information about me cause she had to sign stuff for me to be skipped.

Ms. Nolan's mother was cognizant of the ridicule and judgement of her being a Black woman from the country and the attendant stereotypes that came with it from school employees. Additionally, the trauma she likely experienced or observed coming up working on a farm in the South contributed to her disdain for being around White people. Therefore, she avoided the schools, which were largely run by White people. Instead, the young Ms. Nolan handled official school business, such as registering for school, on her mother's behalf.

I was always good in math, but I missed some algebra. And so when I got in high school, I had to take general math instead of algebra. ... I don't know if I tested into it or how that happened, but I was upset by that. And I didn't try as hard in general math. I guess kind of, I was upset that I had to take it instead of algebra. And I think that was kind of the beginning of me not doing my best. ... I love

school and I love to learn, but I got disillusioned when I had to take that math. I didn't want to do it. Then I think it spilled over to some of my other subjects as well... I kind of took an 'I'll just do enough to get by' attitude. Where before I would do anything extra. Stay after school and do all kinds of things. And it was the first time that I was not in an all-Black environment. So some of the stuff is I didn't trust the teachers, if it was, you know, if they were doing things for my good or just because I was Black, I didn't trust them.

Ms. Nolan had been an overachieving student the whole of her school experience until high school. There, she was put in a general math course instead of the Algebra course the other high school freshman were taking. She could not recall how that decision was made, but does recall feeling it was not where she belonged. This deflated her enthusiasm for school in general and led to her questioning the motives of the teacher's decisions. This incident of exclusion from the class that would have more appropriately challenged her, reverberated till the end of her formal schooling experience.

Ms. Nolan is a core member of the ACBM and was part of the book group that initiated what would later become the ACBM

So, Sandy Thames and the people over at the Morrison Center, said, okay, we going to have this book club and we'll meet on this day. So, I went over there and the first book we did was the new Jim Crow. And it was so intense and... And so, Lynn was there ... And we just started, you know, doing our book club study and that's how I got involved. And when it was over -the information we got-we said we cannot just not do anything with this information now that we know... And at the first meeting we ever had with ACBM, after the book club was over, we had judges, we had policemen, we had a lot of prominent people come. But they did let us know that they were, they were not going to be like, visible. They still would be with us. The judge was crying because she talked to us about how she had contributed to some of this and done some of the things. It was just breaking her heart. You know, because what she said she would do, is if a child or a teenager or a young man or woman would come before her, she'd look at the record and she'd look all down through school records, where they'd been steadily getting in trouble. She didn't really go in depth into what it was for. She just saw that they had this whole string of things, and she would just throw the book at them. And that she was just crying about that.



*I believe the children are our future, teach them well and let them lead the way. I believe the children are our future, teach them well and let them lead the way. This is truly my focus in life. There is nothing more important to me than nurturing and grooming our children to become the best that they can be.*

Speaking to the meaning of her collage, Ms. Nolan goes on,

My focus is always around children and always around, pretty much learning or advocating for children. And I was, um, you know, I was kinda shocked, but I knew this is, these are the things that I do every day. But when I sit back and reflect on it, yeah, this is a big, this is a school children's wealth, promoting children's welfare and school education is a big part of my life. That's how felt. Very important part of my life. If I couldn't do this I would not be happy.

In this collage, Ms. Nolan exhibits the traits of a community mother through her commitment to improving the lives of all children. Including those beyond her biological lineage.

### ***Jai Owens: Following the Rules***

Mrs. Owens is a married mother of two adult children. She was born in Chicago during the Civil Rights movement. Her neighborhood swiftly experienced White flight in the aftermath of the Movement and ensuing race riots during her middle school years.

I was in seventh grade and the culture of my neighborhood was basically, I guess you could say predominantly white, but black people were quickly moving in at that time. So by the time I was in maybe my second year of high school, it was predominantly black.

One of her most vivid memories from school was her fourth grade school teacher-who was Mamie Till, the mother of Emmett Till.

Because I was so young, we didn't understand everything about what happened, you know, to her son, but she did tell us about it. And we were wondering why she was such an intense teacher. After getting older, then I understood all of that. But I definitely do have vivid memories about her. She is very strict, um sad because of what happened. But like I said, we didn't get the fullness of everything about her until after we basically became adults and started hearing more about the history.

During the time the mother of Emmett Till was her teacher, young Mrs. Nolan was unable to grasp the pain Mamie Till had lived through. As she got older, and became a mother herself, Mrs. Nolan could comprehend the intensity of the teacher who was strict because she saw the results of what not following the rules could mean for Black children. Mrs. Owens also recalls the feeling of “intense sadness and lots of mourning” following the death of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. While she could see everyone was greatly impacted, no one really addressed what had occurred or spoke much of racial issues at all in her household.

Back during those days, your parents didn't discuss a whole lot of specific things. Everything was kind of almost like grown folks stuff and so the more, they discussed more about the dos and the don'ts, don't do this, don't do that, but not more so about that type of stuff.

Her family chose to focus on what should or should not be done to not get in trouble and to follow the rules. Her household additionally stressed the importance of getting good grades in school to capture a worthwhile job. Fortunately, Mrs. Owens enjoyed school, had a lot of friends and was quite social.

I enjoyed high school. I loved high school. I had friends, we all hung out. We went to dances. We were active at the games. My most vivid memories, I guess you would say of high school, my BFF and still my BFF today, one of them. She is still in Chicago. We did every, every, every everything together, basically. So being in classes, just having fun.

When Mrs. Owens became a mother, her son was nearly suspended in the seventh grade under the pretense of “sexual assault”.

And so, you know how kids have a tendency when they like somebody, they pick on them, they hit them, they touch them and all that. So she did that. He didn't like her, but she liked him. ... So, this went on a whole lot of days. She would push him, kick him, whatever the case would be. He would tell her, stop, stop, stop. And so then one day she said that she wanted him to call her or whatever the case may be. But because that was his friend's girlfriend, you know, plus he didn't like her anyway. He really was still kind of shy of the girls anyway. So next thing I



know she fabricated this story that he touched her breast. So everybody that I talked to said, what happened was she pushed him and then he pushed her back and she said that he was touching her breast. So she told the principal and all of them. And so then next thing I know I get a message that this is what happened. They wanted me to come up to the school.

The little girl, who was White, told the principal that she was touched on her breast when Mrs. Owens son pushed her back after several days of her bothering him. When Mrs, Owens was called to the school, she fought the suspension and brought in other students who told what happened. Mrs. Owens pursued this situation all the way to the superintendent until it was rectified and taken off her son's record.

Mrs. Owens got introduced to the ACBM through her Sunday school teacher. She was already involved in some local efforts to deal with the police violence that was occurring in the Star City area.

Cubby was my Sunday School teacher and she just happened to be telling me about a meeting she was going to. And because I told her that I was involved with the community ... when she told me about the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers and she invited me to come to one of the meetings. And she said, I think you would really want to be involved in the ACBM based upon, you know, um, during that time it was pretty much about police brutality. And so, I did, I went to the first meeting and from there, the rest was history. So because of the fact that education is a passion of mine, advocacy is another passion, advocating on behalf of those who obviously cannot help themselves.

*Mrs. Owens Artistic Expression Piece [Image]*

**Extra, Extra! Read all about it  
The time has come that we will no longer allow it  
Can't go to school without our teachers acting a fool  
Do we dare tell  
Because who really cares  
Why oh why do they want us to die  
All we want is a piece of the American pie  
Though we have been held down before  
It's not gonna happen anymore  
As we recollect all of the disrespect  
We now understand your fears are on the loose  
Because you know your curses  
are coming home to roost  
Stop trying to hold us down  
It makes you really look like a clown  
Regardless to your actions to decompose  
Just wanna let you know  
That God is in control**

***Karsyn Rogers: The Talk***

Karsyn Rogers is a mother of 4, including a set of newborn twins she would often have to breastfeed during our conversations. All while checking papers from her students in the elementary school she taught. Karsyn came up in a military family and spent much of her time overseas in Germany and Italy.

I grew up in a military community and so it was just military, you know small community. It's not as diverse as people say, I mostly grew up overseas. I moved overseas when I was 12 and I lived there basically until I was like 25. I came to the States intermediately for like two years at one point. And, um, then I went back. Um, so it was just, you know, it's not that diverse, mostly, you know, white people not a lot of black people.

Karsyn admired the lengths her ancestors were willing to go through to see to their children's education. This attitude carried on in her family.

I think the things that my great grandma had to go through to even put my grandma to school, you know, she was a maid her whole life, you know, she backdoor entrance, you know, and they're from, and they grew up in Philadelphia. You know, my great grandma was living with instill, you know, people think of the North and they immediately think that there was like no racism or something, but that's not really true, you know, Um, and so I think it was the emphasis of the thing. We were privileged to have the opportunity to just go to school, to just do what we want. And I think that's what was instilled in us. It was never really like, you have to go to college, you have to go to school. It was more like you are privileged. Take that opportunity instead of like, I'm forcing you to go to college. It's a must because they know in a lot of people's households that's conversation, you go to college, but that was never our conversation. It was like, you are privileged. You do good. So you can go to college to like honor those people that had to work hard to, not that it wasn't handed to them, like it's handed to you.

Karsyn saw the ability to further her education as a duty to the legacy of those that struggled before her to get educated. She further viewed continuing her credentialing as a privilege not afforded to her forebears.

Referencing her upbringing in a military family and lack of Black friends, Karsyn believes that there were positive elements of the Black experience that she missed.

Karsyn: I mean, I only had black friends really, but like five of them. Not like a whole school of them. So I kind of, I think like that's something I look back like me and my husband were from two differ...my husband is from, from Montgomery, Alabama. All he had was black people in school, you know, like, and so I look back and I just...that's something I, I really want to get my kids like, so that's something now that I'm like, Ugh.

Dawn: So you feel like you missed out?

Karsyn: Culturally? Yeah, I really do.

Dawn: And you live in Star City now, your kids go to school in Star City. How do you feel that's working out for you?

Karsyn: Not that great

Karsyn and her husband, who is in the military, made the decision to transfer the family to Star City, believing it would have been a more multicultural experience. Once, there, she spoke of her regret for moving to the city. This doubt has been reinforced through

attempts on the part of the schools her sons attend, to put them out. She spoke of one such occurrence.

BJ is more of my mild child, but like I had to, I just keep having to have this conversation with him. Like dude, and I, I talk to him. He came to my classroom and I was like, why is the teacher calling me saying, you're yelling. I know he's not yelling. He's like, I'm not yelling. That's not what happened. "She's telling a story." I'm like, it doesn't matter. Like as soon as you open your mouth, you are a threat. Like we keep trying to tell you, to tell him all the time. If there's a problem in school, you shut up and you tell me, Instead of, like arguing with your teacher, like we're the adults, let us handle that. And that's how also how we get into a lot of these issues with ACBM. Because the kids don't know how to shut their mouth. Like I tell him all the time, that's how kids get shot by the cops. The same thing you're doing. You're not yelling. I understand you're not yelling at them. You're emotional. I'm the same way. You know, naturally. Like we just get loud, but they see it as yelling, especially because you're a black little boy. I told him, "You can't shout out like that".

