This work is an intervention of self-representation that explores experiences of five Black mothers of the same Chicago elementary school with respect to their relationship with the author – a qualitative researcher – over a period of two years. Black feminist epistemology is the framework that directed this project, fieldwork, and interpretation of the findings. Additionally, this work employs tools of poetry, counternarratives, and critical ethnography.

“Billye Sankofa Waters reiterates the plaintive lament of the mothers of 1970s Boston when they said, ‘When we fight about education we’re fighting for our lives.’ This story of parents in Chicago is powerful, poignant, and oh so familiar. This is a must read!” – Gloria Ladson-Billings, Kellner Family Distinguished Chair in Urban Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison

“The brilliantly insightful Dr. Sankofa Waters draws upon extensive qualitative and participatory research to explore the ways that Black mothers come to know and participate in their children’s education. *We Can Speak for Ourselves* plumbs Black feminist epistemology and critical theory to create a new model that reimagines the critical terrain of both public and private African American female ‘motherwork.’ This book is bold, well-researched and an important contribution to the fields of Education, Sociology, Women’s and Gender Studies and Public Policy.” – Michele T. Berger, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; author of *Workable Sisterhood: The Political Journey of Stigmatized Women with HIV/AIDS* and co-author of *Transforming Scholarship: Why Women’s and Gender Studies Students Are Changing Themselves and the World*.

“We Can Speak for Ourselves is a necessary read for everyone, especially Black mothers, who are on the front lines of the Black Lives Matter Movement. After all, the movement at its core is about resisting the anti-Black society in which Black mothers are forced to raise their children. Sankofa Waters beautifully blends personal writings, counternarratives, and the voices of five Black mothers to create a book that gives us new language to address the issues impacting Black families and Black survival. Through this work, Sankofa Waters expertly depicts the struggles of Black mothers as organic intellectuals deconstructing, critiquing, and navigating the power structures that oppress their sons, daughters, and Black communities at large.” – Bettina L. Love, University of Georgia; Board Chair of The Kindezi School in Atlanta, Georgia; 2016 Nasir Jones Fellow at the W. E. B. Du Bois Research Institute at Harvard University; and author of *Hip Hop’s Li’l Sistas Speak: Negotiating Hip Hop Identities and Politics in the New South*.
We Can Speak for Ourselves
BREAKTHROUGHS IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Volume 5

Series Editor:

George W. Noblit, Joseph R. Neikirk Distinguished Professor of Sociology of Education, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

In this series, we are establishing a new tradition in the sociology of education. Like many fields, the sociology of education has largely assumed that the field develops through the steady accumulation of studies. Thomas Kuhn referred to this as ‘normal science.’ Yet normal science builds on a paradigm shift, elaborating and expanding the paradigm. What has received less attention are the works that contribute to paradigm shifts themselves. To remedy this, we will focus on books that move the field in dramatic and recognizable ways—what can be called breakthroughs.

Kuhn was analyzing natural science and was less sure his ideas fit the social sciences. Yet it is likely that the social sciences are more subject to paradigm shifts than the natural sciences because the social sciences are fed back into the social world. Thus sociology and social life react to each other, and are less able separate the knower from the known. With reactivity of culture and knowledge, the social sciences follow a more complex process than that of natural science. This is clearly the case with the sociology of education. The multiplicity of theories and methods mix with issues of normativity—in terms of what constitutes good research, policy and/or practice. Moreover, the sociology of education is increasingly global in its reach—meaning that the national interests are now less defining of the field and more interrogative of what is important to know. This makes the sociology of education even more complex and multiple in its paradigm configurations. The result is both that there is less shared agreement on the social facts of education but more vibrancy as a field. What we know and understand is shifting on multiple fronts constantly. Breakthroughs is to the series for works that push the boundaries—a place where all the books do more than contribute to the field, they remake the field in fundamental ways. Books are selected precisely because they change how we understand both education and the sociology of education.
We Can Speak for Ourselves

Parent Involvement and Ideologies of Black Mothers in Chicago

Billye Sankofa Waters
Northeastern University, Boston, USA

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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR
WE CAN SPEAK FOR OURSELVES

We Can Speak for Ourselves contributes new insight and pushes established ideas into broader contexts. Sankofa Waters uses a compilation of theories and data sources to provide a unique exploration of the Black mothering experience and the relevance of such in current U.S. society. The research is a solid contribution to this body of knowledge and beautifully unifies a wide range of contextual issues that are salient to the Black community and beyond.

Rhonda Jeffries – University of South Carolina; author of Performance Traditions Among African-American Teachers and co-editor of Black Women in the Field: Experiences Understanding Ourselves and Others through Qualitative Research

We Can Speak for Ourselves is a necessary read for everyone, especially Black mothers, who are on the front lines of the Black Lives Matter Movement. After all, the movement at its core is about resisting the anti-Black society in which Black mothers are forced to raise their children. Sankofa Waters beautifully blends personal writings, counternarratives, and the voices of five Black mothers to create a book that gives us new language to address the issues impacting Black families and Black survival. Through this work, Sankofa Waters expertly depicts the struggles of Black mothers as organic intellectuals deconstructing, critiquing, and navigating the power structures that oppress their sons, daughters, and Black communities at large.

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Through the captivating counternarratives of Black mothers in Chicago, Sankofa Waters brilliantly challenges preconceived notions of what it means to be both a mother and an involved parent in urban schools. We Can Speak for Ourselves offers voices of resilience, faith, and hope as Black mothers navigate the dynamics of race, class, and gender in their quest to provide a quality education for their children. This is a must read for educators, scholars, and activists who believe that the lives of Black children do, in fact, matter.

Paula Groves Price – Washington State University; Associate Dean of Diversity and International Programs and Editor in Chief of the Western Journal of Black Studies
The brilliantly insightful Dr. Sankofa Waters draws upon extensive qualitative and participatory research to explore the ways that Black mothers come to know and participate in their children’s education. *We Can Speak for Ourselves* plumbs Black feminist epistemology and critical theory to create a new model that reimagines the critical terrain of both public and private African American female ‘motherwork.’ It is intersectionally deft in how it attends to both structural issues of inequality and intragroup negotiation of identity. This book is bold, well-researched and an important contribution to the fields of Education, Sociology, Women’s and Gender Studies and Public Policy.

**Michele Berger – University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; author of *Workable Sisterhood: The Political Journey of Stigmatized Women with HIV/AIDS* and co-author of *Transforming Scholarship: Why Women’s and Gender Studies Students are Changing Themselves and the World***

Billye Sankofa Waters reiterates the plaintive lament of the mothers of 1970s Boston when they said, ‘When we fight about education we’re fighting for our lives.’ This story of parents in Chicago is powerful, poignant, and oh so familiar. This is a must read!

