

Othermothering: A Black Feminist History of Communal Early Childhood Education in America

Crystasany R. Turner, Ph.D.*

University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee

This literature review, framed by Black feminist thought and the power of counternarratives, explores the historical and socio-political roles of Black women educators and childcare providers as othermothers. From colonial America to the present day, it examines how these women have consistently nurtured and advocated for Black children and communities, all while navigating systems of oppression and social stressors. The review highlights the unique struggles, creative resistance, and significant contributions of Black women in the field of early care and education, underscoring their enduring legacy as advocates and activists. In the discussion, the author encourages Black women educators to continue building upon the freedom dreams of our radical foremothers, striving toward more equitable care and education for all children.

Keywords: Othermothering, Black motherhood, community mothering, activist mothering, Black feminist thought, early childhood education

Scholarship on Black women’s social history illustrates Black women care providers, educators, activists, and othermothers’ persistence as intergenerational sources of resistance capital (Yosso, 2005) for the Black community and essential elements in the support of children and families (Griffin & Tackie, 2016; Roberts, 2010; Tuominen, 2003). Black women’s legacy of community activism is informed by the intersection of gendered and racial experiences of Black womanhood, including mothering and othermothering (Collins, 1994; 2002).

The term “othermothering” has been used by Black scholars to express the sense of care, responsibility, and kinship that manifests within the Black community through aunties, grandmothers, stepmothers, family friends, and educators who share in the social and cultural responsibility of raising children who are not of their own blood (Foster, 1993; Loder, 2005). The practice of othermothering reaches deep into Black women’s cultural heritage (Collins, 1994; 2002; Foster, 1993; Loder, 2005). It is the manifestation of a tacit sense of collectivism characterized by an individual’s sense of connection to and responsibility for the advancement, safety, and security of the members in their group (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994).

Through the lens of Black feminist thought and the power of counternarratives, this review of literature delineates a historical and socio-political exploration of how Black women educators and childcare providers have steadfastly positioned themselves as othermothers—nurturing and advancing the children of the Black community while navigating various systems of oppression and social stressors.

Critical Counternarratives

Traditional portrayals of mothering and motherhood are “inextricably tied to whiteness, the ‘private,’ and to blood-related relationships” (Pitts, 2014, p.142). Throughout history, Black women in the United States have been stigmatized with images of the asexual, maternalistic Mammy figure, whose body was exaggerated to accentuate her inherent ability for domestic work and caring for white folks’ children (Story, 2014). This domestic servant imagery of Black mothers was later redefined through the “Matriarch” stereotype. In a publication titled, *The Culture of Poverty*, Black matriarchs and female-headed households were posited as the problem with Black civil society. The author blamed Black women for failing their traditional “womanly” duties by refusing to marry Black men, who were too immature to lead a home (Lewis, 1966). Later, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then sociologist and later U.S. senator, wrote that disintegration of the Black family was the cause of high rates of “illegitimate” children, which led to impoverished communities and “startling increases in welfare dependency” (Moynihan, 1965, p. 12).

In opposition to these and other racist and classist assumptions of Black motherhood, Black feminist thought centers the experiences of Black motherhood through the Black woman’s perspective. The Black feminist lens allows theorists and scholars to analyze the meanings, social rules, values, and motives that govern Black women’s action in the care and education of their children and communities (Collins, 2002, 2016; Few et al., 2003). Central to this work is Patricia Hill-Collins’ (1994) conceptualization of “motherwork,” that accounts for the intersectional experiences of Black motherhood and the historical and present abuses of Women of Color in the United States.

Critical counternarratives of Black feminism empower Black mothers and othermothers to name our own reality through “parables, chronicles, stories, counterstories, poetry, fiction and revisionist histories” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 56). In accordance, this current work represents a revisionist perspective of dominant discourses of (mis)education, in which the contributions of Black women educators, theorists, and activists have remained highly unrecognized and unnamed. Within this exploration of the social history of Black women in early care and education, situating the work within the framework of counternarratives enables me to push toward educational equity by revealing the silenced narratives of historically marginalized individuals and communities. Further, Black feminism interrogates gendered racism (Essed, 1991) as a key influence on inequitable social systems that affect the daily lives of Black mothers, othermothers, our children, families, and communities.

Othermothering, Motherwork, and Community Mothering

Traditionally in the United States, there is a dualistic view of family and the economic market. Family, childrearing, and motherwork are often associated with the private sphere—

dichotomous to socio-economic production and the market. These ideologies, that separate the family from the workforce, are based in the era of industrialization that focused on white, middle-class families (Boris & Kleinberg, 2003; Story, 2014). The “workplace” was a place of paid labor, rationality, and competition—all associated with masculine, paternal, and white behaviors. Contrastingly, the home or family was a place of nurturing, affection, and caregiving—“feminine” and maternal attributes (Story, 2014; Tuominen, 2003).