BJ's lesson was that even if he was wronged in some way, he must stay quiet and not get emotional. Karsyn gives her son the talk, equating what can happen to him in the school with what could happen to him on the streets. The goal of this discussion was to insure his survival over everything else.

Karsyn was given the okay by her school principal to coordinate some racial awareness and programming for the kids at her school. She reached out to the traditional Black organizations in the Star City area for assistance to no avail.

"I could like, not get a hold of them. I was like writing them on Facebook. ... I'm like, help me. What resources do you have? Ironically, at the same time, this was happening that I'm contacting them, not getting responses .... I want to say that stuff in Chandler, the stuff that happened on Snapchat, I want to say that was in Rancho- It was on the news. It was all over the place. And all of a sudden, they're posting all this stuff on their Facebook, like, "Oh, we were in the news at..." Yeah. You know how they show up. ... I'm following their Facebook. Like, oh, that's ironic. I was like, when I was asking you to help me to put things in place so these things don't happen, you couldn't show up, but you could show up for the camera.

A racial incident that occurred in a school in Rancho made national news. Many local Black organizations came out to speak against the event in the press. During this time, another organization that Karsyn had not previously attempted to talk to caught her attention.

That's when I saw the Black Mothers' Forum, I contacted Mrs. Dotson. And I said, look, this is what happened. She immediately was like, "Well, come in and meet me. Let's talk." And so I came in and we talked for a long time, and then that's just, you know. Here we are today.

### *Karsyn's Artistic Expression Piece*

#### **Dear White Educators,**

*For so long you have made it hard for my children and myself to excel in your system. I am a teacher. Although not for many years. Yet, the years have made me jaded with more animosity than I had on the outside looking in. You see, one of the reasons I became a teacher was to be a "Champion" to somebody that looks like me. To fight the system from the inside. To be the change that would play a role in my black boys' education! It often feels like I am on a path of failure. The things I often hear, see, and feel when I am in YOUR schools is heartbreaking. I lay in bed some night tossing, turning, sometimes crying because I cannot save them all from you?*

*When I say I am an advocate for black children, you do not need to state that you are an advocate for ALL children. When I say I am an advocate for black children, it does not make me unofficial liaison for black students that you do not understand or just do not want to deal with. If you were an advocate for ALL children, our schools would not be the highway for the school to prison pipeline.*

*I had to make my student teaching school list very carefully. The chances of being discriminated against was bar none. During my second placement I was welcomed into a 4<sup>th</sup> grade classroom with a white man my age. In his very predominately white school he said to me, " You should tread light with the conversation about race. It makes people uncomfortable.", "I've dated a black girl!" "Color doesn't matter." Before an interview in the same district I told that my nails were too distracting, and nobody could hear my words. If you do not see color you do not see those black children. You do not see their culture. You do not see the things that possibly mean a lot to them. You simply do NOT understand them...because you do not see color. But of course you cannot see the products of me or other women like me because If you cannot accept, understand, respect me, then you cannot accept, understand, and respect the black children that come from us.*

*I am a parent. I have been a parent for longer than I have been a teacher. Yet I have seen my children experience just as many inequities. At nine years old having to give my child an explanation of why he cannot do the same things as the white kids in his class. Seeing the tears in his eye, and hearing his words, "I don't understand, it's not fair." White teachers saying they could not address my son because he "gets so aggressive".*

*My three-year-old being kicked out of school because he was throwing things, but had him in a room with 7, 8, 9-year olds that were taunting him and staff simply not watching. When my 4-year-old started preschool in a public school he was in the office the first week. A black staff member coming to me begging me to talk to my child. Ask him what he did at school, and NOT to believe everything they were saying about him. The same staff member stating that there were other (white) children with worse behavior, but they only put my son out, and only called me!*

*A conversation with the principal about my child being in my kindergarten class because I do not know when he will have a black teacher, as my 5th grade has not. Telling me that the district works hard to hire teachers that match the population, but they always hire the MOST qualified teacher. Are the majority of qualified teachers in Arizona white? If it was a priority to the school district then they would seek out qualified black teachers! This is not the case in any district that my children have been in.*

*My black boys have not been allowed to have emotions without them being deemed "aggressive". Emotions that in white children are considered, "just being kids". I have not been allowed to have emotions when I go to the school to advocate for my black boys. My emotions are labeled, "the angry black women", their emotions are labeled, "the concern (white) mother". Am I any less passionate about the wellbeing of my child than the next mother of a different race?*

*I pray for grace as my strong-willed black children continue to move through your schools.*

*Dear White Educators, your privilege is blinding you and damning to our black children!*

*-----Sincerely,*

*A BLACK mother and teacher*

### ***Akua Sampson: Going Straight to the Top***

Akua's parents came to Canada answering a national call for skilled individuals from abroad to take advantage of opportunities in the country. Her father was from

Ghana and worked in politics. Her mother was from Guyana and worked for the government as a stenographer.

In the seventies, when I was growing up, there was not a heavy, multicultural presence. But the prime minister at the time, who is the father of the current prime minister now, Trudeau. . . . At that time he was inviting people to come into Canada if they could find work. So he was stimulating that diversity in Canada, which is basically why Canada is the way it is today. And a lot of Caribbean, African and Black people from all over the world came into Canada at that time and found work. My parents were one of those people.

In her household, there was pressure to not only get an education beyond K-12, but to make a living that allows you to contribute back to the community that supported you.

Africans, especially Ghanaian and Nigerian parents-even if you get an education it's, um, it's important to have a certain type of education, you know, like you can't say you wanna be a chef, you can't say you wanna be a chef or, um, you know, like put it this way. Uh, if you don't come to them stating, you know, you are trying to be a doctor or a nurse or an accountant or anything making over like in Canada, then anything making over 75,000, it was a huge burden to bear because also in that community, they're very tight knit. So everyone would be looking at you sideways. So the pressure of not obtaining an education, um, yeah. It's just something that they, it wasn't acceptable.

Akua's parents eventually separated and Akua became a latchkey kid that had to see to herself. Balancing home and school expectations came easily as she was a good student that grasped academic concepts quickly.

I didn't struggle and I didn't have anyone at home coaching me or teaching me anything cause my mom would work. And you know, she was a single mom at that time and I had an older sister and she was doing her thing after school, you know? So I was one of those kids that would have like a key on a shoe lace around their neck and come home and open the door and take care of myself, you know?

Though she was a strong student academically there were times when the racial dynamics of the environment would push her sensibilities.

I would knock people out if you called me a n\*\*\*\*r. And my dad raised me to fight like, yeah, fight, you know? And he's a fighter because he was a freedom fighter. Right. So that spirit, that blood and it's in all of us. ... So my dad came and he was an advocate for me. So if it didn't make sense and I was verbally attacked or whatever, and I protected myself, he didn't care how I protected myself. His thing was, "No, she'll be back tomorrow if you can't explain whatever." And the way he would deal with them, it would just go his way when it came to me. So I would never be out.

Akua decided to permanently settle in States as an adult in 2011 as she had family already here in various locales. Her family settled in Star City and her daughter attended a local charter school. There were two instances where her daughter when she was called n\*\*\*\*r by the same White student two years in a row. The second time, Akua intervened.

Well, my husband and I went to the principal to speak with her about it and she's Black and we were received in a way that kind of made me have to catch myself because I wasn't expecting the way she came at us. Basically, the white child was not suspended. I know just from being ACBM, that when the table was turned, we're the first to be suspended and she chose not to suspend the child, even though this was the second incident... I wrote a complaint to the board, which is public. I just bypassed everyone. That's how angry I was. I just went straight to the board.

When Akua did go to the board, she was further frustrated by the board's confusion about how to respond to the incident. "It's like, why do I have to tell you people what to do? You know, you guys should know what to do which was very aggravating. You know what to do when it's the other way around." This speaks to the disparate treatment between Black and White children when it comes to discipline seen in the swift and punitive response to the misbehavior of Black children when compared to their White counterparts. But what is also revealed is the insinuation that the labor of coming up with a response lays at the feet of Black women. Instead of the individuals leading the institution.



Akua became involved with the ACBM around the same time the incident with her daughter occurred and she decided to reach out.

I became involved with ACBM because I was in a group on Facebook, and somebody posted about it. A lady posted about it and then I reached out because I was like, that's something that I would participate in and then my situation happened after. So, then I reached out to Lynn and I let her know what was going on and I was like, "You know where I'm stumped because my child is not in a public school. So, where the heck is the Board for the Charter school? Why is this shit hidden?" Because I can't go and ask the school because they aren't going to tell me anything. Because they were giving me an email to submit a complaint and then that person was giving me some dumb email. I was like, no, no, no, I am not playing this. I need to just go straight to where I need to go to. So, Lynn was just becoming familiar with how the Charter schools were operating and so we both were learning at the same time, and then she found out where the charters go through, and then I went to the Board.

When Akua was unsure of the process to challenge practices or procedure in a charter school, when reached out to ACBM. She did not trust that the school would tell her the truth and was frustrated that they seemed to dismiss her concerns by giving her an email to field her complaint. With Lynn's assistance, she was able to learn of the Charter board's meetings and place her complaint in person.



*Chatterla Davis: Better Apart*

Mrs. Davis, a retired paralegal, came up in a segregated rural community in Mississippi. Her father graduated high school and worked as a farm laborer. Her mother worked as a maid until she was able to acquire her GED through an assistance program.

During all the social, the civil rights things. You know, people were coming down from the North and giving black people different programs. And they had opened up some program to get people, to get their high school diploma. Because you know at that time they were using that as a reason to keep them out of jobs.

As her community was segregated, all of her teachers in elementary and part of middle school were Black. She went to a Catholic school run by an all-Black order of nuns and priests.

It was an absolute, best experience of ever being in any school. Not that I don't see the value. It took me a long time to get past my hatred of Catholicism. But I have come to see really the value of the education I got. It was a private school education.

As her school only went up to eighth grade, her mother worked to send her to a boarding school in Boston to get a “good education” during her high school years. When the young Mrs. Davis told her mother that she couldn't stand it, she came back home and eventually went to California with her older brother so she could finish out her high school years in the “better schools” of California.

I was a good student. I did better with black teachers, you know. I just, you know, knew that really, right away. Because that's all I had for the first 12 years of school was black teachers. And I noticed the difference than when I had a white teacher. That I wasn't connecting, you know?