**Gloria Ladson-Billings – University of Wisconsin, Madison; Kellner Family Professor of Urban Education; author of *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* and *Crossing Over to Canaan: The Journey of New Teachers in Diverse Classrooms***
This book is the product of an 8-year process that began when I left Chicago to pursue “higher” education. My mother and I started on the road to Chapel Hill but after about two hours in to the drive, Cousin Eric called to inform us her mother/my grandmother passed away. We double backed to Chicago to repack bags, after which my mother insisted upon completing the initial drive with me. She drove the entire 12 hours before I boarded her on a plane to Galveston, Texas to pay her last respects to our family matriarch — and to assume her role as such. Along those highways I accepted that my grandmother took the road ahead to guide my journey. However, it was never clearer until I completed and submitted this first full manuscript — on the day of her birth, 2015. I realize she has been writing this with me the entire time.

Zola Luetta Jones Temple
(February 1, c.1913 – August 5, 2007)
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FOREWORD

Through a blend of personal writing and academic research, *We Can Speak for Ourselves* is a multifaceted analysis of the ways in which society conceptualizes Black mothers. Negative portrayals continue to permeate film, music, and other forms of media; Black women are often over-sexualized and under intellectualized in academic scholarship. Billye stands with a community of mothers to push back while highlighting various levels of agency Black mothers engage to move forward. This work bridges seminal Black feminist writings and is in conversation with the contemporary work of motherhood and women’s studies (see Camille Wilson, Robin Boylorn, Kaila Adia Story), which explores “motherhood as praxis, institution, and lived experience” (Story, 2014, p. 1). This book highlights the grave conditions facing Black mothers and articulates a new viewpoint of Black women’s lives and capabilities. This book asserts their narratives as empirical data and is critical in nature because it is a call to action.

This book provides a passenger-side view of a project that moved beyond a 10-week work assignment to evolve as a multi-generation chronicle of resistance work, which challenges the dominant understandings of Black mothers in American society. *We Can Speak for Ourselves* is rooted in the everyday lives of Black mothers and contributions to their communities that include children, partners, cousins, stepparents, godparents, Big Mama, neighbors, and teachers. These stories reinforce the scholarship of Black motherwork, which is often not regarded as activism and require us as a collective people to engage dialogue that recognizes Black women’s contributions across time and space. Billye offers a poignant historical analysis of controlling images alongside an intricate analysis of contemporary issues in popular culture. More importantly she – along with the mothers of this project who are acknowledged as co-participants – challenge the pervasive assumptions about Black women and their approaches to mothering and care.

It is an honor and privilege – as a Black mother, a Chicago native, a village daughter, and a sister-scholar – to pen the foreword for such a timely collection of work. I have walked alongside Billye as a poet, mentor, and work with her as both a university colleague and community activist on behalf of Black women, girls, and social justice. We are partners in the struggle to re-present Black women’s lived experiences, specifically within Education and Women’s Studies. Our research and practice are always intimate and intersectional. When the former is called into question as me-search, we understand the urgency to create more space for the voices we have heard our entire lives – praying, laughing, crying, affirming. *We speak* because so many have lost their voices screaming or were buried in fear.
FOREWORD

and tragedy, and this silence has rendered invisibility. This work is a celebration of voices – all voices. This work is an important piece of an immutable patchwork that collectively advances equitable rights and resources for Black mothers and children.

Kristal Moore Clemons, Ph.D.
PREFACE

FOUNDATION FOR THIS BOOK

This book was birthed from my dissertation studies and before that, the desire to honor the mothers I have known and seen my entire life. I understand this with clear hindsight. What you are reading has gone through dozens upon dozens of word-for-word, line-by-line revisions as if every single letter were a tool all by itself, and a grand committee of peer and senior reviewers. However, this was not my first choice for a project.

When I began graduate school, I showed up in my advisor’s office every week with a new idea – each one more elaborately passionate than the one before. I’d taken a 60% pay cut to leave a position I loved and moved 765 miles south – past the Mason-Dixon line – so this work had to mean something. The problem is, I wanted it to mean everything and my wheels spun around a world of lifelong projects that I thought I could complete in five academic years. That first year of the program the only question that seemed to matter was “what are your research claims?” I would rattle off anything between “philosophy and literature of the Harlem Renaissance” to “teacher prep in urban classrooms.”

The final semester of my Master’s program, I enrolled in Schooling versus Education of African American Students in K-12 Public Education with Dr. Eileen Parsons. This course gave me the language of culturally relevant pedagogy and critical race theory and my world exploded. Finally, I could understand the connections between theory and practice as activist dimensions and I diligently committed the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings, Derrick Bell, Mwalimu Shujaa, and John Stanfield to memory. In fact, I was so enthusiastically ambitious that I claimed critical race theory as one of my research areas and for this reason Dr. Parsons mercilessly pushed me beyond my learning edge.

The previous semester I’d enrolled in Theorizing Black Feminisms with Dr. Michele Berger. I died a little on the inside every time I earned a “B” on an assignment. I’d pour out tens of thousands of words over the course of those 16 weeks. I added dozens of new names across centuries of history, and countless hours – even in my sleep and nightmares of violence against Black women. And all I could get was a B, as in “do better”? I was a bit angry.

So I humbled myself and dug deeper. I attended office hours and read more. I had discussions with other colleagues to refine and bolster my ideas. I submitted articles and conference papers on critical race theory, qualitative research, and Black feminism across disciplines to receive even more critical feedback. I began to appreciate Parsons and Berger immensely while learning that the goal was/is never “Mastery” but “growth.” One of the most indescribable moments was attending the
National Women’s Studies Association 2009 annual conference. My sister-mentor Kristal Clemons told me to jump in the car, and we headed to Atlanta. I was floored that all my teachers – Paula Giddings, Angela Davis, Johnnetta B. Cole, Kimberlé Crenshaw… were walking around as my living and breathing textbooks that I could approach and learn from in real life.

There is so much beauty in that I have been learning critical race theory and Black feminism as I both live and write it – when I thought it had to be the other way around. This work allows me to touch my history every day, and I honor this responsibility.

And when I began to move toward my dissertation, and someone referred to me as the “Black mother expert” I cringed. Hard. It was wrong. I was not a Black mother (by biological definition), and I was not an expert. That was a box that felt limiting and completely misassigned. I was most uncomfortable with the assertion that of all my research interests, “Black mothers” would be the only one I would be asked about. I was uncomfortable until I fully began to understand Black motherhood as an incredibly expansive identity; it allows me to understand the toughest and most vulnerable parts of myself. It allows me to critique interlocking systems of oppression and develop spaces for reciprocity and healing (Dillard, 2000, 2008). It allows me to excavate dynamic stories and build collages that claim futures for my children and grandchildren. It allows me to create homes wherever I go and to speak freely in a dialect that is both familiar and empirical. Therefore, when I began writing this, one of the greatest joys was that I was able to return to Chicago and do this with my family. I composed drafts of my analysis while sitting with my mother and the biggest compliment I’ve ever received is: “I can read this.”