As a result of these racist, classist, gendered, and heteronormative ideologies, “Scholars focused more on motherhood than mothers, caregiving than wage earning, child welfare than exploitation, at best ignoring the motherhood of the non-white and at worst accepting the devaluation of their motherwork [...]” (Boris & Kleinberg, 2003, p.91). This narrow understanding of motherhood and mothers’ role in supporting the social economy cannot fully appreciate the weight of Black women’s motherwork or the various ways we cope with the daily pressures of maintaining our households, children, families, and communities (see the Superwoman Schema [Woods-Giscombé, 2010], the Strong Black Woman Syndrome, [Nelson et al., 2016], and Sojourner's Syndrome [Lekan, 2009]).

Contrary to traditional views that exclude various caregivers from the ranks of “workers” or mothers, Jordan (1993) asserts that while “giving birth is indeed a part of mothering, it is caregiving that *defines* the act of mothering, and caregiving is a choice open to those who give birth and those who do not” (p.3). This description of mothering and motherwork offers language to understand the othermothering of Black women educators and care providers. Moreover, this boarder lens accounts for the various forms of creative resistance to societal diminishing of Black women’s revolutionary, communal motherwork (Story, 2014). These forms of motherwork include, but are not limited to, activist mothering (Naples, 1992), social care work, kinwork (Tuominen, 2003), and social motherhood (Boris, 1993).

Like Jordan (1993) who defined mothering by the act of caregiving, Naples (1992) uses the term, “activist mothering” to describe Black women’s understanding of mothering and community mothering within the early education setting. She explained,

Activist mothering [...] encompasses a broad definition of actual mothering practice. The community workers defined *good mothering* to comprise all actions, including social activism, that addressed the needs of the children and their community—variously defined as their racial-ethnic group, low-income people, or members of a particular neighborhood. (Naples, 1992, p.448)

In alignment with Naples’ (1992) definition of activist mothering within their communities, Black childcare providers and educators’ sense of intergenerational collectivism is often linked to a critical consciousness not only about education, but issues of social and racial justice as well (Tuominen, 2003). Black mothers, more than their racial counterparts, bear the onus of preparing their children to manage the constant pressures of race, class, inequitable power structures, white hegemony, and societal perceptions of Blackness (Feagin & Van Ausdale, 2001). Studies show

that Black women educators often support parents in children’s racial socialization and psychoeducational needs by acting as cultural translators and intergenerational sources of social capital (Foster, 1993; Griffin & Tackie, 2016; Loder, 2005; Yosso, 2005). Through their engagement as othermothers, Black educators and caregivers share cultural knowledge, skills, and strategies to help children and families navigate race-based experiences in inequitable institutions (Griffin & Tackie, 2016; Roberts, 2010; Tuominen, 2003).

Relatedly, Tuominen (2003) and Boris (1993) recognized Black early educators and care providers’ work of social care work or social motherhood as manifestations of community activism to address the needs of children and families. As social mothers, Black women childcare providers’ commitment to serving families in need is rooted within the cultural construction of social networks as a means of sustaining the community. Tuominen (2003) explains that “kinwork”—the collective work of family-centered networks across and within households— is needed to sustain families and communities over time. Kinwork “regenerates families, maintains lifetime continuities, sustains intergenerational responsibilities, and reinforces shared values” (Stack & Burton, 1993, p. 160). In sum, Black women’s kinwork and othermothering are vital elements of the consciously constructed connections developed from a family’s economic, social, physical, and psychological needs (Tuominen, 2003).

Whether through activist mothering (Naples, 1992), social care work (Tuominen, 2003), or social motherhood (Boris, 1993), these forms of community care, education, and othermothering are centered on the maintenance of Black community culture, resistance to oppression and social disenfranchisement, and the development of Black youth (Collins, 2002; Dougherty, 2004; Naples, 1992; Royal & Gibson, 2004; Tuominen, 2003). This tradition is now sustained in the Black community as “Black mothers are expected to pass on the torch to their daughters, who are expected to become the next generation of mothers, grandmothers, or othermothers, to guard future generations” (Bernard & Bernard, 1998, p. 46).

In the following section, I will provide an historical review of the literature, from colonial America to present day, discussing the legacy of Black women care providers and educators acting as othermothers, advocates, and activists for Black children and our communities. My intention is to portray the unique struggles, creative resistance, and significant contributions of Black women in the field of early care and education.

The History of Black Women Care Providers and Early Educators

The story of Black early care and education (ECE)— like the story of Black women in America— is long, complex, and laden with adverse conditions and discriminatory policies. While Black educators and care providers have made significant contributions to the field, documentation of our experiences has received little attention within educational research or accounts of the history of ECE (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979).