This feeling of lack of relational connection, was reaffirmed, when Mrs. Davis noticed that, despite her good grades, she was never approached about doing anything beyond high school.

I can see how I was not helped because the guidance counselors, even though my grades were great. . . . Not one of them talked to me about college. There was no college preparation. No, nothing you know. Of course, my parents were of the age when you got out of high school, that was, you know, that was it. Just getting out of high school was, you know, an achievement.

As a mother, Mrs. Davis tried to be a readily available presence for her children, in case there was any issues. Whenever she started getting discipline notices that she believed to be “unjustified or unfounded” she would go up to the school to challenge it. Yet, one situation forced her to pull her son out of an activity.

Daniel had locs in high school and the baseball coach didn’t want him to play ‘till he cuts his hair off. And I’m like, wait a minute. That has nothing to do with him playing baseball. So he played the Gadson City league and they don’t have no issue. What is the issue with him cutting his hair? So I ended up, you know, contacting people, CCing everybody in the state. And then the principal says, “Oh, that’s not a requirement, you know. He can play”. But by the time that had resolved it, I had already put him in track.

Mrs. Davis refused to force her son to cut his locs<sup>5</sup> to play on the team and instead found an alternate temporary team. She eventually pulled him out of baseball altogether and placed him in track where his hair was not an issue.

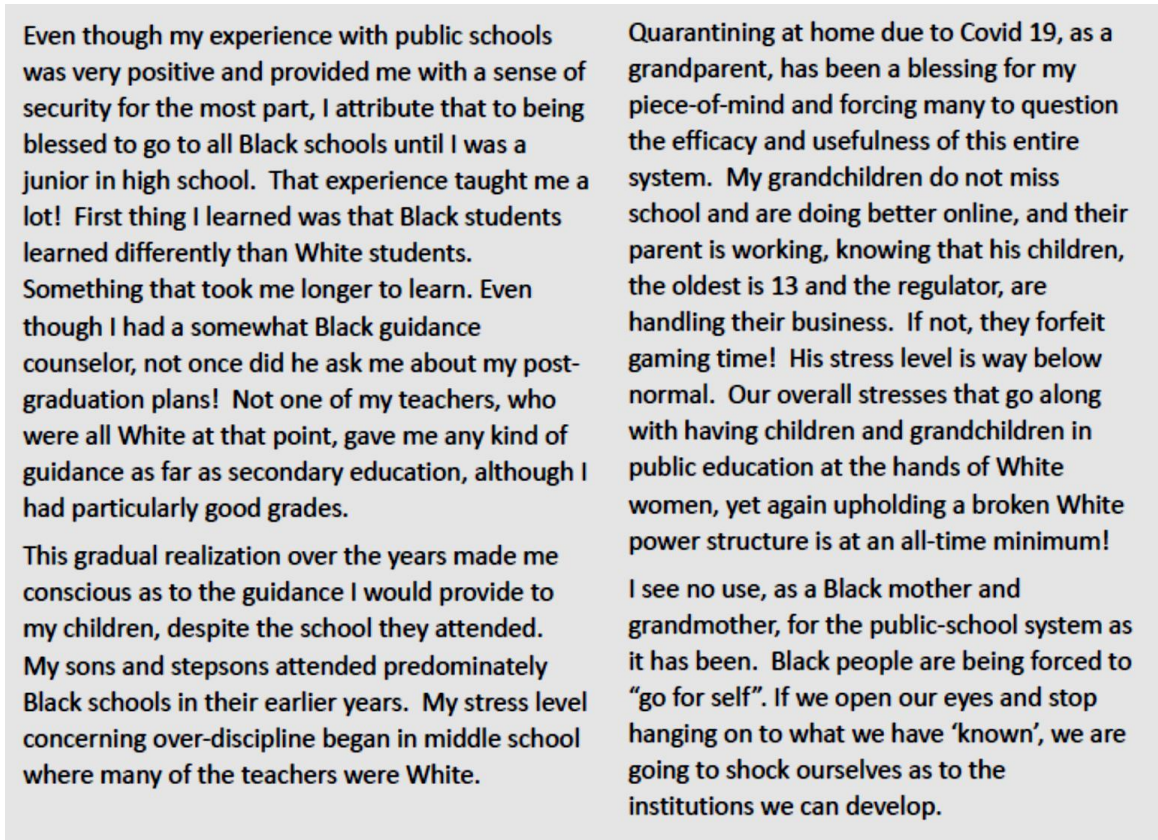
Mrs. Davis was working on advocating for Black children caught up in the foster care system when she first got acquainted with the ACBM through an invitation while playing “bid whist”<sup>6</sup> at a friend’s house.

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<sup>5</sup> “Locs” are a hairstyle most worn, but not exclusively worn in Black communities. The term “locs” is a variation of the term “dreadlocks”. Wearers of the style may use the term “Locs” to put space between their desire to wear the hairstyle and the negative and racialized connotations associated with being “dreaded”. See Banks, P.A. (2021). No dreadlocks allowed: Race, hairstyles and cultural exclusion in schools. *Hairstyles, Cultural Exclusion in Schools*.

<sup>6</sup> “Bid whist” is a card game popular in African American tradition.

*Mrs. Davis' Artistic Expression Piece [Image]*



Mrs. Davis composed a piece of prose that highlighted her experience being passed over for college-going considerations. She used her interactions with the high-school of her childhood to help inform her actions with her children. The onset of Covid, was seen as a “blessing” because she did not have to worry about the harm and suffering that could befall her grandchildren. Mrs. Davis expressed her hope that the pandemic would serve to encourage more Black people to develop their own educational institutions for their children.

***Michelle Thompson: Multigenerational Trauma***

Michelle is a single mother of two, a son and a daughter. She came up in the Midwest and was raised by her paternal grandparents. Both of her parents had issues with drugs, though her father was always nearby when she needed him. She was surrounded by a lot of family and fictive kin, as she grew up in the same neighborhood her father came up in. Though she felt protected surrounded by so much family, one traumatic school interaction affected her far into the future.

I was acting up in school and she [her teacher] ... told me she was going to call my mom. I didn't even know my mom at the time. So, I was like, "You can't call my mom," you know of course being smart. And she's like, you're right. And then she's like, "Why not? Does your mom not want you?" And so that was like that whole thing right there was like- it really was a bad time. Because what happened is the kids started to repeat it. So it was like, "Aha your mom don't want you." And so at that point in time, I just didn't know my mom or didn't know where she was. But when she asked me that question, then it was like, 'Oh, she don't want me. That's why she not here.' And so from third grade, that's why I started to struggle like really bad with behavior and my self-esteem. Cause I felt like my mom don't want me. And it was from that interaction with that third-grade teacher.

Michelle was triggered by this teacher's comments because she had yet to meet her mother. This single comment on the part of the teacher, shook Michelle's sense of belonging established by her family. Additionally, the teacher embarrassed Michelle in front of the entire class and gave the children fodder with which to tease Michelle. Still, she was supported by teachers in the same school that this incident occurred.

I went to the same elementary school that my father and my aunts went to. So a lot of their peers of course grew up to be teachers. So to my advantage, some of my teachers, they knew my dad struggled with drugs. They knew my mother struggled with drugs. You know, they knew about me before I knew about me. And I didn't know that then, but I know that now. And so they kind of was very

lenient with me. Like I said, they refocused me a lot. Um, and they really pushed me outside of what I wanted to do, I would say. So I have really excellent teachers outside of that one.

Fortunately, the familiarity of other educators in the school served to redirect her pain that was caused by the teacher inferring she was unwanted by her mother and her becoming the target of school bullying. While these teachers were able to soften the blows of these events, the scars were ever-present.

It was from that interaction with that third-grade teacher as far as anything positive about school. I don't know, like I've done a lot of positive things, but that experience overshadowed anything. So, like I won spelling bees. I was like the State Champ. I did poetry contests, you know. I've had my paper that I wrote on Martin Luther King published in the paper. But my [most memorable] school memory is that third grade [incident].

Michelle went on to work in the public schools to create after-school programming around bullying prevention, to boost self-esteem and “the programs I needed when I was a kid”. Michelle got involved with the work of the ACBM during an exclusionary incident involving her own son.

He was attending Sanchez Middle School, in Newman School District. And there was an incident where the teacher wouldn't let him in class. He was like, I guess like 30 seconds late. She was still in the door though, but late, he went to the bathroom first. He was upset she wouldn't let him in, and he started crying, folded his arms. And the teacher said she was intimidated by him, his posture the way his arm was folded, so he was suspended for 10 days for intimidating a teacher. When he returned from suspension, people were saying, “Hey, I heard you got suspended. I heard you got suspended”. And my son said, “Well, the teacher shouldn't be telling the business, because these are my rights. You're not supposed to be able to tell”. My son knows that cause I work for the schools and he knows there are certain things you can't talk about, and so he approached the teacher. “Why are you telling my business?” Again, she felt intimidated by him. He went in the cafeteria; he was trying to tell the administrators. They weren't listening. They were like, “We'll check into that. We'll have a conversation with her”. And he was at the lunch table and he was like, I'm tired of this. I'm tired of them treating my people like this. I would rather them shoot me dead than treat me like

this! And one of the students told the administration. So, because he mentioned shooting a gun, they correlate that to, he brought up guns and violence.