I write for Jeffery Manor and everyone on the block who asks, “when’s the next book coming? You gotta write about us.” I write for State Street: because I went to Beasley on 52nd, my father taught at DuSable on 49th and my mother taught at Beethoven on 47th – all under the shadows of the demolished Robert Taylor Housing Projects – and new prospect for the Obama Presidential Library. I write for my Sorors from 1913 to present. I write for my classmates at Olive Harvey who felt like they hit a dead end. I write for the 19-year old girl who left Howard University with a .08 GPA. I write for my sisters and brothers in the academy who are still the first, few, and only. I write for my mama and ‘nem, Grandma Eva and ‘nem, my family in Cameroon, the Queen Mother and Kings ‘nem. I write for the times I sat in the middle of my bed feeling paralyzed with the fear of high expectations and screaming to God to let the words just fall out of my head onto the paper or screen because I swore through desperate tears that I had nothing left (and it happened) – and for every person who tells me they experience the same. I write this for every sister circle, fish fry, game night, sleepover, kitchen table study group, touch-and-agreeing affirmation I was blessed with to get through graduate school. I write for my doc students who want to change the world chapter by chapter. I write for my public and charter school students who want to change the world block by block. I write for my partner who read one of my first Black feminist assignments “Coming Apart” by
PREFACE

Alice Walker with me because I didn’t want to feel stupid when I discussed it in class with people I thought knew more than me. I write for the homeland umbilical cord that was severed so that I may contribute to the healing of our conscious identity. I write for the Rhodes’ the Temple’s the Jones’ the Barnett’s the Njoya’s the unborn and unclaimed sankofawaters’. I write for my student who sat in a teacher prep course and had to listen to an instructor explain how to prepare herself to teach in urban environments with Black mothers as a curricular battle plan. I write because Chicago is changing, and I don’t want it to, but we all have to grow up. I write because the world is changing, and I need it to because I want my kids to grow up. I write for my healing. I write for the warriors with crippled with arthritis, dementia, deferred dreams, broken hearts, and wounded egos. I write for the warriors who trust me with the baton. I write for people who don’t read “academic” books, but may pick this up – and may even keep reading because they see/hear/feel my heart.

This is not a book of solutions. This is a book of stories. This is a book of love. We go on record.

RATIONALE FOR THIS BOOK

According to Comer and Haynes (1991), American education fails to address needs of Black children largely because the structure of public education and the philosophies that guide its development neglect salient features of Black culture and life. In other words, most schools are not culturally responsive to Black families and do not engage their knowledge and lived experiences. This book does not propose a mandate or sanction a specific program that may facilitate the goals of educators, researchers, and policymakers to align with Black families. Instead, it departs from the work of seminal/conventional sociology such as Bronislaw Malinowski (1926, 1927) and Sander Gilman (1985) that has been performed on Black bodies, to open a space within these varied discourses – specifically for Black mothers to speak for themselves rather than be spoken for.

This ethnographic project is an intervention of self-representation that explores experiences of five Black mothers of the same Chicago elementary school with respect to their relationship with the author – a qualitative researcher – over a period of two years. Black feminist epistemology (Hill-Collins, 1989/1995) is the framework that directed this project, fieldwork, and interpretation of the findings to better examine the perceptions brought through the everyday consumption of controlling images that help to “justify U.S. Black women’s oppression” (Hill-Collins, 2004a, p. 47). This work employs tools of poetry (Lorde, 1977/2007) and counternarratives, a widely understood component of Critical Race Theory (CRT) which “aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 144). Additionally, the work of D. Soyini Madison (2005) is explored with respect to reflexivity to consider broader meanings for operations of the human condition; and how this work makes the greatest contribution to equity, freedom, and justice.
We Can Speak for Ourselves examines Scientific, Government, Feminist/Mothering, Education, and Popular Media discourses to underscore the historical trajectory in which Black mothers are currently scrutinized and speak back to. Four themes guide the analysis; three name a specific action with a specific stakeholder: Defining Mother, Preparing Children, Navigating Institution, while the fourth, named Other – discusses the complexities of mothers who are further marginalized by class and intragroup expectations. The voices of this project are urgent, particularly in a time where there are competing societal goals for global access and basic survival in the so-called murder capitals (Johnson, 2013) of America. These narratives require all those concerned with the care and high expectations of our children to look within, across, and beyond systems to actively engage discourse that is multilingual and inclusive. From this space, we co-create action agendas and leverage networks of power, which situate Black mothers and children as key stakeholders rather than subjects of inquiry.

An Epilogue is provided to discuss the emergence of violence that has occurred since this project formally concluded in early 2012. Current issues are explored with respect to a historical lens; social media as a literature source; maps for further research; and challenges to multiple audiences.

AUDIENCES FOR THIS BOOK

Sociologists. Previous works describe the role of both Black women and mothers as an imperative catalyst to a destabilized society based on primitive [sic] and dysfunctional norms (see Crime and Custom in Savage Society, 1926; Sex and Repression in Savage Society, 1927; Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950–1980, 1984; Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness, 1985). This book critiques and departs from conventional sociology to provide nuanced perspectives of Black women – in their voices – inserting/asserting their expertise on identity and family. This project specifically speaks to the motherwork of Black women, which influences positive self-image and restorative justice projects, which are an urgent concern given the current climate of violence and disenfranchisement in our major cities.

Sociologists of education. Many Sociologists of Education are concerned with issues of race, class, and gender. This work not only addresses broader issues of racism as the interplay of race with class and gender, but it discusses issues related to schooling specifically. The narratives of these women contribute to the discourses of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and leadership.

Qualitative researchers. As a “postcritical ethnographer” (Noblit, Flores, & Murillo. Jr., 2004), this work adopts a new paradigm approach for analysis, interpretation, and writing. This approach, within qualitative inquiry, is framed by the work of D. Soyini Madison (2011) who defines critical ethnography as social justice and risk
coupled with truth and translation. Much like the reciprocal relationship between parents and teachers, she asks that the same take place between the researchers and participants with an essential focus on the reflexivity of the researcher.

**Feminist educators and researchers.** Employing a feminist methodology was/is critical because of its commitment to social justice. A feminist method in sociology research works to dismantle power structures and recognizes that women experience oppression and exploitation based on race, class, and sexual orientation much differently than others (Reinharz, 1992). Taking steps further, “involving much more than simply the counseling of existing social sciences, the placing of ideas and experiences of women of color in the center of analysis requires invoking a different epistemology” (Hill-Collins, 2004a, p. 49).

**Black women/mothers/othermothers.** It is important to note that while the voices of these women are shared to speak to an academic audience, they are also speaking back to themselves; the data chapter centralizes the women’s voices and thus are broadly accessible. It is important the participants of this project see themselves as major contributors to a body of work that speaks to, for, about, and with them.