Historical documentation of Black women care providers begins in early colonial America. The first Blacks to settle in America were not slaves, but explorers, soldiers, interpreters, and indentured servants (Berry & Gross, 2020; Cunningham & Osborn, 1979). In 1620, the Virginia Colony founded the first public school of “Negros and Indians.” Young Black children attended

these schools until about 1640 when enslaved African people in America became more commonplace, and thus, the status of Black people changed (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979).

The education of young Black children shifted drastically in the context of institutional slavery. Some education historians suggest that enslaved women, servants, and nanny figures represent the earliest forms of child care (Auerbach & Woodhill, 1992). However, these arrangements likely took place in the child's home, were not through a negotiated relationship, and were not compensated. Child care for Black children at this point in Black women's history was communal care. As screaming children were kidnapped from their African homes and loaded onto slave ships, older Black girls and women embodied the role of othermothers—acting as comforters and guardians for the young orphans (Berry & Gross, 2020). On the plantations, the whole enslaved community, especially the women, aided in rearing the enslaved children. Because enslaved mothers were expected to promptly return to work after childbirth, the care of babies and young children became the primary responsibility of elderly community members—those who were no longer fit for manual labor (Collins, 2016).

In these conditions, communal mothering substituted for individualized maternal care as Black women collectively accepted the onus of raising one another's children (Collins, 2016). Even after institutionalized slavery ended, the foundational understanding that *community is survival* is evident in the way Black grandmothers, siblings, aunts, care providers and even teachers become othermothers—offering material, emotional, and spiritual support for the children in their care (Brewster & Padavic, 2002; Collins, 2002, 2016).

Dame Schools, Sabbath Schools, and Clandestine Schools

Education was haphazard in the United States before the 1860s since most states had no compulsory education laws. The few laws that existed were rarely enforced and only applied to white children. However, despite the conditions of the time, there were three types of educational facilities developed for the early education of young Black children before 1860: formal schools, sabbath schools, and clandestine schools (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979).

One of the first examples of formal school education for Black children occurred in 1750. Reverend Thomas Bacon, a formerly enslaved person, founded an integrated formal school for poor children. Throughout the next century, a number of public primary schools were created for Black children in Massachusetts and Virginia. Although these schools existed, they were too under-resourced to meet the needs of the enslaved Black community (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979). Dame schools offered formal in-home care and education programs comparable to today's early childhood education programs. In these schools, a local woman would serve as both a caregiver and educator to several children at a time. The woman would teach basic literacy and mathematical skills while managing her domestic duties (Lent, 2016).

These programs most often prepared white males with the basic skills needed to enroll in a town school, while female students were taught skills such as sewing and knitting (Auerbach & Woodhill, 1992; Lent, 2016; Michel, 1999). However, Quaker and Moravian communities believed in educating both genders and promoted the education of African Americans. In some instances, Black children were given access to the formal schooling of dame schools. Yet, like the

formal schools, there was little funding for supporting Black children's education (Auerbach & Woodhill, 1992; Cunningham & Osborn, 1979; Lent, 2016; Michel, 1999).

The second early institution for Black education were Sabbath schools, established at the turn of the 19th century. They provided religious instruction for many of the enslaved people and even trained in literacy skills. This type of schooling was allowed in the South until the early 1800s, when groups of enslaved people began rebelling against white enslavers. As education was seen as the root of revolution, fearful plantation owners pushed for legislation to enact laws that prohibited both formal and Sabbath schools (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979).

The prohibition of formal and Sabbath schools led to the last type of early education for young Black children in early America—the clandestine or midnight schools. In these schools, enslaved Black women, who had previously learned to read, began teaching children and other determined enslaved people literacy skills. Because of the clandestine nature of this stage of Black education, little is known about the women and children who risked harsh punishment and mutilation for the opportunity to teach and learn (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979).

Post-Civil War Early Education

Following the Civil War, a number of schools for Black children were founded with the understanding that education is the liberation of the Black people (Anderson, 1988). A prime example of emancipatory early schooling for Black children is the work of Lucy Laney, a formerly enslaved woman. Laney, a graduate of the Hampton School's first class, founded a nursery and day school for Black children in Augusta, Georgia in 1883. When she started, Laney's goal was to support working mothers of her local community. However, her program later grew into the nationally recognized Haines Institute, a full-on educational institution for the advancement of Black children (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979).

The post-Civil War early education movement continued in segregated tracks for Black and white children. The racial tension and discrimination of the era inspired Black women activist mothers to organize in churches and secret societies to create the early care and education opportunities their communities needed (Cahan, 1989; Collins, 2016; Cunningham & Osborn, 1979). In 1896, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), under the leadership of its president Mary Church Terrel, established a Black kindergarten. Terrel was an avid supporter of early childhood education. She and Haydee Campbell, a graduate of Oberlin College and the leader of their kindergarten program, founded an extensive network of Black kindergartens beginning in the St. Louis school system and expanding across the United States and even Canada (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979).