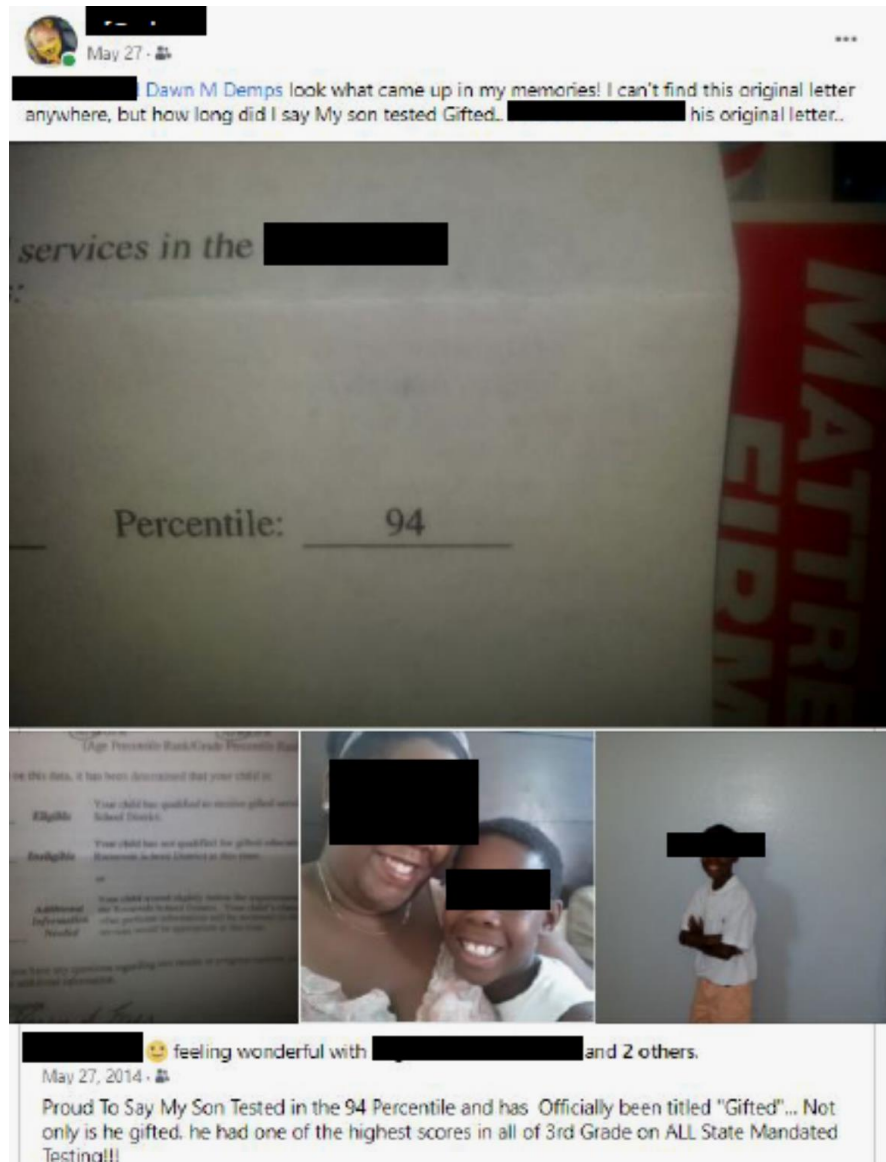
So, he received another 10 days suspension with a recommendation for expulsion. And so myself, along with ACBM, as well as some other community leaders, we went to his hearing and everything. ... So they had this folder prepared with all of these, like their evidence should I say? They have made a [printout] internet search stating that my son had searched up guns previously on the computers. And then it was pointed out [by ACBM members] that during the dates that they have under his ID logged into his computer, those days he was on suspension. So he never could have searched through that [on those days]. But that was part of their evidence. And so once that was brought to light, [the school board] said “Well, we'll just tear this up. We can't use this.” Then they just took it out the folder. They wanted us to just tear it out and give it back to them. I'm like, no, of course I kept my folder. But they ended up saying, “Okay, well we're not going to expel him, but he has to go to a special school”. But at this school he'll be isolated. They have isolated studies. They pick up trash and do community service, and I basically just went off. Like, I'm not going to let you put my son in prison. That sound like public prison, and so I declined. I removed him from the Newman district.

We see Michelle's 12-year-old son being perceived as a threat in both instances. Then when the district was called out for inserting falsified evidence to support their claims for expelling him, instead of addressing it, they ask the community to ignore it. Furthermore, instead of rectifying and addressing the suffering caused to her son, they suggest he be put into an alternative school that was “like a public prison”. Michelle ended up taking her son out of the Newman District and eventually sent him to Florida to his father to go to school believing the schools in Star City were too problematic.

During our discussions, Michelle often bragged about how intelligent her son was, though it was not acknowledged by the teachers and administrators in the Newman District. She told me that he had tested as gifted, but the district refused to place him in gifted classes. “I am going to send you the paperwork if I can find it.” I believed that her son had tested as gifted, but her insistence on showing me evidence, suggests a history of not being believed. Weeks after this discussion, she tagged me on a Facebook post:



Michelle's Facebook Post [image]




The post reads:

*xxxxx, Dawn M. Demps, look what came up in my memories. I can't find this original letter anywhere, but how long did I say my son tested gifted. xxxxx his original letter. (May 27, 2014) Proud To Say My Son Tested in the 94 Percentile and has Officially been titled "Gifted"...Not only is he gifted, he had one of the highest scores in all of 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade on ALL State Mandated Testing!!!*

In the post, the pride and happiness of the mother and son is captured in their smiles. Yet, 3 years after this original post showing his test results, her son was not only denied entrance into gifted programs but was actively being pushed out of the district. Michelle created a poem for her artistic expression piece which speaks to her son's experience.

*Michelle's Artistic Expression Piece* [image]

**Murder Is the Charge!**



Murder is the charge  
Why so large? I know you're thinking  
But let me tell you about the life that's missing.

Full of passion, but she didn't like the reaction  
She said she was scared, and my son caused her fear  
So they tried to suspend him for the whole year

He's never been the same, his glow is gone  
But I know who to blame,  
And it wasn't the broken home.

She was the teacher, also Caucasian  
My son a black boy with passion,  
But they say race is not in the equation


Yes I said his color  
Nothing he could change  
So as his mother

I mean the Black Mothers  
We took a stand, to tell Kyrene they can't have another  
black child, black Student, black Brother.

All because she feared him and he did not fear her  
He now hates what he sees in the mirror  
She Killed his love for self & his love for School  
This was never about him breaking a rule

When it comes to our black boys  
Killing their passion is not small but large  
So I rest my case with

**MURDER IS THE CHARGE!**



Michelle's piece captures the stereotypes and fear of Black boys that fuel the overly punitive responses to them in schools. It further animates the ability of educational institutions' treatment of Black children to kill their love of school. Regardless of the

schools' denial of Black humanity and education, she highlights the Black mother's refusal to let the system sacrifice another Black child. In the end she suggests the trauma of the schooling experience is so great, that the system's actions equate to the murder of Black children.

### **The Mothers' Standpoint**

Collins (2000) forwards that the experiences of Black women as mothers, community advocates and othermothers have afforded us the ability to “have hammered out a multifaceted Black women's standpoint” (p.16). The stories shared with me from each of the mothers represent a multitude of realities. This patchwork of orientations and biographies illustrates the Black woman is not a monolith. Alas, this coat of many colors must contend with the focused and extractive nature of White supremacy. To this end, the mothers individually have different approaches to overcoming oppression which all inform the stance taken by the organization.

### ***Response to Schools***

The first research question asks, how does the mothers' standpoint affect their collective response to school system inequities? The mothers' experiences which craft their perspectives contribute to how they believe the inequities experienced by Black children should be addressed. Two overriding themes emerge in my observations of the group and the mothers' narratives.

**Transformation.** ACBM commenced to challenge systemic disparate treatment in various realms. Though they initially focused on the police killings of Black men in Star City, the formation of the group opened up space to understand how the vines of

White supremacy touch on every dynamic of Black life. In this exploration, the group came to focus on the school to prison pipeline.

ACBM educated its' members and community on the components and practices of the school to prison pipeline. They did this through community wide events which featured students and parents whose children had experienced pushout. They organized prayer walks that were attended by city officials and school district administrators. ACBM conducted "Know Your Rights" trainings open to all community members and became a familiar presence at school board meetings in Star City.

In particular, two districts, Rancho and Newman, had garnered national attention because of racist incidences which caught the attention of social media. ACBM, directed their energie to organizing in each district to varied effect. In advance of attending district board meetings, they coordinated and rehearsed how they would make their demands known to board members. Mrs. Dotson helped to craft a statement which was read at all meetings. *We, as Black mothers will no longer remain silent, while our children are blatantly disrespected, provoked, threatened, neglected, and set up to fail through policies, curriculum, disciplinary practices, deeply rooted in racial stereotypes.* After this statement was read each mother would name the next steps the needed the district to take. One after the other, they would repeat this statement and over multiple board meetings until their request was met.

We are greater in numbers... when they see a group of us show up, that has been quite impactful. When you see two rows of Black mothers. So, if you see three rows of us, it's just impactful. And not just gather for a mob or gather for a parade. No, we are organized. We have one thought; we have the same statement and we are going to show up in agreement. And organizing is a part of that. It's this, this agreement to come into a space and effect change to impact that space.

To change the way that space is currently, interacting with this community. You come in and say, no, we're going to change that.- Mrs. Dotson, ACBM mother

Mrs. Dotson speaks to the potency of an organized group of Black mothers demanding change. They possess an understanding of the power of their presence in politicized spaces to influence what is happening. Mrs. Dotson's statement further shows how the mothers seek to use that power to positively change the way the system operates towards the Black community.

ACBM followed these more public displays of pressure by setting up meetings with board members and superintendents to discuss how things could be improved to interrupt the school to prison pipeline. The investment by ACBM into the hard work of transforming the system to become safe and equitable institutions in which Black children survive and even thrive (Love, 2019) is further driven by the mother's belief in education in general and their faith in the possibilities they believe present in the school system.

Well, I am and my children are products of public school. I'm a product of the public-school system, I believe in the public-school system, but we had dedicated teachers. And so that's, that's the premise that I'm coming from. More and more, I'm kind of getting a little bit disillusioned, but I, I just believe in the public-school system. I think it's better for people in general to learn how to get along with all people...I just believe in public schools and that's why I'm not a proponent for pulling our kids out of school. ~Ms. Nolan, ACBM mother

Here we see Ms. Nolan pointing to the evidence of positive outcomes in her own life through the educational system. But that is quickly followed by her growing disillusionment after observing the children in the school she works, in her family and the families she advocates for with ACBM. Yet, she returns to what she believes to be the

democratizing effect that public schools can have on citizens. Thus, her hesitation for “pulling our kids out of schools” and her commitment to transforming the system.

Another line of reasoning for the organization to focus their energies on transforming the schools is realized through a politics of desperation (Stovall, 2013). This logic acknowledges the limited, and often undesirable options available to Black mothers as they seek to ensure the best educational avenues for their children.

Considering these limitations, the motivation is to make the best of what is available.

There's not been inclusion. There's not been equity. It's not ever been a place for us to be comfortable because it wasn't built for us. So there's nothing we can do about that. You know, I think we make sure that while we are in this space, because we need to be in this space, that we're not being treated wrong, that our students are not being treated wrong, but we have to, I think we have to really look at it from that aspect that this wasn't for us. So it's not ever going to be inclusive. You know, just my own experience growing up and going to school, I never felt included in any way. ~Simone, ACBM mother

Akua's sentiment mirrors that of Simone's, when she shares with me her reasons for keeping her daughter in the school in which she had been traumatized by two separate racialized incidences over two years.

Yeah, because everybody was just pulling their kid out and I was like I'm not pulling her out. I'm not going to pull her out and just throw her anywhere because anywhere you go, it's going to be the same BS.~ Akua, ACBM mother

In both Simone and Akua's statements, we see the need to make lemons into lemonade.

Akua's recognition that anywhere she could put her daughter “will be the same BS” speaks to the desperation of the educational choices Black parents are forced to make.