**Social justice educators.** This work speaks to all educators interested in issues of equity in education, particularly that within urban areas.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful that God enables me to use my gifts of writing, my passion for education, and my community of Black mothers/fathers, men/women, to not only facilitate the writing of this book, but to inform every step – from birth until present. Years ago I wrote a line in a poem: “I am jealous of the woman I am yet to become.” However, I am so grateful to be in the presence of mind to excitedly accept the woman I am right now. Not because this journey is complete but because this journey has taught me to fight. This journey has taught me to be still. This journey has taught me to exhaust all possibilities. This journey has taught me to ask for help. Through this journey, I have grown roots strong and deep. Thank you, Father God for making it clear that you will in all ways prepare me and I can rest/rejoice in knowing that each and every journey is the blessing.

I am grateful for my first teacher – my mother – Mary Rhodes. Thank you for listening attentively to every draft, every question, every brainstorm. I count it a triple blessing that not only did this project teach me more about myself as a Black woman and gave you tools to see your phenomenal work as an othermother, it created a beautiful comradery between us. You called to share books, news reports, and stories of our family I had never heard before. You have proudly relished in how I have grown as a woman; however, you are the foundation for all that I am. I am proud to relish in your revelations as a feminist and friend.

I am grateful for my best friend, Malari. You have walked every step with me since we met in Harlem – allowing me to grow as a scholar, a woman, an artist, and a life partner. You have been my wake-up call, my assistant researcher, my personal trainer, my comedian, and my resting place – teaching me the greatest lessons in effective communication and how to support a freedom fighter.

I am grateful for Kristal. You were a sister the first day I met you. Thank you for introducing me to myself – as a Black feminist. Thank you for believing, challenging, supporting, and laughing. Thank you for investing in me with your intellect and your spirit. Thank you for driving to Chicago at midnight. You have shown me the rewards of self-determination, faith, and excellence. Thank you for sharing the work our souls must have.

I am grateful for Renée. You are an awesome big sister. You make it look so easy, and I am more grateful and humbled that you have taken the time to show me life behind the veil. Because of your example, I have grown confident to walk as professor, artist, wife, and mother. Thank you for reintroducing me to “playtime.” Additionally, thank you, Howard for introducing me to her and you both for sharing Brother Bakari with me.
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I am grateful for my Chapel Hill/Critical Conference Sisters: Dr. Jessie, Dr. Dani, Dr. Karla, Dr. Corliss, Dr. Cassandra, Dr. Shannon. We did it! Each of you has provided amazing support beyond the academy – across dinner tables, marriage celebrations, church services, Bimbe festivals through Charlotte, Pittsburgh, Brooklyn, Toronto, Puerto Rico. I have been able to call on you at the last minute and sometimes every day. I am challenged by your individual/our collective projects and thrilled we travel the world doing what we love. Your friendship has extended my family.

I am grateful for Howard University. You introduced me to my Bamoun cousin and life pledge brother Glenn NSangou; Elle, who I have been blessed to watch evolve into the most beautiful of butterflies; Kea Iman, who shared her faith and allowed me to flourish; and The Samuels – Dre and Trinishia – the ultimate Big Brother and Big Sister.

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ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Joyce Owens (Howard University, BFA; Yale University, MFA) is a painter, sculptor, curator, juror, author, consultant, wife, and mother of two sons. A native of Philadelphia, Owens has resided in Chicago for nearly 20 years. A tenured professor at Chicago State University, her award-winning art has been selected as illustrations for events, books, and exhibited on four continents including at NATA in Brussels and the African Mission in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Of Because I Am Free, she writes: “Looking at our shared history that started in Africa, and forward to a time when wars end and we all live in peace, able to accept our differences and exist side by side.” This work is currently housed in the Preston Jackson Collection.
INTRODUCTION

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized.

– Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is not a Luxury,” 1977

We Can Speak for Ourselves is an ethnographic project in which I examine Black women’s experiences as mothers in urban communities of Chicago. This book builds on the work of feminist and critical race scholars who have shared the ethnographic and anthropological narratives that highlight the activism of Black women during Freedom Summer (Moore, 2009; Clemons, 2014), the lived experiences of Black women ranging across the Deep South, and Northern “Black Belts” (Hurston, 1935/1995; Clark Hine & Thompson, 1999; Morrison, 2008), and the knowledge production of Black women across identities (Generett & Jeffries, 2003; Moore, 2005; Alexander Craft, McNeal, Mwangola, & Zabriskie, 2007) – to examine the race, class, and gender politics at play during this historical moment.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Since early 2011, an onslaught of reports, campaigns, images, and legal cases have culminated in a relentless pursuit to shape public and private perceptions of Black women’s and mothers’ identities: the Life Always campaign that proclaimed “the most dangerous place for an African American is in the womb” (February 2011); the Psychology Today report that maligned Black women’s beauty and intellect (May 2011); the Fox comedy-drama Glee (2009) which broadcast derisive images of an angry Black mother to a national viewership of seven million people (a Google search for “angry glee mom” currently yields an image for a dark-skinned Black woman with puffed cheeks and bulging eyes holding a hand-written poster over her own head which states in large, bold lettering “ANGRY”); and the arrests of Kelly Williams Bolar, Tonya McDowell, and Raquel Nelson are a poignant sampling. A space has opened “to begin taking seriously the idea that black women’s experiences act as a democratic litmus test for the nation” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 16).

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

POSITIONALITY

One of the initial questions of this project was “how often do we interact with Black mothers and in what context?” As a Black woman, my response is very personal and intimate; this is the only mother I’ve known. I remember learning my alphabet, vocabulary words, poems, and speeches with her through songs she would sing during our morning car rides. I remember boarding the big yellow bus at the end of my school day, only to be later deposited at her school for more lessons; my mother was a middle-school Social Studies teacher in a major urban city we called home. The climate of my life in the mid 1980’s was full of promise, mobility, and “Black on Black Love” our community celebrated the first – and only – Black mayor of all four years of his tenure; and most families I interacted with were Black and middle class, which didn’t make The Cosbys seem so abstract.