Black women social mothers continued to train as teachers and early educators in the Hampton School and the Tuskegee Institute. Coursework included the care and feeding of infants and general childrearing practices. Howard University and Atlanta University also adapted early childhood coursework—offering advanced coursework to prepare women for work as early childcare program directors. In 1902, thirteen Black women earned diplomas in kindergarten education from Howard University (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979).

Urbanization and The Progressive Era

The growing need for Black childcare and discriminatory government funding during the Progressive Era (1896-1906) prompted Black clubwomen and social mothers to establish their own facilities to keep Black money within the Black community (Cahan, 1989; Gatewood, 1990/2000). They argued that "If we must be segregated, we want to segregate ourselves; we do not want to be 'Jim Crowed' by white people and then pay them for doing it" (Knupfer, 1995, p. 1912). Therefore, the clubwomen used white racism and segregation as an impetus for founding the much-needed institutions from which Blacks were excluded.

Clubwomen were members of the Black elite consisting of businesswomen, politicians, ministers, and community leaders. Despite experiencing the privilege of education and wealth, the clubwomen were still excluded from dominant cultural definitions of "true womanhood" due to their Blackness and definitions of "full citizens" because of their womanhood (Boris, 1989; Taylor, 1998). Thus, as activist mothers, they fought for Black children's rights to equitable education while fighting for their own recognition as full citizens in the American social structure. Using language of "social housekeeping", they connected their rights as women to the experience of motherhood—resisting relegation to the home and extending their influence into the community, city, and nation. "By claiming expertise and responsibility for non-familial social spaces, black suffragists were redefining the political and demanding votes for women on the basis of their work as—rather than their mere being—mothers" (Boris, 1989, p. 26).

Uplifting the Black community meant that educated social mothers would take the responsibility of improving the quality of life for millions of formerly enslaved people by improving their "morals," educating them, and providing an array of social services (Gaines, 2012). Educated Blacks saw themselves as leaders and role models for the community. On one hand, they were socio-economically distanced from the impoverished Black community; yet in racial solidarity, they worked to educate the growing Black community on the ways of urban society in the North (Gaines, 2012; Giddings, 1984). Towards this purpose, Black women's clubs collaborated not only with one another, but with local chapters of the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (Knupfer, 1995).

As the Progressive Era continued, millions of southeastern Europeans immigrated to the United States' Northern urban centers. While they experienced extreme poverty and ethno-linguistic discrimination, many received support from white advocates of immigrant rights to facilitate their transition into American society. Black American migrants, however, were excluded from these philanthropic efforts (Park & Kemp, 2006). Instead, it was Black clubwomen who continued to prioritize the advancement of working-class Black women and children. The clubwomen's activist mothering towards addressing the needs of the impoverished Black community were primarily funded by Black philanthropists with little aid from other organizations or the U.S. government (Gatewood, 1990/2000). Although the Women's Christian Temperance Union, Black colleges, white missionaries, and settlement houses established kindergartens and early childhood programs, with the exception of Black colleges, these organizations focused on the needs of the European immigrant children and did not necessarily address the unique needs of

Black children (Gatewood, 1990/2000). Over time, the discrimination of European immigrants lessened as the privileges of whiteness settled in—allowing them to assimilate into the American social-economic infrastructure (Carter, 2018; Collins, 2002; Park & Kemp, 2006; Suransky & Polakow, 1982). However, discrimination and exclusion persisted for Black community members. As such, Black clubwomen, activists, educators, and social mothers continued to fight for equitable education access and quality child care options.

Through the resolve of Black clubwomen, the first Black day nursery was founded in Harlem, New York in 1902 to meet the child care needs of working Black mothers. Hope Day Nursery became the only Black institution of its kind. It provided childcare for Black mothers for a fee of five cents a day, while receiving no government support. Instead, the school was supplemented by contributions from board members, friends, and other civic-minded citizens in the community (Cahan, 1989; Griffin, 1906). Later, in a parallel movement with its white counterparts, Hope Day Nursery expanded their services to address children’s educational, developmental, socialization, and health needs. Hope Day Nursery was an early model of educational programming that resembled the work of modern-day early care and education programs for the Black community (Cahan, 1989).

While the Black community continued to make advancements in the establishment of day nurseries and kindergartens, there remained a preference for informal care child arrangements (Lent, 2016; Michel, 1999). Many mothers relied on informal child care within the home setting provided by family members, friends, or neighbors due to a sense of community, convenience of location, and flexibility in scheduling. Moreover, Black mothers and certain other groups of mothers preferred not to undergo the “invasive and intimidating application process and investigation that had become routine at charitable institutions,” which discriminated against Black women and unmarried mothers (Michel, 1999, p.46).