Therefore, she sees ACBM's work is to make the best of a bad situation to make sure “we're not being treated wrong”. Simone's statement further elucidates how the permanence of racism (Bell, 1991) contributes to this sense of desperation as she

recognizes the school system being a space that was not built nor intended “for us”. This thinking is confirmed by Simone’s own negative childhood experiences in the school system. The fact that her own children are still experiencing the type of things she went through, confirms her sense that Black oppression is inevitable and can only be improved, not eliminated.

**Evacuation.** Another potential response to school system oppression was ever present just under the surface in conversations of “what will we do” if the traumatizing conditions of the schools could not-would not be improved.

And so it's, I don't know if it's possible. I don't think it's possible. I think it would have to be, I mean, not like, I don't wanna say it like re-segregation, but it's just not, that's just how our systems are built. It would take a complete tear down and rebuild further to be as a school, to be a safe place for black kids.- Karsyn, ACBM mother

Karsyn, who is a public-school teacher and sees the inner-workings of a school daily, expresses sincere doubt in the ability of the schools to no longer be sites of suffering and anti-blackness (Dumas, 2014; Dumas & Ross, 2016). She contemplates aloud a type of separation but is apprehensive acknowledging it as “re-segregation”. Still she suggests the only way to remedy Black educational suffering is to “tear down and rebuild” the entire system.

In ACBM committee meetings, more intentional discussions around what the next moves for the group should be beyond pressuring education decision makers to improve conditions for Black children, were beginning to take place. The mothers were growing frustrated by stalled efforts on the part of the schools to address the mothers’ concerns

and by some of the reversals they were noticing in schools or districts that had previously appeared to be making progress.

I don't want to leave the ground game cause it's very much needed for me to keep my ear to the ground on a lot of stuff. But I also know that I need to be in the other game, which is the policy and the decision making end having a parent sit up there, talking to them and making sure they do what they need to do, for the accountability piece. But I also know that I want to create... redesign the school system for Black children. And so it's either [policy changes] or redesign the system for us where I'm not even fooling with their system anymore.-Mrs. Dotson, ACBM mother

Mrs. Dotson, as the primary founder of the ACBM expresses her hope to expand the group's influence around state level policy by staying on "the ground".

Simultaneously, she exhibits a desire to create an alternative for Black children where she will eventually end up "not fooling with their system anymore"-meaning the traditional public-school system.

The group's leadership began to engage in more rigorous discussions with educational funders and other entities promising to support ACBM's efforts to create another system hospitable to the needs of Black children. Chief among these opportunities, was support for the creation of micro-schools<sup>7</sup>. Some of the outside group's offering to assist ACBM in that effort were aligned with neoliberal policies to expand school choice and divest from public schools. The controversy that followed these entities caught the attention of teacher's unions and members of the RedForEd movement in the state. One activist of the RedForEd movement offered to give a

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<sup>7</sup> There is no singular definition that encompasses all the possibilities of what a micro-school could be. The term has come to represent all types of educational configurations. What is consistent, is they are much smaller than traditional schools and possess a mix of private and homeschool components. See Cohen, J. C. (2017). School disruption on the small scale: can micro-schools break out of an elite niche? *Education Next*, 17(2), 28+.



presentation to the ACBM mothers to make them “aware of the political and economic intentions of the micro-school movement funders”. ACBM agreed to have the RedForEd representative present at an upcoming ACBM meeting.

The RedForEd representative was a middle-aged White woman, teacher in a public-school district in the state and mother herself. As she gave her presentation, members in attendance on the Zoom meeting took furious notes. She shared slides discussing that the move towards micro-schools was a “privatization scheme” controlled by right wing, special interest groups. She discussed the involvement of venture capitalist allowed to run without oversight, dipping into public education tax dollars that undermine public schools. She further expressed her concern that the model only required “guides” of any educational background, instead of “qualified and certified teachers”. Lastly, she discussed her worries that the micro-schools model was discriminatory and provided few protections for English-language learners, students with and individualized education program or other special education. At the end of her presentation, Mrs. Dotson, began the conversation.

First of all I want to thank you for this thorough conversation about the micro-schools. I do want to start off by saying, I don't know if you believe that we were recruited by the funder. And I don't know if you believe that somehow, someone reached out to us, and we were like, ‘Oh, yeah, this is great because this of Covid-19.’ Um, no. Actually, we have been looking for some alternatives for our parents. Because, you know, based on the public schools. And I'm not against public schools. I don't believe any of us are against public schools. And I don't want to take funding away from the public schools, but, what I do wanna do is make sure our Black children are safe....The Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers have been looking at these alternatives because our children have been pushed out at such a high rate. Our Black children and our Brown children, more than anyone else in the state. And we have talked about this with the districts. And while you say there are mechanisms to change that, unfortunately, we have a lot of players within those mechanisms that are unwilling to do that. Unwilling to admit racism.

Unwilling to do right by our children and we have been fighting this for the past three years...Before Trump even got elected. So we were not a response to Trump. We were a response to the brutality of our Black children and how they have been mistreated [in public schools]. (Fieldnotes, August 24, 2020).

Mrs. Dotson wanted to make sure that ACBM were not perceived as a passive group that had somehow been fooled into unintentionally undermining the public-school system. Rather, her and the other mothers on the call shared their own research on the funder and expressed that the move to partner with them was not driven by political allegiances or lack of knowledge. Instead, they were motivated by the longstanding suffering and dismissal of Black children at the hands of the very public schools they were being asked to care about and support.

Over the course of the 33 months I spent participating with and observing the activities of the ACBM, there was a slow-burn shift in their approach to responding to school system injustices. While the components for this change were always an undercurrent in their membership meetings and core leader discussions, an unexpected societal event elevated these elements to the fore.

So I'm really looking to create more. And especially now that this is a great opportunity to do that. This COVID-19 has presented some additional opportunities for us because now kids are home with their parents. They are safe.  
~Mrs. Dotson, ACBM mother

The Coronavirus pandemic created the perfect natural experiment for the organization to test the limits of educational avenues beyond traditional schooling options.

I thank God for Covid for shutting down the schools. It gave my son confidence to know he can teach his son himself. Now he can keep my grandbaby out them schools. ~Mrs. Davis, ACBM

Furthermore, the pandemic provided an opportunity for Black parents to test their own ability to educate their children in venues beyond the school system. The simple phrase Mrs. Davis says of “out them schools” is heavy laden with all the pain, trauma and spirit murdering (Love, 2016) experienced by generations of Black children at the hands of educational institutions. Like Mrs. Dotson, she echoes the belief that the forced option for Black children to be educated at home, either virtually or through homeschooling, provides a moment of reprieve from worry about safety. It further empowers Black parents to imagine new possibilities for the education of their children.

### *Policy Effects*

ACBM made themselves known at various levels in the educational system, attempting to influence school leaders and legislators to protect Black children from disproportionate educational exclusion and inequitable treatment in schools. While the mothers were invited to have a “seat at the table” in some instances, what were the tangible or attitudinal effects of their advocacy, voice, and presence? This section will respond to the question of how have the efforts of ACBM influenced educational policy? The data revealed two primary themes regarding the ACBM’s influence on policy: Authentic change and conciliatory change.

**Authentic Change.** As ACBM’s presence grew familiar in Star City, they were invited to speak and present on disparities in student pushout in schools and districts in Star City. ACBM hoped these occasions would educate the wider community to help compel school districts to analyze their policies and practices to improve the conditions

for Black children. In the Newman school districts, they worked with another parent group that supported the ACBM's goals and wanted to use their white privilege to advance an understanding of the ACBM's grievances.

We worked very hard on a presentation that we had hoped to bring to living rooms of Newman parents to educate white parents about the discrepancy in discipline between White, Latino and Black students. And to talk generally about like why Newman has a problem. Why Aurora Coalition for Black Mothers was showing up at board meetings to amplify some of those stories. To talk about how the district has responded. ~Lucy Huddleston, Community Organizer

Lucy, an organizer whose children had attended schools in the Newman District, attempted to bring the message of educational equity to parents in the district who did not feel the ACBM's concerns were legitimate. While her vision to enlighten parents and hopefully recruit allies to the ACBM's charge for policy change "lost steam", she continued to support the group by spreading the word of their events and continuing to pressure administrators inside the district to attend to ACBM's concerns.

Eventually, the allyship with mutually concerned parent groups and other community organizations led to the Newman district hiring a consultant to conduct professional development sessions for their teaching staff and administration to train them around matters relating to equity and inclusion. In the district of Rancho, a district-wide position was created to deal specifically with equity and inclusion. In addition to these district changes, the ACBM worked to help negotiate the creation of a state department of education level position focused on equity, diversity and inclusion. The person hired for this position, a Black woman, was the only Black education administrator working at the state level.

In the school district of Akowi, ACBM was given a classroom to have volunteers who would work with children having problems in the school. Students were welcome to visit the ACBM classroom when they were frustrated and wanted to talk it out. Leonard, a board member in an adjoining district commented on this arrangement.

I found it interesting that they [Akowi District] allowed a group, such as ACBM to actually have space on campus- to be able to do the work that they do. And, so not sure if that's a policy change, but I think that the fact that they were able to do that is pretty significant. It's not an easy thing to do... Most districts would just say no. ~ Leonard Jones, School Board Member

The Akowi District created a path for the mothers to have contact with students inside schools that may be having difficulty, in an attempt to interrupt the likelihood of suspension. This was an unusual move for a school district and was interpreted by ACBM as an effort towards genuine partnership.

ACBM was eventually able to secure a physical base of operations in the Jefferson School District. The mothers began to hold monthly meetings, parent trainings and community events, such as book clubs to further educate the community about the necessity of equity-based policy change. The influence of ACBM towards authentic change in the ways schools and districts approached equity and exclusion concerns was captured by a high-level administrator in the Jefferson School District.

I know that in my former district they definitely had an impact. Because the conversations we would have at the executive table, oftentimes we would speak through the lens of things that they have shared. I think they do a good job highlighting blind spots and so you know, back to the commentary of 'there are not a lot of Black superintendents, there are not a lot of Black administrators". But these people are still making decisions that affect Black people. So having somebody there to highlight blind spots whether malintent or not is really important. ... we were having discussions around discipline and practices and policies as a result of them being a part of the conversation. I know that decisions

were made differently. They were healthier decisions. So, I know for sure within that space there has been an impact.- Akeem Collins, District Administrator

Akeem formerly worked in the district that ACBM retained classroom space for volunteers and students. He later moved to the Jefferson District where he helped ACBM secure their official operating space. When he spoke with me, he often commented on the value of ACBM being at the table. We see in the comment above, that the impression the group had in his former district left the type of impact that they did not have to be present to enforce. Put another way, even without ACBM being physically in rooms where decisions were being made, their advocacy led to district leaders making decisions through a different lens. It influenced them to make “healthier decisions”.