The women of these families shared the responsibility of raising me. These mothers met with one another to see if their respective homes were suitable for us to play; that is if they hadn’t already interacted during PTA meetings or school assemblies. Our mothers openly discussed our value systems and our plans for achievement. We were encouraged to participate in everything from karate, classical piano, Young Engineers Club and the apex of all was school. The first question almost anyone asked me was, “how are your grades?” which was followed by, “what high school are you thinking about… what college?” This community of women were multi-generation educators, members of HBCU and Ivy League legacies or returning to school for job promotions. They are mothers of chief executive officers and small business owners, astronauts, Broadway thespians, mothers, and educators. We have been raised by a village, and this is very apparent in my life; I was an honor student, high school debutante // and following the death of my father, a college dropout, minimum wage barista // turned self-published poet, doctor. This trajectory does not occur in isolation, and there were certainly seasons where I was as gifted as I was troubled. But there was a village.
Exchanging stories as an adult, I learned of a woman who simply changed religions to ensure that both her children and grandchildren attended the best school in the neighborhood – which happened to be Catholic. And another mother, whose child came home one day, totally bewildered, asking if he is Black. (Yes, he is.) She immediately pulled him from this affluent, predominately White, suburban school he attended and transferred him to a selective-enrollment, predominately Black school in the middle of the city. Dr. Mahalia Ann Hines, a child daycare provider, Chicago Public School (CPS) teacher, principal, and mother of Common (a Grammy-winning, Hollywood actor, AIDS activist, and children's philanthropist, born and raised on the South Side of Chicago), recalls her efforts and the legacy she inherited: “Even though my mother always stressed education and pushed me to succeed, I also received a separate education in how to survive… You have a door closed in your face? You have to learn how to pick the lock or maybe just knock it off the hinges” (Common & Bradley, 2011, p. 14). This perspective mirrors countless narratives of Black women, shadowed by the dominant discourse, all of which clearly state: we do not have to be told how to raise our children. Our mothers and grandmothers had a ‘we will do whatever it takes’ attitude when it came to our care and education. These are parts of a legacy that thread and interlock our history as Africans in America.

SIGNIFICANCE AND AUDIENCE

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

Before reading The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought (hill-Collins, 1989/1995), I never critically thought of all these women I interacted with as a network of activists. They were simply doing what was necessary for us as children and our community as a whole; this is the work of othermothers – a role as old as our time in America, rooted in our African ways of knowing (hill-Collins, 1990/2009). Othermothers are women who are concerned with the holistic care of their children,
CHAPTER 1

whether by birth or community right. These women are my first examples of field workers and their lived experiences, which they shared with me day in and day out, have always been concrete criterion for meaning (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009). Upon reading the work of sisterscholars who move through and beyond academic spaces to articulate their work, whether through blogs, popular magazines, or community-based workshops, I increasingly found myself drawn to the likes of Michele Berger, Kristal Moore Clemens, and Robin Boylorn (2013a) who shares:

Our uninterrogated investment in naming ourselves and creating opportunities from our circumstances was fiercely feminist, but we just called it “getting by.” I was surrounded by reluctant feminists whose involvement in my success, happiness, and well-being was informed by an understanding that didn’t require academic degrees. We were black women in a world that was as sexist as it was racist. And all we had was each other. (p. 73)

I know mothers to be fiercely protective and strict disciplinarians in their children’s lives and this is certainly not limited to Black mothers. Many television shows and movies depict mothers of diverse races/ethnicities as meddlesome, opinionated, and controlling – all in the name of ‘knowing what is best,’ regardless of their children’s age, geographic location or marital status. However, this lens does shift when considering the Black mother and understanding this distinction is crucial in how we interact with both her and her children. From a historical perspective, she is raising her children to enter, perform, and gain success within systems that have been designed to destroy them psychologically, intellectually, economically, and physically. Her teachings of survival and cultivation are not translated and characterized as that of a “Tiger Mom.” Instead, she has been publically (mis)translated into quick head snaps and sharp tongues. Her presence and physical appearances are not made just for comedies and heartfelt dramas; the Black Mother has been the target of government policies, law, and education literature loaded with the oppressive caricatures of submission, sexuality, and defiance. The same systems for which the Black mother prepares her child appear to work at the root by leveling attacks against her. In as much as this project is a tool of affirmation for the work we do as Black mothers, it is also a teaching tool for those who only interact with us through a white patriarchal lens – particularly those we must forge collaborative relationships with in raising our children.

CONTEXT

The common factor for the women in this project is Chicago – where they were either raised or are currently raising children enrolled in the same elementary school. Chicago is a city rich with a strong, interminable history in union organizing, urban education (within a mayor-controlled school system – as he selects its Chief Executive Officer), and historically segregated housing and gentrification projects, which in large parts determine the schooling experiences and sociocultural messages
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that are cycled for generations. Chicago Public Schools is the third largest school system in the United States. Enrollment for the 2014 fiscal year was over 400,000 students across 664 schools (516 are traditional) (Chicago Public Schools, 2014a) with an operating budget of 4.9 billion (Chicago Public Schools, 2014b) including the CEO salary of approximately $250,000 (Byrne, 2012).

In February 2012, the current city mayor – Rahm Emanuel – made the decision to close 17 underperforming elementary and secondary schools with a plan to redistribute resources, teachers, and of course, our children. In September 2012, CPS teachers and workers engaged a 19-day strike – for the first time in 25 years – partly to oppose the continuation of such efforts (Myerson, 2012). However, six months later CPS officials proposed another 54 school closures. The Chicago-Sun Times cover story for March 7, 2013, read: “NOT FAIR’ Though 41.7 percent of CPS students are African-American, 88 percent of students at schools targeted for closing are black.” Additionally, since Arne Duncan ended his eight-year tenure as CPS CEO to accept the Secretary of Education position in 2009, the leadership has turned over five times and of the seven people to assume this office only two (Jean-Claude Brizard and Barbara Byrd-Bennett) had professional experience in Education. Collectively, these moves have been characterized as education apartheid because it disproportionally affects Black families and teachers (Fitzpatrick & Golab, 2013; Rossi, 2012).

Decisions such as these precipitated into the brutal death of Derrion Albert (1993–2009), which was captured on YouTube and summoned Duncan to declare the tragedy a “wake up call for the country” (Martinez, 2009b). In this case, as mandated by the recent regulations of CPS, a low-performing high school was closed and its students were squeezed into another in the same neighborhood – doubling class sizes and mixing histories of long-standing untreated violence and hostility. It was the proverbial recipe for disaster. Annette Holt, mother of Blair Holt, who was killed two years prior noted, “someone said [Derrion] was in the wrong place at the wrong time. No, he wasn’t. He was in the right place. He was coming from school” (Martinez, 2009a). These experiences are what I hear, feel, see, and know when parents say, “CPS is not an option.” Additionally, we know the war is not just amongst our children, but this war includes the mayor, the Local School Councils, the Teachers’ Union, the school faculties/staff, administrators on Clark Street, community organizations, and every family concerned with the well-being of their children when they send them to school.

SSCES AND THE JOURNEY OF THIS PROJECT

The summer of 2010, I was granted the opportunity to work in Chicago for a 10-week education fellowship. I was assigned to South Side Charter Elementary School (SSCES) which services students grades K-8. Several SSCES parents remarked that the neighborhood public school was “not an option” as many were closed or closing due to low-performance. The expressed goal for many of these
parents is to graduate their children into one of the highly competitive, selective-enrollment schools in the city.\footnote{13}

SSCES boasts an art-infused program that attracts many families from across the city in addition to the open-enrollment policy; therefore, there is a waiting list for each grade. During my time there, I fielded many calls from parents and others who simply showed up to the main office, desperate to enroll their child stating:

- “They labeled my child a behavior problem at his old school but when he got to the new school and started making A’s and B’s again the violence after school was too much so I need him to be here.”
- “I don’t care how long the waiting list is, my child belongs here. God will make a way.”
- “I will go to hell and back for my children. I will hold myself and this school accountable for their success.”