The Great Migration

Throughout 1916-1970, there was a large urbanization process, called the Great Black Migration. As Jim Crow laws spread in the South, employers hired European immigrants for jobs that had formerly been performed by Black laborers. Subsequently, Black women and their families left agricultural work in Southern rural communities to take up domestic and industrial work in Northern cities such as Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Baltimore, New York, Philadelphia, and Milwaukee (Collins, 2002; Dougherty, 2004; Haskins, 1998; Kendi, 2019). The growing industrial economy in World War I-era America contributed to a wealth of job opportunities and better pay for Black people.

As Black migrant men—who competed with white immigrant men for jobs in the urban labor markets—were subject to frequent layoffs, Black mothers fulfilled the growing demand for low-paying domestic work to support their families (Collins, 2016; Giddings, 1984). Black girls transitioning to adolescence often trained in domestic work in the South while performing motherwork for younger siblings. When finished training, they would migrate to Northern cities to help relatives with their children until they could secure a domestic job to contribute to the family wage (Clark-Lewis, 1985).

Black women and girls were constantly subjected to sexual harassment, rape, intimidation, and highly exploitative conditions in their domestic work. Defined by white culture as breeders, promiscuous, and sexual deviants, Black women were deemed antithetical to the ideals of womanhood (Berry & Gross, 2020; Boris, 1989; Collins, 2002). Yet, there were few choices of Black women's labor at the time, so they persisted to maintain their families' income and survival (Collins, 2002; Taylor, 1998).

As millions of Black families continued to migrate, the “ghettos” of Northern cities swelled. Black communities were crippled with the effects of poverty such as dilapidated housing, prostitution, truancy, and unsanitary living conditions (Farmer-Hinton, 2002; Knupfer, 1995). Unlike the European immigrants, the Black migrants did not have the assistance of the settlement house movement to help them transition into the Northern cities. As such, migrant Black families faced immense challenges in adjusting from a rural environment to the racially segregated housing industry in urban centers (Dougherty, 2004; Farmer-Hinton, 2002; Knupfer, 1995). Nonetheless, Black mothers anchored themselves in the hope that a fresh start in Northern cities would offer their children educational opportunity and their piece of the American dream (Anderson, 1988; Dougherty, 2004; Haskins, 1998).

Many of the Black mothers depended on othermothers—such as kin, friends, and neighbors—or other types of communal networks to care for their young children while they worked away from the home. The urban childcare programs, filled with white immigrant children, were not prepared to handle the influx of Black migrant children. Moreover, Black mothers and their children were highly discriminated against (Cahan, 1989; Griffin, 1906; Johnson- Straub, 2007; Suransky & Polakow, 1982). In response, a group of social mothers founded the first documented in-home childcare program in Philadelphia in 1928 (Frankel, 1994).

Civil Rights

Clubwomen and other Black activist mothers continued to be highly influential in the women's suffrage movement in the years 1890 through 1920 (Collins, 2002; Taylor, 1998). Black women organized in suffrage clubs and voters' leagues and rallied for the right to vote in heat of Jim Crow oppression and the theater of violence that surrounded public lynching (Taylor, 1998). In 1910, Ida B. Wells-Barnett wrote, “The Negro has been given separate and inferior schools, because he has no ballot” (Wells-Barnett, 1990, p. 269). Black women social mothers and activists understood that political enfranchisement was necessary to improve their children's schools and the conditions of Black wage laborers (Taylor, 1998).

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, there was continued disparity between state expenditures for white and Black schools. In 1927, Dorothy Howard established the first Black nursery school in the United States. Later in 1930, Spelman College founded a laboratory nursery school. Under the leadership of Pearlie Reed, this school became the training grounds for various Black women ECE leaders and social mothers. Among these legacies are Flemmie Kittrell, the first Black woman to receive a Doctorate in early childhood education; Dorothy Neal, who helped establish the early Head Start centers; and Ida Jones Curry, who left teaching at the Spelman

Institute to become the director of early childhood education at the Hampton Institute (Cunningham & Osborn, 1979).

During the Great Depression (1929-1941), the U.S. government created and funded numerous childcare programs to provide jobs for care providers. However, Pres. Roosevelt's New Deal was designed specifically to prevent Black workers from obtaining the economic and social benefits of the legislation. For example, in 1935, the Aid for Dependent Children (ADC) was established by the Social Security Act (1935) to assist fatherless families (Blank & Blum, 1997). However, the ADC was highly discriminatory against Black women applying for the program's assistance. Instead of receiving assistance, Black mothers were directed to employment offices where they were pushed into menial, low-wage jobs (Reese, 2005). Similarly, the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938), specifically excluded agricultural and "domestic workers" to target Black laborers. Since paid child care was typically provided in the home, Black women in-home childcare providers and domestic workers were denied the right to organize and did not receive the same protection as other workers through the law (Johnson-Staub, 2017). Nonetheless, Black activist mothers, educators, and care providers continued pushing for equitable educational access for Black children.