**Conciliatory Change.** Many of the influencing effects that could be directly or indirectly connected to the organizing efforts of ACBM could be interpreted as acts of authentic change on the surface. The only difference between authentic change and conciliatory change seemed to be time and pressure. Many of the initial changes, once lauded as victories for the group’s goals towards equity, fell under the weight of the mission and succumbed to outside demands or lack of commitment.

... it's not really going to challenge the system, even when you have equity directors who are, you know, your activists, your disruptors. Their check is still dependent on, you know, the people in the system who are leading the system, liking them. If they say something that the [superintendent] doesn't like, or whoever, ... could put them in a place where they may get fired or they may not get their check. And so there has been a lot of conversations, particularly in this district of “How do we tone down [the director of equity and inclusion]?”  
~Jessica, Board Member

The Rancho District, was the first district in the state to implement a Director of Equity and Inclusion. She was given the explicit task of addressing achievement gaps and issues of racism in the district. The creation of this position received positive media attention

and Rancho was hailed as a leader in the state for inclusion and equity in schools. Yet, Jessica, the first ever Black woman elected to the school board in 2018, speaks to the precariousness and ultimate powerlessness of the post. Here we see how the power of whiteness (Harris, 1993) has the ability to of the director of equity and inclusion to enact any real change in the district though she possesses a title which suggests she should have some autonomy to impact “equity and inclusion”.

They're still utilizing their white supremacy ideology and infusing it into their equity policies. Now in writing, they have one thing, looks really good in writing, but in actuality, they are still directing the equity and you can't direct it if you have a white supremacist's mindset. But they believe they need to direct it. So, the current director, she is struggling I believe. Because she's being directed by a superintendent who has no idea what, what true equitable solutions really look like. That's unfortunate. And they've excluded her from those conversations, from what I gather. So, she's just on paper right now, and she's just doing something, doing something. But she's not impacting policy changes. They've excluded her from that. And again, I know there's a need for us to be back at Rancho dealing with this. I know that. We're fully aware of that. -Mrs. Dotson, ACBM

Again, the power to exclude (Harris, 1993) the Black woman holding this position in the Rancho district from any policy implementation-even discussions-betrays any honest effort at systemic change. Furthermore, the attempts to “tone down” and control the director was a direct response to the appointment that was only created under local and national pressure due to a racist incident by white students caught on camera. The embarrassment of the moment that went viral on social media, forced the superintendent to create and fill the post. This moment of interest convergence (Bell, 1980) provided an opportunity for ACBM and their allies to hope for authentic change and investment in equity-oriented policies. But once there, the Director of Equity and Inclusion, was exposed to death threats, online trolls and verbal attacks in board meetings, with little protection or support from the district. She shared that once she was hired to the position,

she feared what could happen to her without the assistance or protection of the district. She further expressed the physical impact of the situation had driven her to be on blood pressure medicine for the first time in her life.

Much of the pushback in Rancho was led by a very aggressive conservative counter equity group called Freedom's Parents (FP). This group was determined to eliminate the installment of the Director of Equity and Inclusion and railed against equity focused curricular changes as anti-capitalist" and "un-American". The debate made national headlines as the conservative commentator Tucker Carlson, charged,

They're not teaching anything having to do with math or science or English or language... They're teaching racial activism, certain to confuse and wound and divide our kids of all colors.

FP had achieved previous success in their efforts to quell equity talk in the Newman School District. Newman initially agreed to begin equity focused development and training for their staff only after student data around academic and discipline outcomes were released to the public at the behest of ACBM and other community groups. According to the district superintendent, Newman hired a consulting firm focused on equity work to help the district begin "embedding the lens of equity and inclusion in every one of Newman's functions—teaching, learning, hiring, community engagement—we can begin to close the gaps in achievement, opportunity and discipline, to ensure equity for all".

In the end, Newman dropped the consulting firm after pressure exerted from FP. Thus, this counter-equity parent group believed they could have the same effect in Rancho. FPs presence in Rancho school district board meetings drew headlines. Yet,



it wasn't until ACBM also attended those same board meetings to counter FPs efforts to topple equity, that the board begin putting new rules in place to minimize public comment and "ease dissent".

The ACBM mothers recognize every step of progress seems to manifest two steps of regress. Derrick Bell identifies this pattern of illusory authenticity for the self-gain of whiteness as interest convergence. Under the pressure of embarrassment and potential loss of power, prestige, or leverage, both Rancho and Newman instituted steps they believed would alleviate the negative impacts of the attention drawn to the racism and inequities in their districts.

But really it's more like, they just wanna appease you because they don't want you to get in the way. We don't want you to, kick up dirt. So we're gonna kind of, we're gonna show up, we're gonna appease you. We're gonna tell you what you want to hear because they know... I feel like, people know the drama that can be caused when you start screaming race issues. And so I feel like a lot of times that's what happens because they, the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers is a threat, but I see a lot of people just trying to appease, you know? ~Karsyn, ACBM

While ACBM may hold some initial power through their ability to "kick up dirt" and draw attention when necessary to anti-blackness and Black suffering, in the end, the real power is seen in the big stick of whiteness. FP has shown the consistent capacity to entice schools, in the very least, to soften their commitment to equity and the elimination of discipline gaps. The ability of FP to convince districts to reverse course hints that the true nature of steps towards equity to begin with are self-serving and not truly an investment in what is best to repair the school trauma experienced by Black children. One school administrator, who is also a Black mother, states the attitudes of the districts in this way.

They are rolling their eyes like what do they want now? What now? What do they want now? They are afraid of them. I think that is the whole issue of value that white folks think we have no value and only they have value. The whole idea of what people of color have to say period. That white is right. That people of color, we don't know shit. We have nothing of value to say. So they hear the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers are coming-they are already to ask, "What do they want now?" Give them what they want instead of looking at us as partners in this thing called education. ~Vanessa, District Administrator

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## CHRONICLE 5- WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE

*The pandemic saved my son's life. I absolutely believe that. I say this because the pandemic was able to facilitate two things. First it interrupted the contact he had with the school system, which for all intents and purposes served as proxy for the judicial to prison industrial complex. Next, it forced my hand to carve a way out of the demands on my time and expectations-to self-educate my son.*

*The state lockdown in response to Covid, shut down the schools, setting up all of my children to finish the school year online. My youngest, 7 year old Zora, had her teachers enter my home everyday through Zoom. Mrs. Ronsin's voice echoing through the dining room with instructions, guidance and confusion. Hearing the mistakes some of her teachers made as they tripped over tech issues, tried to stop 2<sup>nd</sup> graders from "chatting" with each other while they were teaching or just plain using horrendous pedagogical practices in real-time was elucidating. I reminded myself that these educators are new to online teaching, so they should be extended grace as they learned with the parents and students how to use this new platform. Yet, there was something about the things I was hearing and seeing over my little one's laptop that felt routine. What I mean is, some of the things in terms of how the teachers actually spoke to the kids, or chose who they focused on, or how they expressed displeasure with particular children- were not due to their unfamiliarity with working Zoom-but seemed simply an extension of how they are used to operating in the real world classroom.*

*My two eldest, Journi and Jay, were never digitally face to face with their teachers. All their assignments were sent to them through email or Google Classroom. As*

*they were older than Zora, they largely worked independently. My observation of how each of my kids' schools were "doing schooling" made me realize a few things. Having little Zora's teachers digitally, in my house, every day, reiterated how very white my Black children's educational experience had been. I mean, beyond their racial whiteness- the dynamics of the curriculum and how the teachers taught and related (or not) to the kids. I also remembered that these teachers don't know everything. They are fallible and either learning-which is human and promising- or they are stuck in their ways and believe they have nothing more to learn-which is dangerous and harmful to children. Lastly, I recognized that the majority of children's learning occurs in spite of, not because of whatever we adults scramble around trying to "teach".*

*I decided I was going to homeschool Jay by the end of that school year. At that time, we were not sure if the schools would open back up the following year. Regardless, I was relatively firm that even if they did open, Jay would not be there. The murder of George Floyd at the close of the school year had mobilized people across the nation. But it was just another instance reminding me of how unsafe the world was for Black folks. I was admittedly growing more cynical as to the point of it all. Now corporations "believe" racism may be a problem? Now schools want to be "committed" to challenging injustice? All of a sudden districts and universities are scrambling to formalize "Director of Equity and Inclusion" posts? I was extremely doubtful anything would change except the chalk mark on the wall symbolizing another Black death. Jay was no longer considered "cute" and stood solidly at 6'1" and starting to acquire some meat on his frame. I couldn't bare the thought of some overzealous school "resource officer", on my son's neck in the hallway, while Jay used his last breath to cry out to me.*

*As I was entering the final year of my PhD program, I decided to keep Zora in her school online as it was going to be hard enough homeschooling Jay and I felt his situation required more of my attention. Plus, I was not confident my mind could add a third grader to the mix with my dissertation and job search and move and everything else on my list. My mother, who now lived with us, would be able to help support Zora's learning.*

*I began researching conversations around Black homeschooling, deschooling<sup>8</sup> and unschooling<sup>9</sup>. A fellow Black mother academic sent me youtube videos and podcasts on other Black mothers having critical conversations about the benefits of homeschooling. I further researched how single mothers and working parents made this whole thing work. My confidence rose and waned daily. Would this sacrifice my work on my dissertation...would Jay be treated differently regarding his postsecondary goals as a homeschooled Black kid...would it overtax my health...what if he hates it...what if he doesn't learn anything...will I be able to maintain this!*

*I eventually sat down with Jay to discuss what he could imagine his schooling could look like. Given we were stuck in the house and "field trips" could not really happen until the threat of Covid was past us via vaccine or behavior change, we had to get creative. Jay told me he would prefer to learn from videos, movies and hands-on projects., He wanted to focus on stuff he was actually interested in and would inform*

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<sup>8</sup> Deschooling is the process of unlearning the ways we have been socialized to believe learning must look like. See Weiner, E. J. (2015). *Deschooling the imagination: Critical thought as social practice*. Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> Unschooling is a form of child-directed learning. See Riley, G. (2020). Exploring the Growth of Homeschooling and Unschooling. In *Unschooling* (pp. 37-50). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. Also see Akitunde, T. (2020, December 17). *Unschooling: The educational movement more black parents are joining*. Retrieved from <https://matermea.com/unschooling-education-black-families/>

*what he wanted to do into the future. He knew he wanted to be a chef and would one day open his own restaurant. He wants to go to Italy, China, Nigeria and Japan to study for a few months at a time to learn about their food culture and cooking practices. Jay seemed to have a plan for himself even if I did not!*

*“I can definitely do that Jay. But I do have things that I believe are important that I want to input. First Black history...”*

*“Mama, I like Black history. So that’s fine!”*

*“Okay, I also want to incorporate current and global events. I think it is important for you to understand what is happening in the world.”*