As one parent was leaving with her new enrollment package, her kindergarten son turned around to me and said, “I’m going to wear a cap and gown from this school,” smiled and ran out of the door. It is then heartbreaking to know that between the lottery and residential redistricting that there is not always a “choice.”

From my understanding, before most parents saw a curriculum or met their first teacher, they were invested in SSCES, certainly as one of the major stakeholders\footnote{14} in the school. I’d worked in the Chicago school system for nearly 10 years and had a strong working relationship with parents. This is why I was selected for this project – to develop a Parent University,\footnote{15} which is a theoretical space for parents to foster involvement with their children’s school and their overall learning experience. The events and incentives I developed would incorporate school parents, various city resources, as well as the faculty and staff. During my first week, the school’s Family Coordinator – Carolyn – previously organized with several parents to host a meeting for other parents in the school to create a plan of action for the upcoming school year. This meeting was a major springboard for both the Parent University and the parent involvement program, The Beacons, which at one time boasted a roster of 50 parents.

The meeting was to be the first of several which began approximately at 9AM and would run through the afternoon. It was planned for three different “drop in” stages: the first hour was scheduled for parents who identified as “very satisfied” with the school; the second hour was scheduled for parents who were on-the-fence so to speak; the latter hour was for parents who were dissatisfied and wanted to voice major concerns they were having with the school. The school faculty and administrators were not present for this meeting because it was made clear that Carolyn and the parents needed this space to be as transparent as possible. Even though the meeting was taking place in the school building, it was clear that no one would feel comfortable speaking “too freely” if they were there. Because the school was fairly new (less than 10 years old) – and the principal had just assumed her position that academic year, everyone wanted to create dialogue with as much honest
feedback as possible from every possible perspective to effectively meet the holistic needs of the SSCES community.

Only about five of us had gathered in a resource classroom for our first Saturday morning meeting when Deja arrived. Upon seeing her, I thought she was one of those parents who made you want to walk in the opposite direction upon approach – the “pound of flesh” parent who was there only to point fingers. She was out of breath when she reached the doorway, and her unkempt hair was barely tucked under a baseball cap. She sat her McDonald’s bag at the meeting table and began to complain about her ongoing job search. I looked away dismissing the conversation she was pressing with other parents who were obviously more familiar with her. As the meeting picked up, these parents began a fervent exchange about the goals for their children. The general nature of this meeting was to discuss how to extend and build more resources to develop a fertile network for all of the parents and the school. I took copious notes of their responses to questions such as “what makes a successful school?” and “what can we do now?” Over and over, I heard the words, consistency, accountability, communication, trust, and transparency. It is important for me to note that only the first stage of parents were present – the “very satisfied.” However, Deja kept my attention. What took me back the most was when she pulled reports and articles from her bag addressing teacher retention, student success, and so forth. She brought literature to underscore current challenges in the classroom, the school-at-large, and how the parents present could organize themselves to be more involved. Her goals for this meeting aligned with the budding organization’s guiding principles. With three biological children and othermother to her sister’s children, she has a major stake in the school.

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

Before developing the University, my textbook research offered fill-in charts and tables of ‘Homework Time,’ ‘Classroom Duties,’ and laundry lists of things parents can do to promote academic success. I found everything in my research on ‘getting parents more involved,’ except the actual perspectives and voices of the parents, which made my time with the mothers in this community all the more transformative. I’d taken the words of Umoja Student Development Corporation Director Lila Leff to heart: “no one shows up for programs, they show up for relationships” (personal communication, 2010). I’d been ‘beating the street’ by going to meetings at the alderwoman’s office, several neighborhood restaurants, professional development workshops and felt the hope of parents when I received their new-student enrollment packets. In 10 weeks, I was able to co-create a year-long calendar of events for the
parents; however, the University and Beacons were disbanded after the first three months. Because of the energy I experienced with those mothers, I was heartbroken and felt as though I had failed them in some way. I immediately wanted to know what happened; I constructed research questions from a place of hurt and was ready to point all of my fingers. In many ways, this project initially sought to answer a problem I thought I already understood. As I began to engage with the mothers, I realized that I still had much to learn about them. To focus on the issues of the school would not only position the administration as an enemy, which was not my intent – nor was it true, but would also further marginalize these mothers’ needs and goals for their children, which had been my primary focus. I slowly realized that the nuanced perspectives of these mothers was rich in its own right and the school was not the point of departure, but the mothers could stand and speak on their own.

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

We (my participants and self) are writing Black mothers – and ultimately Black women – into the literature via our lived experiences. I define “we” through the lens of Sofia Villenas (1996) who writes from the perspective of the colonized and the colonizer, challenging researchers of color to control their multiplicity of identity, history of complicity and mark their own points of marginalization. This is a space where we shift the light to “pursue our magic and make it realized” (Lorde, 1977/2007, p. 36). Critical ethnographer and mother Renée Alexander Craft notes, “Black women have not been waiting to be called. We are simply inviting people into a conversation that is already taking place. We are – and have been – on the front lines” (personal communication, 2011). Black women’s work has pushed itself through various disciplines dating to the early 19th century. The articulations of Sojourner Truth (b. 1797), Maria Miller Stewart (b. 1803), Anna Julia Cooper (b. 1859) – who were in their respective fields before and alongside Elizabeth Cady Stanton and W.E.B. DuBois – are critical intersectional contributions, which have too long existed in shadows. As Barbara Omolade (1994) wrote of being “a product of an intellectual tradition which until twenty-five years ago did not exist within the academy” (p. ix), the excavation of Black women and mother’s theory and praxis have been documented through the enslavement of Africans in the U.S. (i.e., the African Holocaust or the Maafa) to our current Hip Hop/technology generation in major anthologies, legal briefs, special edition journals, fiction, and song (see Tomorrow’s Tomorrow [Ladner, 1971]; Ain’t I a Woman [hooks, 1981]; All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave [Hull, Bell-Scott,
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The goals of this work are to further a dialogue that questions how Black women come to understand their relationship to education, the role of schooling, and to contribute to the growing literature and practices of motherwork from their homes and respective communities. I am particularly interested in further exploration of how Black women develop ways of knowing regarding teaching, activism, race, and womanhood. I will also give consideration to how these women’s narratives can potentially impact in-school relationships. This work, which will offer a rich perspective of Black women as mothers, othermothers, and daughters in 21st century Chicago, has four central questions:

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

METHODS

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

BLACK FEMINIST THEORY

Black feminist theory (BFT) has its roots in standpoint theory: a feminist materialism that enables us to expand the Marxian critique of capitalism to include all of human activity, especially the activity of women (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009; Hartsock, 1983). According to Black feminist theorist and activist Pearl Cleage (1994), feminism is
“the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities – intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual, and economic” (p. 28). In reference to her 2000 work *Feminism Is for Everybody*, bell hooks states “feminism is a movement to end patriarchy, to end sexism and sexist domination, and oppression. It’s not difficult,” also having noting “let us remember – if you take nothing else with you tonight – patriarchy has no gender” (hooks, 2014). Employing Black feminism provides support for examining how issues affecting Black women in the U.S. are part of women’s global emancipation struggles (Davis, 1989/1990; Hill-Collins, 1990/2009; Moore, 2009). Therefore, BFT is critical to this project as it values the intellectual and active contributions of Black women and Black mothers. I write this as a “daughter of feminist privilege” (Morgan, 1999, p. 59).