The Black Panther Party

During the 1940s, individual states began to issue in-home family childcare licenses separate from the licenses issued to center-based programs and foster homes—thus, in-home family childcare programs became a regulated profession (Lent, 2016). Black social mothers shifted to regulated in-home child care as a means to address the unique socio-cultural needs of Black children and families. This transition took place in the shadow of a series of court cases won by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which laid the groundwork for the desegregation of the nation's public schools. In the fall of 1952, the United States presented the Supreme Court with five desegregation cases combined under the title, *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka (1954)*. Ultimately, the Supreme Court unanimously agreed that,

To separate [colored children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone. (Kendi, 2019, p.176)

Yet, recognition of the effects of separating children by race within public schools did not initiate immediate change in discriminatory policies and practices that kept Black children in de facto segregated schools and early childhood programs (Dougherty, 2004; Frankenberg, 2016).

There remained significant educational inequities for Children of Color. The majority of Black students still attended predominantly "minority schools," and young Black children remained in segregated early childhood programs (Evans-Winter & Esposito, 2010; Frankenberg, 2016; Milner, 2013). Racialized neighborhood attendance policies, intact busing, discriminatory transfer policies, and a racially segregated housing industry kept Blacks in isolated communities

and persistently hampered their educational access (Bonds et al., 2009; Dougherty, 2004; Farmer-Hinton, 2002; Kendi, 2019).

Seeing Black families remain segregated in overcrowded, blighted inner cities with high rates of unemployment and poverty galvanized the formation of the Black Panther Party (BPP). In 1966, the Black Panther Party was founded in Oakland, California by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale to challenge police brutality and claim social-political, economic, and educational opportunities for Black Americans. Oftentimes, descriptions of the Black Panther Party (BPP) invoke images of militant Black men in leather jackets. However, a survey taken by Bobby Seale in 1969 reported that the movement's membership consisted of over 60 percent women (Farmer et al., 2013; Taylor, 1998). These women were integral to every aspect of BPP life, including serving as prominent leaders. The BPP's Ten Point Program outlined a vision for Black liberation, encompassing demands for jobs, housing, education, and self-determination (West, 2010).

The revolutionary politics of the BPP linked the conditions of local Black communities to the economic inequality perpetuated by American capitalism and neocolonialism (West, 2010). Moreover, the BPP recognized the public-school system's failure to educate Black and impoverished youth as the source of generational oppression and socio-economic disenfranchisement (West, 2010). In response, the Black Panther Party established the Youth Institute in 1971 to break the cycle of racist and classist oppression in the Black community. The goal was to "provide an example in the education of Black children and to guide our children toward becoming fully capable of analyzing the problems they will face and to develop creative solutions to deal with them" (West, 2010, p. 5).

In addition to strong beliefs about the inequitable state of the public school system, Black Panther women (Pantherettes) advocated for issues of childcare and early education. The activist mothers identified traditional ideas about childcare and parenting as manifestations of "bourgeois gender roles" and the same capitalist structures they were fighting against in other arenas of the organization (Farmer et al., 2013, n.p.). Accordingly, they began experimenting with communal housing and child care. Within the communal living situations of most Panthers, they employed alternative models of parenting outside of the nuclear family. All community members were expected to cook, clean, and raise children, both their own and of others. There were accounts of numerous in-home daycares, most often headed by Pantherettes, where they cared for and worked toward the development of the community's youth (Farmer et al., 2013, n.p.).

Within the BPP early childhood programs and preschools, educators recognized the lack of research on "preschool age" and younger Black children's development. Furthermore, because of American racism and resistance of communalism, there were no resources provided to study the development of children in a communal lifestyle (West, 2010). In response, the BPP developed their own two-tiered comprehensive child development program, which included infant stimulation (for children from birth until one year) and sensorimotor development (for children one until two and a half years) (West, 2010). Within the infant stimulation program, BPP educators established their own developmental schedule to give them "an accurate evaluation of the child to use as a guide to cultivate the child's developmental needs" (West, 2010, p. 56). The developmental

schedule included: motor skills (gross and fine), adaptive (problem solving), verbalization, self-awareness, and responsiveness (West, 2010)—all domains of widely adopted state learning standards today.