*“Okay, that is cool too.”*

*I spent the next week learning how to use Google classroom and finding resources to use for Jay’s school experience. I could have him interview folks in the industry he is interested in and discuss how they followed their path. I could throw in some opportunities for him totalk to Black men in the community that are making things happen. In addition to Black history and global and contemporary events, I created curriculum for an art class, a cooking class, a financial literacy class and leadership and civic engagement class. I added my mother to the Google classroom to have another person who could follow up with him about his work or help if I was writing and overwhelmed.*

*When we started Jay’s unschooling homeschool experience I was nervous and worried I was not making the right decision. I think the de-schooling process is more for*

*my benefit than his. I am realizing how attached I am to believing learning must be within the confines of the model I came up in. We are still growing and working through this thing together. The deschooling of my own mind was necessary to accept that our children are made to explore and learn. I am Montessori trained so I know this...but when I wonder if my son's entire future could be degraded in some way because I supported him coloring outside the lines, it is scary. It is deep how programmed we really are.*

*I knew that I was doing something right when a couple months into our grand experiment, Jay had to remind me to post his assignments for the new session as I was "behind schedule". He was checking me about not giving him his work! Never in his life had he made sure he was given schoolwork. Additionally, we began having discussions at the dinner table about world events. When he was familiar with a concept he had been working on from our sessions, he would point it out. "See mama. That is an example of objectification. Ahhhh, I remember!" He was making connections between the history of Black people, current events and the world. It is an exciting thing to see.*

*Jay will be a high school senior next year. I still have a gnawing worry about the transition from our homegrown schooling to college or culinary school. Will it be more complicated for him to move to the next level or will he be ahead because we are already working on the things he wants to do. Will it be better because he can examine things critically or will they consider him a challenge? For now, I am happy that my son is safe and for the first time ever seems to be enjoying learning.*



*I admittedly feel some guilt associated with pulling my son out to save him. How does my protection of Jay contribute to the larger liberation project for Black children? The lion share who must continue to enter buildings where they are viewed as deficient and incapable. Walk through metal detectors and are at the mercy of an educational system in league with the judicial system. Where their home cultures are regarded as minimal and uncivil. Of that, I am not totally sure of the answer.*

### **Discussion of Findings**

We have no options as Black mothers. Either you put your kids in a racially hostile environment, or you put your kids in a quote-unquote bad school...where all the kids are Black, there's trauma. Where all the kids are White, there's trauma. There's not a lot of in-between.

Monifa Bandele<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of this study was to challenge majoritarian narratives which cast Black mothers as disempowered vessels that have net negative impact on the Black community and their children in the educational arena. Furthermore, it explored how the knowledges that Black mothers employ are informed by their experiences as Black women surviving in the world. For this purpose, this study examines the ways a group of Black natural and othermothers, known as the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers (ACBM) employ community organizing to respond to incidents of school exclusion as experienced by their biological and communal children. I specifically sought to answer how the mothers' standpoint affected their collective response to school system inequities and how their efforts have influenced educational policy?

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<sup>10</sup> As quoted in Dani McClain's, *We Live for the We: The Political Power of Black Motherhood* (2019), Monifah Bandele is also the Senior Advisor for Strategy, Policy and Equity for MomsRising. See <https://www.momsrising.org/>

I conducted a critical ethnographic examination over 33 months inclusive of pre-field observations through participant observation, in-depth interviews, document analysis, participatory art creations and autoethnographic reflections. The data was analyzed using hybrid thematic analysis. Final themes were selected through a process of family grouping of patterns and emerging themes were member-checked by the key informants in the study and other co-collaborators from ACBM.

### ***Strategy and Impact***

The consideration of Black women as creators of knowledge and insight, specifically in educational spaces is sparse in the literature (Alston, 2012; Bay et al., 2015; Cooper, 2017). Black mothers are considered even less as educational leaders in their own right (Bertrand & Rodela, 2018; Davenport, 2019). This study takes seriously the truth claims and acquired wisdoms of Black mothers seeking to create positive change in educational spaces.

The stories of each of the mothers provided context for the contributing events that elucidate their standpoint. Collins (2002) notes the varied experiences of Black women, which occur underneath the tarp of White supremacy, all contribute to the knowledges which inform and mobilize their actions. Given the wide range of the mothers' interactions with schools, both in childhood and motherhood, varying influences of family educational ethos and advocacy efforts, they each added a different ingredient to the rue that made up the ACBM response to school inequities. Ultimately, the binding

was their commitment to the motherwork (Collins, 1994) necessary to construct a better future for Black people, Black children, and humanity

The data revealed that two overarching approaches guided the groups' response to school system inequities: Transformation and evacuation. The response of transformation was observed in the groups' attempts to move forward socially just and equity-oriented improvements within the school system. They did this by being a visible and vocal presence at board meetings, utilizing media to elevate their demands, educating and supporting Black parents in the community, advocating for families when they were experiencing exclusion attempts and forging alliances where necessary. Evacuation was witnessed through the group's efforts to create alternate educational spaces amenable to the needs and safekeeping of Black children. Alliances towards this end were also created and community outreach and education campaigns were launched to inform the community of their intentions.

While seemingly binary on the surface, these approaches were embraced at varying times-even simultaneously- by the organization given the environmental conditions, access to resources, belief in the institution and evidence of goal progression. Thus, transformation and evacuation were not opposing, but intertwining roads similarly bound for the relief of Black suffering in schools. The mothers pragmatically walked the path that would best meet this goal. After hearing all of the tales of Black suffering and exclusion perpetrated by the institution charged with educating Black children, my discussions with the mothers always came down to, "Why do you still do this work?"

**Obstinate Faith.** The mothers were in full agreement as to the import of an education for Black children and families. They also viewed it as essential for the progress of the Black community as a whole. This led to an unending dance to access the best possible options amid a wholly undesirable selection of partners (Stovall, 2013). Thus, ACBM recognized efforts to further extract viable avenues for the education of Black children through overzealous discipline policies, as an assault on the child and the wider community. Accordingly, ACBM saw their responsibility as community mothers to challenge systemic maltreatment and disparities to insure the viability of the Black community.

While their faith in the possibilities an education facilitates stood resolute, their belief in the educational system to deliver those opportunities was in free-fall retrograde. Even those that worked inside of the school systems expressed deep doubt for the schools to ever be life-giving environments for Black children. Still, the mustard seed of faith in the rhetoric of the education system contributed to the group's continued efforts towards transformation.

**Permanence of Anti-blackness.** The groups' lack of faith in the school system was informed by the collective knowledge they had accrued over their lifetimes and the lifetimes of their ancestors. Anti-black racism was an ever-present force in the mothers' realities from childhood to their advocacy work. The absolute disregard and disgust they experienced (Dumas Ross, 2016) contributed to the protective stance they took when dealing with the schools. Yet, the realization on the part of ACBM that anti-blackness would never dissipate, did not lead to resignation. Akin to Bell's premise of racial realism

(Bell, 1991; Curry, 2008), the permanence of anti-blackness did not provoke dark hopelessness, rather, it empowered the groups' efforts to dig in deeper to improve the system bit by bit-to make it survivable. As Black mothers fighting for the survival of their communal children, where Black suffering was present, they were obligated to reside. The group exhibited a deep ability to take the school system as it is-"never made for us"- instead of some future utopia. Concurrently, this commitment to being present in the shadow of personal and residual Black suffering exacted a heavy toll on the mothers.

**Fugitive Prospects.** The accumulation of physical, financial and psychic stress on ACBM as they mobilized to counter the suffering enacted on Black children inside schools, contributed to impatience with the nature of transformation. Conversations within the group often alluded to the "dream" of a Black educational space (Warren & Coles, 2020) where children could be made whole. The onset of Covid 19 forwarded a sensibility that was ever-present- That the schools' inability to see Black children-and by extension Black families-as human and deserving of the same opportunities' whiteness is afforded, will require fugitivity and evacuation for survival.

The implication that the mothers of ACBM were incapable of making properly informed decisions only energized their commitment to the creation of a Black education space. The insinuation that somehow the mothers were ignorant or did not understand all the facts, ignored their truths of intergenerational trauma and spirit murdering committed at the hands of the public-school system since its' inception. Moreover, the assumption hinged on the controlling images of Black women as intellectually and socially inept (Collins, 2005; Harris-Perry, 2011; Roberts, 1999). Additionally, movements for public

school and educator support, rarely centered the needs of Black children and families. Instead, opting for a race neutral, colorblind ask for school improvement (Douglass-Horsford, 2011). This was made more incendiary in light of the national political environment which unveiled many instances of teachers displaying anti-blackness and racism on social media (Johnson, 2020; Staff, 2020; Payout, 2021).

**The Illusion of Progress.** The experiential knowledge ACBM possessed recognized that mothering while Black required adept navigation of the political realities and players impacting the life chances of their children. (Dow, 2019; McClain, 2019). To this end, ACBM sought to have “a seat at the table” so they could exert some influential power on the decisions that were made affecting Black children. Just having them at the table was acknowledged as a move towards transformative change, even when their voices were overlooked at the table. Some interventions and policy change efforts appeared genuine and authentic. These efforts were sometimes made without the direct pressure of ACBM, thus suggesting, an authentic commitment to principally changing. Yet, more often than not, the façade crumbled under the threat of white offense. The weight and influence of whiteness (Harris, 1993) was a power unattainable by the mothers and undercut the perceived progress their efforts had achieved. This Sisyphean struggle contributed to the group’s disillusionment with the entire system.

Another feature of the group’s progress was the dependence on the mothers’ productive labor to count as the school’s own investment towards exclusion and equity work. While arrangements “inviting the mothers in” to school spaces appeared to be a demonstration of the school’s good faith, it did little to contribute to systemic

improvements. The usury nature of this relationship did two things. First, it relieved the institutions of doing the real work of addressing systemic inequities and deficit powered responses within their own staff, administration and policy practices. Then it precluded the institution of accountability as the labor of “keeping kids in school” fell to the mothers. If the demands of their under/uncompensated labor proved too strenuous to maintain and the effort failed, the mothers could become the scapegoat for the failure. In all, the value signaling engaged in by the institutions at all levels revealed the limits of the groups work to be bound by the beneficial impact for the school systems themselves (Milner, 2008)-not Black children.

### ***Implications and Recommendations***

I humbly offer these recommendations, though I acknowledge they are not entirely new. It stands to reason that they are not novel because we already know what should be done to improve the educational system for our most disenfranchised and excluded student populations. Lack of direction is not the missing component- it is lack of desire to usurp a system that feeds the few off the bones of many more. Still, I will reiterate what others before me have already explicated.