For a Black woman to claim a feminist identity in light of the housewives’ concerns’ explored in Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is a strategic, revolutionary shift of lens to explore the issues that have been affecting *masses* of women, such as economic survival and racial discrimination (hooks, 1981). Black feminist Linda La Rue (1970/1995) ardently asserts that “attempt[s] to analogize black oppression with the plight of the American white woman has the validity of comparing the neck of a hanging man with the hands of an amateur mountain climber with rope burns” (p. 164). This community urgency to break from the patriarchal press of White ‘sisters’ and Black ‘brothers,’ which is not set in direct opposition to either, seeks to acknowledge the entire body of feminist praxis – not just that done in “waves.” Whereas Friedan (1963) grew up never knowing a woman “who used her mind, played her own part in the world, and also loved, and had children” (p. 68), Black feminism affirms a lineage that concretely chronicles Black women’s steadfast intellectual, spiritual, and physical participation in every facet of the Black liberation struggle. I acknowledge that while the term feminism was created in an academic space, *Black feminism* (Smith, 1983/2000; Boylorn, 2013c) was created in our proverbial kitchens and I do not shed this epistemological standpoint – or tool – when designing and conducting research (Grande, 2004).

### Black women and mothers’ identity.

The theme of identity is a tightrope walk for mothers to plant positive self-affirmations for their children in the midst of protecting them from a society where they are systematically cut down. While in the womb, Black children are inherently subjected to the persistent and controlling images of their mothers. Challenging these images is a staple of Black feminism. Hill-Collins writes, “portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammy, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mamas helps justify U.S. Black women’s oppression” (2004a, p. 47). Images of Black motherhood align with stereotypes of Jezebel, Sapphire, and Mammy – the accepted depictions of women as chattel that have sustained American post-colonial behaviors. While all of these images are deliberately antithetical to the beauty and grace of the Victorian White woman, they have distinct roles.
The Jezebel is a sexual deviate and breeder of the enslavers’ children. Her sexual relationships with the men of the plantation are never viewed as rape – for she is a temptress. Sapphire is rough, domineering, and emasculating – your all-purpose belligerent black bitch. Mammy, in contrast to both, is asexual, afeminine, virtuous, and conformable. She operates the inner-workings of two households (the enslaver’s and her own) and tends to the enslaver’s children with great care. In reality, many Mammies were not only the sexual property of the enslaver, but breast fed the children of the house – assuming responsibilities of the ‘delicate’ White mistress. Such work denied her the opportunity to care wholly for her own children. Dominant society regards Mammy as close to traditional womanhood as a Black woman can come: pious, pure, submissive, and domestic (read: non-threatening). Crucial to these identities is the intersection of mother – more accurately noted as breeding – a necessary function of both science and capitalism to maintain the system of slavery after the import of Africans legally ended (Roberts, 1997; Jenkins Schwartz, 2010).

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

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

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

While there has been a dramatic increase among unwed White mothers since 1965 (Roberts, 1997), it is persistently “viewed as a Black cultural trait that is creeping into white homes… White childbearing is generally heralded as a beneficial activity; it brings personal joy and allows the nation to flourish. Black reproduction, on the other hand, is treated as a form of degeneracy” (p. 9).
The media has turned its proverbial blade into this fact: *Precious* an Oscar-nominated film presents a sexually and physically violent woman as the lead character’s mother, whom Patricia Hill-Collins (2004b) identifies as the stereotypical Bad Black Mother (BBM). Not only is this BBM portrayal honored with the Best Supporting Actress award, the movie fires away scene after scene without critical examination to present Precious – a young, unwed, obese, illiterate, Black girl has contracted HIV after being raped by her father and subsequently birthed a special needs daughter. In the same season, Bristol Palin, daughter of GOP Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin, was brought to light as a courageous, teenage, unwed, mother asserting her pro-choice rights and has since reportedly garnered over a quarter of a million dollars as a spokesperson for young adult unplanned pregnancies. Bristol Palin’s child was never called *illegitimate*. Nevertheless, both images were celebrated for their respective reasons. The former is posed to remind us that Black unwed mothers are “carrying on like modern-day Jezebels when they should be acting like good revisionist Mammys” (Austin, 2003, p. 305).

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

These images and issues illuminate the critical need for Black feminism as it asserts that the work of Black mothers has been about more than “dishpan
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hands” (La Rue, 1970/1995, p. 164). The historical characterizations of the Black woman position her as combative, apathetic, and emasculating, especially in her home. The reality is that home leadership is narrowly defined by who earns the (larger) paycheck, deemphasizing that major family decisions are often a shared responsibility despite financial income. In fact, Black mothers have often been penalized by the government for securing legal relationships with their partners, thereby bloating the statistics of single and female-headed households. Additionally, Black mothers have actually been accused of suffocating their sons and daughters while they have worked beyond capacity to protect their children from a society that has brutally and fatally penalized young Black boys and girls for asserting their manhood or demoralizing their sexuality, without the protection or service of the law. While care and personal responsibility have been staples of motherhood, it is crucial to view the work of Black mothers in a context that is situated in their lived experiences and through personal dialogue (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009).