The Black Panther childcare system, fueled by Pantherette activist mothers and even some Panther men, is a chapter in the history of Black community mothering and othermothering that is often overlooked. Outside of the provisions made for young Black children through the BPP, it was not until Title IV of the Civil Rights Act (1964) was passed that the Black community and other People of Color gained legal access to equitable group childcare and other institutions receiving federal financial assistance.

Welfare and the Rise of Black Childcare Programs

Throughout the long history of social, physical, and economic isolation, Black women have relied on their community of othermothers—grandmas, aunts, neighbors, and friends—for material and emotional support (Brewster & Padavic, 2002). However, this core value was threatened by a rise in the number of Black women forced to enter the labor force—from about 43% in 1970 to 64% at the end of the twentieth century (Brewster & Padavic, 2002).

In response to the influx of Black women laborers, Dorothy Lee Bolden founded the National Domestic Workers Union of America—comprised primarily of Black women—in 1960. This group of activist mothers and laborers worked in tandem with multi-racial welfare rights activists through the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) to demand better compensation, higher wages, vacation time, training, higher public assistance/welfare payments and more respectful treatment by case workers (Slotnik, 2019). Black activist mothers in the NWRO placed better compensation for childcare professionals at the top of their agendas. They recognized the value of the motherwork caregivers performed to support working mothers. While their white counterparts believed focusing on women’s rights as childcare providers would reinforce the traditional gender roles they were trying to escape, Black women as social mothers embraced the intersectionality of their motherhood and roles as paid workers (Boris, 1989; Tuominen, 2008). By the late 1960s, the NWRO had almost 25,000 members advocating for policy changes that would allow women of all races and income levels to balance motherwork with paid labor (Nadasen, 2002).

The rise of these woman empowerment movements, based on welfare and equal rights, made white Americans increasingly resentful throughout the 1960s and 1970s. This resentment was fueled by a series of racist media stories that sensationalized the idea of hundreds of thousands of unmarried, Black welfare mothers out to cheat the system at taxpayers’ expense (Resse, 2005). Lewis’ (1966) publication of *The Culture of Poverty* argued that the Black family tended towards female authoritarian households because Black women refused to marry, and Black men were too immature to lead a home. Similarly, Moynihan (1965) wrote that the Black female-headed family structure was highly problematic. He argued that the disintegration of the Black family and high rates of “illegitimate” children led to “startling increases in welfare dependency” (Moynihan, 1965, p. 12).

In response to the white public outcry, in 1981, Pres. Ronald Reagan substantially cut welfare payments, changed eligibility requirements, and encouraged states to develop workfare programs. As a result, almost five hundred thousand families lost their welfare benefits, predominately in Communities of Color (Reese, 2005). This was the first in a chain of welfare reforms that targeted low-income Families of Color. Among the various acts that challenged Black motherhood was The Family Support Act of 1988. This legislation established the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program, which led states to expand education and training for applicants rather than become welfare recipients (Reese, 2005). Similarly, in 1992 the Clinton administration promised to “end welfare as we know it” through tougher work requirements and two-year consecutive time limits. Clinton’s Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which mandated individuals must work *outside* of the home in order to receive public assistance, dramatically increased the demand for quality center-based childcare in the Black community by decreasing the availability of grandmothers and aunties who had earlier aided in kincare and in-home child care networks (Brewster & Padavic, 2002; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1982).

By 2004, nearly 72% of women between the ages of 25 and 54 were in the labor force—many of whom were mothers of young children (Blank, 2010). Although Black women have continuously outpaced white women in their formal labor force participation, they are most often relegated to low-paying positions such as preschool teaching assistants, nursing aides, hotel maids, cleaners, cooks, and cashiers—industries that lack the basic rights and protections afforded to other occupations (Collins, 2002; Minoff, 2020). Still, Black women social mothers and businesswomen, rose to the occasion by filling communities’ need for institutional support and childcare facilities. The number of incorporated childcare centers and registered in-home family day cares doubled between 1977 and 1992 (Brewster & Padavic, 2002; Casper & O’Connell, 1998).

Response to a World Health Crisis

In March of 2020, Black women ECE professionals (as well as children and families) were met with unprecedented challenges. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) announced that “coronavirus disease 2019” (abbreviated “COVID-19”), a highly contagious respiratory disease, was spreading from person to person at alarming rates—creating a nationwide public health crisis. While the virus ravaged the world’s social, economic, and public health structures, within the United States, Black community members suffered higher contraction rates and mortality rates of COVID-19 than any other racial/ethnic population (Carpenter, 2020; Williams, 2020).