School systems must move beyond reform to embrace fundamental shifts towards equity informed, social justice-oriented ideologies. It is illogical to believe a system “not built for us” would become an equitable space through manipulation of the perimeters or making equity an add-on. The heart of the school systems as it now exists, must be transplanted. Only then, will it be able to withstand challenges against centering the needs of our most marginalized children and families.

This reimagining of educational institutions must be substantially informed by those most negatively impacted by school disparities and inequities. Having a seat at the table without the power to actually impact change is performative tokenizing. This will mean that the table must be made bigger, or the customary diners may have to give up their seats.

Normative definitions of who educational leaders are must be expanded to include Black parents, community elders, organizers and activists. These are the people most familiar with the lived realities and concomitant necessities of the Black child. The rhetoric of “school-community partnerships” belies the power dynamic of the arrangement when these individuals are considered guests and the “educators” are considered the only “experts” in the room.

### **Conclusion: Black Dreams in a Liminal Space**

Givens (2021) notes fugitive spaces are always temporal. “Even as the captive has escaped from bondage, the contingencies of their escape, and the looming threat of recapture, signals their liminality- a phenomenological in-betweenness- escape’s lack of definitiveness”. The mothers of the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers exist in the in-between. Stealing shallow breaths in the interstice unable to lean wholly on transformation or evacuation to guarantee freedom from racialized educational oppression. At every turn, the specter of their efforts being undermined, demanded their multilateral attention. Simultaneously, the mothers were not slaves to their circumstances- deftly making political calculations to ensure their ability to fight another



day. This has long been the legacy of Black mothers as they champion for the power, survival, and identity of all their children.

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APPENDIX A  
ACBM LETTER OF APPROVAL

[REDACTED]

April 18, 2019  
Statement of Study Participation

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter serves to confirm the participation of the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers in the research study: *Thy Rod and Thy Staff: Black Mothers Strategies to Repel and Respond to Patterns of Black Student Exclusion*. We acknowledge this is a research study under the direction of co-investigator Dawn Demps, ASU PhD student of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College and primary Investigator, Dr. Keon McGuire, ASU Professor in the Division of Education Leadership and Innovation of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College.

We understand that this investigation will be a year long ethnographic study lasting from April 2019-July 2020. Ms. Demps will participate in the Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers' activities and meetings documenting her experience and observations during this time. We further acknowledge that interviews and photographs related to this study will be carried out with individual members of our organization after forms of consent have been distributed, signed and collected. Participants will also be assigned pseudonyms to insure confidentiality during the study process and thereafter. We recognize this study will include the following components:

- Fieldwork and participant observation by Ms. Demps
- Analysis of organizational archival data by Ms. Demps
- A series of in-depth interviews with our organizational leaders and selected group members
- An activity collecting artistic expressions of the participants experiences
- A "Parent Cypher" gathering all study participants in one space to engage in a focus-group style discussion

If you have any questions, please feel free to call Lynn Dotson at the [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Lynn Dotson  
Founder/ Executive Director  
Aurora Coalition of Black Mothers

APPENDIX B

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW 1 QUESTIONS

### Key Informant Interview #1- Oral History

1. Describe the community you grew up in.
2. Where were your parent's originally from? What was your parent's education level? What did they do for a living?
3. Do you have siblings? What is their educational level and what do they do?
4. What is your most vivid educational memory?
5. What was the discussion regarding the importance or value of education in your home coming up?
6. What, if anything, did you enjoy about school? What, if anything, did you dislike about school?
7. Please describe yourself as a student during your childhood.
8. What was your relationship with your teachers like throughout your schooling?
9. During your childhood, did you ever experience some form of school exclusion? Please describe.
10. What type of schools did you attend? Describe the school culture and environment during Elementary, High School, College.
11. What was your guardian's experiences and interactions like with your schools?
12. Did your mother's and father's school involvement differ? How so?
13. What were you raised to believe was the purpose of education?
14. Were there any moments that you recall of pride and accomplishment around educational achievement in your family or yourself?
15. If you were to make an educational family tree, what would the branches of your family look like? What is the educational history of your wider family?
16. Who were your role models or people you admired coming up?
17. Were there any historical moments related to education and/or race relations (Brown v Board, bussing, Rodney King etc) that you can recall? How did they impact you and/or your family?
18. What was the discussion around political and/or racial issues in your home coming up?
19. What role did you believe education to play in achieving the American Dream?
20. Growing up, did you think that education was equally available to everyone who wanted it? Why or why not?
21. Was there discussion around social activism in your home coming up?
22. Did you see examples of activism in your family, community or in general? Please explain.

(2hrs)

APPENDIX C

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW 2 QUESTIONS

1. Has your child(ren) ever experienced an incidence of suspension, expulsion or other educational exclusion? Can you share that experience with me?
2. How did you respond to these incidences of exclusion?
3. How, if at all, did you process this event with your child?
4. What was your child(ren) overall experience with schools?
5. What do you believe contributes to how the teacher/ schools treated your child/ren?
6. How did your child's school respond or treat you during this incident? Why do you believe you were treated as you were treated?
7. How did you come to be involved with ACBM?
8. To what extent do you think community organizing is effective in stopping Black student exclusion? Why/why not?
9. What do you see as ACBM's most effective strategies to combat student exclusion?
10. What have been policy wins at the school, district or state level you believe ACBM has accomplished? How were they achieved?
11. What have been some policy losses or impact shortcomings around issues the organization has fought for? Why did they occur?
12. What do you believe to be the group's biggest obstacles to stopping student exclusion?
13. How would you describe how ACBM is received by teachers? School administrators? The wider community?
14. Do you believe ACBM has ever been treated differently, if at all, because it is Black women led? Can you recount an instance of this?
15. Do you believe ACBM has ever been discounted or treated poorly because it is Black women led? Do you recount an instance of this?
16. How would you describe the nature of Black student exclusion in U.S. schools?
17. Do you believe that the U.S. educational system can become a truly equitable space for Black children? Why/Why not?

(1.5hrs)

APPENDIX D

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW 3 QUESTIONS

1. Given what you have shared with me in the previous interviews, do you believe your own educational upbringing has influenced your response to your child/ren experience with exclusion? How so?
2. Do you believe your own educational upbringing has influenced your involvement with ACBM? How so?
3. As a Black woman, what is the importance of being involved in an organization like ACBM?
4. What do you believe to be the importance of a group like ACBM to the wider Black community?
5. What have you learned from your personal involvement with ACBM?
6. Given our discussion throughout these interviews, what do you see as your future involvement with educational organizing efforts like ACBM?
7. Can you talk to me about your expressive piece? What were you trying to capture? (CX)
8. How did you feel when you were creating your work? Why do you believe you felt that way?

(1.5hrs)



APPENDIX E

COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Where are you from? What is your role in the community/school district?
2. Could you describe the educational climate in the state? Specifically, in terms of achievement, educational gaps and inequities?
3. What do you believe to be the most impactful contributing factors to the educational inequities, specifically around Black children?
4. What are your thoughts on the disparate rates of student discipline by race in the state?
5. (If they believe they exist) What do you believe to be contributing to these particular disparities?
6. When and how did you first become acquainted with ACBM? Have you done any work or collaborated with them?
7. What do you understand to be the work they are attempting to accomplish?
8. What are your general feelings about the work that ACBM is engaged in?
9. Do you believe that ACBM has had an impact on the educational landscape in the district/city/state? If so, how so? If not, why not?
10. As a Black women-led organization, how do you think ACBM is perceived by the broader community?
11. Do you believe ACBM being a Black women-led organization plays a role in how ACBM is received and/or treated by the district or schools? Why/Why not?
12. What do you believe to be the future of ACBM?
13. Is there anything you would like to add?

(1.5hrs)

APPENDIX F

KEY INFORMANT INTAKE FORM

What is your name? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your email? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your phone number? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your year of birth? \_\_\_\_\_ Where were you born? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your race/ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your occupation status? (please circle all that apply)

1. Employed full-time
2. Employed part-time
3. Unemployed (looking for work)
4. Unemployed (not looking for work)
5. Student
6. Retired
7. Self-Employed
8. Unable to work

If employed, what is your occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

If retired, what was your occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your household income? (please circle one)

- |                         |                         |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Less than \$20,000   | 4. \$50,000 to \$74,999 |
| 2. \$20,000 to \$34,999 | 5. \$75,000 to \$99,999 |
| 3. \$35,000 to \$49,999 | 6. Over \$100,000       |

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? (Please circle one)

1. Less than a high school diploma
2. High school degree or equivalent (e.g. GED)
3. Some college, no degree

4. Associate degree (e.g. AA, AS)
5. Bachelor's degree (e.g. BA, BS)
6. Master's degree (e.g. MA, MS, MEd)
7. Professional degree (e.g. MD, DDS, DVM)
8. Doctorate (e.g. PhD, EdD)

Marital status (Please circle one)

- |                              |              |
|------------------------------|--------------|
| 1. Single (never married)    | 4. Widowed   |
| 2. Married                   | 5. Divorced  |
| 3. In a domestic partnership | 6. Separated |

How many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

If applicable, please fill in the table to record the children of K-12 school age currently living in your home?

	Child's Age	School type child attends (public, charter, private, homeschool, none)	Relationship (natural child, grandchild, adopted child, other)
Child #1			
Child #2			
Child #3			
Child #5			
Child #6			
Child #7			

If applicable, how many total grandchildren do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

How would you describe your amount of involvement with the Black Mother's Forum? (Please circle one)

- Very Involved
- Involved
- Occasionally Involved
- Rarely Involved
- Very Rarely Involved
- Never Involved

APPENDIX G

COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE INTAKE FORM

What is your name? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your email? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your phone number? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your year of birth? \_\_\_\_\_ Where were you born? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your race/ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your occupation status? (please circle all that apply)

1. Employed full-time
2. Employed part-time
3. Unemployed (looking for work)
4. Unemployed (not looking for work)
5. Student
6. Retired
7. Self-Employed
8. Unable to work

If employed, what is your occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

If retired, what was your occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your household income? (please circle one)

1. Less than \$20,000
2. \$20,000 to \$34,999
3. \$35,000 to \$49,999
4. \$50,000 to \$74,999
5. \$75,000 to \$99,999
6. Over \$100,000

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? (Please circle one)

What is your name? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your email? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your phone number? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your year of birth? \_\_\_\_\_ Where were you born? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your race/ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your occupation status? (please circle all that apply)

1. Employed full-time
2. Employed part-time
3. Unemployed (looking for work)
4. Unemployed (not looking for work)
5. Student
6. Retired
7. Self-Employed
8. Unable to work

If employed, what is your occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

If retired, what was your occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your household income? (please circle one)

1. Less than \$20,000
2. \$20,000 to \$34,999
3. \$35,000 to \$49,999
4. \$50,000 to \$74,999
5. \$75,000 to \$99,999
6. Over \$100,000

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? (Please circle one)