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

MOTHERWORK

Patricia Hill-Collins (1990/2009) posits that there has been a collective reluctance of U.S. Black women to contribute to critical analyses of Black motherhood because of the persistent discourse posed by feminism, with limited effectiveness due to “the combination of its perceived Whiteness and antifamily politics” (p. 190). This is why it is critical to understand the varied discourse on motherhood. Early feminist work – particularly through the 1980’s – held a limited critique of motherhood that ignored complexities of race and class and organized family life into two spheres: public and private, i.e., separation of work and home.
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Motherwork (Hill-Collins, 2004a) is then presented as a challenge to these separate spheres. This framework is grounded in Black women’s agency and concerned with social problems such as: child care for U.S. Black mothers; education opportunities for Black children; the prison pipeline for Black men; and the disproportionate numbers of Black children in foster care. Hill-Collins uses the term motherwork which “can be done on behalf of one’s own biological children, or for the children of one’s own racial ethnic community, or to preserve the earth for those children who are yet unborn” (2004a, p. 48). In earlier writing, she explores five types of motherwork. This includes:

- **Women Centered Networks (WCN)** are described as a community of mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, cousins, [or neighbors] responsible for taking care of the children. Because of the historical value of WCN, many of these women grow to gain “a reputation for never turning away a needy child” (Hill-Collins, 1990/2009, p. 198).
- **Mothers and Daughters** describes the ways mothers communicate love in an environment that calls for their protection and survival.
- **Community Othermothers and Political Activism** describes “mothering of the mind” which demands socially responsible uses of education.
- **Motherhood as a Symbol of Power** explores issues of class, the dumbing down of Black women’s work and the work of community women who are “nameless in scholarly texts, yet everyone in their neighborhoods knows their names” (1990/2009, p. 208).
- **The View from the Inside** describes mothering as a “fundamentally contradictory institution” (1990/2009, p. 211) and shares the narratives of Black mothers.

FORWARD

This chapter has provided an introduction to the research problem, significance, the journey of the project, methods, and epistemology. Chapter 2 explores the dominant discourses that focus on Black mothers. I specifically discuss the literature from scientific research; government reform; motherhood and parent involvement; popular media; and briefly introduce the perspectives of the women who have participated in this project as a means of “speaking back” (G. Noblit, personal communication, 2012). Chapter 3 provides the methods for this ethnographic project. In Chapter 4, the women speak. Chapter 5 provides an interpretation and analysis of the narratives according to four themes and reflexive journaling. Chapter 6 will conclude by addressing the implications of these Black mothers’ lived and shared experiences. An Epilogue is provided to discuss the emergence of violence that has occurred since this project formally concluded in early 2012. Current issues are explored with respect to a historical lens; social media as a literature source; maps for further research; and challenges to multiple audiences.
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NOTES

1 I maintain the use of Black as an inclusive term for those of African descent, living in the United States, who are descendants of the African Diaspora. Some references that are cited use the term African-American or People or Women of Color – especially when generally including people or women of non-White ethnic/racial groups.

2 These are explored further in Chapter 2.

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

4 Harold Washington (1922–1987) is the first and only Black mayor in Chicago’s 175 years of governance. He served four years in this position before dying of a heart attack in his City Hall office. I recall the announcement of his death during the school day over the public announcement system; my teacher abruptly left the room completely grief-stricken.

5 The Cosby Show (1984–1992) was a prime-time, half-hour television sitcom that featured an African-American upper middle-class family of seven, largely based on the family-centered stand-up comedy routines of William H. Cosby, Jr., Ed.D. (also the show creator). Of important note are the contributions of Civil Rights Activist and Harvard (child) psychiatry professor Alvin F. Poussaint, M.D., who vetted 196 of the 197 scripts for the 8-year series.

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

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

8 These are elaborated upon in Chapter 1 and 2.

9 The position of CEO was created in 1995 by Mayor Richard M. Daley, upon the decision by the Illinois State Legislature to place Chicago Public Schools under mayoral control. Paul Vallas was first appointed to this position and remained in office until 2001 (six years), preceding current US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan who held the position until 2009 (eight years).

10 Ron Huberman held the position January 2009–November 2010 (22 months) upon sudden resignation; interim CEO Terry Mazany held the position for 6 months; Jean-Claude Brizard held the position May 2011–October 2012 (17 months) upon sudden resignation; and current CEO, Barbara Byrd-Bennett held the position October 2012–June 1, 2015 having resigned after a two-month paid leave of absence amid a federal investigation into a $20.5 million no-bid contract. Jesse Ruiz assumed the interim CEO position, April 17, 2015.

11 Downtown street location of the main offices for the Chicago Board of Education.

12 All names of school, faculty, staff, parents, and programs are noted with pseudonyms.

13 It is important to note that public schools in Chicago have several categories. On the Chicago Public School website (www.cps.edu) there were 11 categories to delineate the 665 public schools in the district for the 2011–2012 school year. These categories include Neighborhood, Traditional, Optional, Contract, Military Academy, Special Education, Magnet, and Selective Enrollment. Only the first two are included when generally speaking of the dangers and failures of CPS; the others schools are deemed exceptions.

14 As current education reform measures move more toward business models of operation, the term stakeholder has often been employed to discuss the needs of administrators and faculty as primary consultants for school decisions. The term generally does not holistically include families and their respective communities. I intentionally use the term in this work to affirm the voices and resources of the participants.
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15 Parent Universities are designed as a theoretical space to instigate parent involvement. Ideally, the school works closely with the parents to establish a “credit system”, awarding credits for various activities (e.g., lunchroom duty, class mom, trip chaperone). The parents with substantial amounts of credits are recognized at various school ceremonies and may be awarded items donated by community sponsors. The Parent University has grown popular across the country; there are some that have a physical space for parents that serve as a library and technology resource center.

16 Foremost leaders in feminist and Black thought.

17 The African holocaust is an alternative term to note the enslavement of Africans in the U.S. or reference to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. “Holocaust” is a term of Latin, Greek, and French languages from the mid 12th and mid 13th centuries meaning “wholly burnt” or “burnt offering.” It was first recorded in 1957 in reference to the Nazi genocide of European Jews which was previously referred to as “Shoah” meaning “catastrophe.” Therefore, according to its etymology, the term “holocaust” does not belong to a specific ethnic group but rather refers to a “mass slaughter of people” according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. In this way, scholars focused on the African Diaspora refer to this period of enslavement and disenfranchisement – roughly documented between 1525 when Portugal began exporting African bodies across the world, to the signing of the U.S. 1965 Voting Rights Act – as the African Holocaust; there are scholars who extend this period into the present with respect to the prison industry. However, because the term is so closely tied to Jewish history, anthropologist and African Studies scholar Marimba Ani (1980, 1994) refers to this period as the Maafa – a Kiswahili term meaning “great disaster.” Since the late 1990’s, this term has gained momentum within academic scholarship and not without controversy; however, I employ it here as a clear marker of the terrorism upon African bodies in the U.S., by not using deficit-based language such as “slavery” or to conflate it with other genocidal atrocities such as The Holocaust.

18 See Appendix I.

19 Feminist theory is historically documented in the West according to three waves. The first wave began in the nineteenth and early 20th centuries, marked by the Suffrage Movement. The second wave is associated with the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s. The third wave, which may run concurrently with the second, is seen as a reaction to the second wave failures. While there are a notable number of Women of Color that are included in “Third Wave” literature, collectively, these “waves” have been criticized as too static and intentionally narrow in holistically addressing the protests and progress of Black women in the US and worldwide.

20 “Welfare Queen,” a trope of Former President Ronald Reagan, was first used during his 1976 presidential campaign in reference to a woman on the South Side of Chicago (Douglas & Michaels, 2004).