To prevent the spread of the disease, the nation’s state and local governments implemented “Safer at Home” orders, which required all non-essential businesses to close and all non-essential workers to stay home. Black and Latine laborers were most likely to be part of the COVID-19 “essential” workforce occupying lower-paying, consumer-facing service jobs (Ray, 2020). Further, the nature of consumer-facing work offered limited opportunity for employees to work from home (Murphy, 2020). As a result, Black mothers faced challenges pertaining to the unequal division of child care and caregiving (Zamarro & Prados, 2021). These challenges were

exasperated by extensive childcare closings and reduced sources of social support—increasing the stress associated with their motherwork (Moorman, 2021).

Again, Black women early childhood educators and social mothers activated to ensure the survival and empowerment of the Black community (Turner, 2022), who were among the most affected by conditions of the pandemic (Ray, 2020). The worldwide health crisis highlighted many gaps in the American health care system; and many childcare providers were among the group of 27.5 million Americans who had no health insurance before the COVID-19 pandemic (Frazee, 2020). Thus, the care providers who were called upon to keep the nation’s parents at work were among those who were least protected (Turner, 2022).

In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic as a significant source of stress during the summer of 2020, there was intersectional hardship in the Black community due to a surge of racial tension and civil unrest. Freedom fighters around the globe rallied to protest police brutality and the murders of George Floyd (1973-2020), Breonna Taylor (1993-2020), and scores of Black men, women, and children who suffered at the hands of those who swore to protect and serve. The push for Black liberation from state-inflicted violence evolved into one of the most influential social movements of the post-civil rights era in the summer of 2020 (Roberts, 2020). No part of the Black community was immune to the cumulative effects of psychological, emotional, and spiritual trauma caused by the persistent criminalization, defamation, and dehumanization of Black Americans (Turner, 2022).

Continuing to Freedom Dream

This revisionist historical account illustrates how Black women child care providers, educators, and othermothers have consistently fought for the sustainment and advancement of our children and families. While their efforts have brought forth significant change in educational policies, legislation, and other social systems, the work is not done. The affront on Black motherhood, Black mothers, and our children persists. This is evident in inequitable healthcare practices leading to exorbitant Black maternal mortality rates (Callaghan, 2012; Josiah et al., 2023); manifestations of structural and individual racism associated with adverse maternal and birth outcomes (Josiah et al., 2023); wage gaps and discriminatory welfare legislation targeting low-income mothers (Dozier, 2010; Reese, 2005); rampant criminalization and incarceration of Black women (Richie, 2012); uneven parenting and caregiving burdens (Chadiha et al., 2004; Urizar et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2017); and countless other gendered and race-related stressors associated with simply existing as a Black woman in America (Mullings, 2000; Sue et al., 2008).

In the field of early care and education, policies and practices remain seeped in a legacy of systemic and structural racism. Restrictive government policies and rising accountability practices within the white middle-class agenda, persistently push the acculturation, assimilation, and spirit murder (Johnson-Staub, 2017; Kendi, 2019; Love, 2019) of Black children and “others”. Black women educators and caregivers have long understood the development of young Black children and have established pedagogies rooted in Black children’s sociocultural, linguistic, psychoeducational, and spiritual needs within the context of their communities (West, 2010). Yet, Black women’s perspectives “have been (historically) silenced and marginalized in the discourses

about teaching and learning” (hooks, 1994, p.91); and little attention has been given to their lived experiences and wealth of cultural knowledge (Boutte & Strickland, 2008; Tuominen, 2003; Turner, 2022).

Our current social and educational climate necessitates a wide range of methodological, pedagogical, theoretical, epistemological, and historical perspectives to support children and families who have been historically pushed to the margins (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Yet, as we (re)member and (re)claim the stories of our radical foremothers, who dared to freedom dream (Kelley, 2002) for a more equitable future for Black children, their collective counterstories provide the wisdom and context needed to understand and transform established educational belief systems, pedagogies, and practices.

In his work, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) defined freedom dreams as the visions of the future that have motivated Black activists and change agents in various social, cultural, and political movements throughout our history. He reminds us that within our radical dreaming, we hold the power to challenge all manifestations of hegemony, anti-Blackness, and social injustice. Yet, Black social activism must not only focus on deconstructing unjust systems, but also imagine reconstructing a better future. With this call, I ask how can this generation of educators, care providers, and activist mothers advance the freedom dreams our foremothers began centuries ago? Rooted in Black women’s (her)tory of creative resistance, how can we continue to construct new visions of liberation, joy, and wholeness for Black children within education and society?

As critical counter-narratives to white-centric perspectives, the representation of diverse voices of Black women child care providers, educators, and social mothers is a crucial step in their recognition as indispensable members of the ECE community—in the past, presently, and in the future. As such, their voices and dreams for Black children must be heard throughout policy and decision-making around issues of pedagogy, practice, equity, and social justice. In amplifying Black women’s voices, cultural knowledge, and freedom dreams, they can contribute to a larger repertoire of practices that more readily address the diverse and dynamic needs of young learners.

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