

To the University of Wyoming:

The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Ambreia Meadows-Fernandez presented on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022.

Lilia Soto, Chair

Tracey Patton, Outside Member

Frieda Knobloch, Committee Member

APPROVED:

Frieda Knobloch, Director, American Studies Program

Camellia Okpodu, Dean, College of Arts & Sciences

Meadows-Fernandez, Ambreia, R, *Mothering in Their Own Words: Uplifting the Voices of Black Mothers in Wyoming and Surrounding Areas*, Master of Arts, American Studies, May 2022.

The purpose of this thesis is to actively assert the presence and validity of Black mothers in the Wyoming and surrounding areas. This thesis was developed based on surveys that I conducted with mothers in Wyoming, Colorado, and Nebraska. Within these pages I explore the tools Black mothering individuals employ when attempting to navigate, survive — and hopefully, learn to thrive in — the structural, political, and social influences on their experiences in Wyoming, Nebraska, and Colorado. I engage with the language that Black mothers use to describe their experiences as they raise children in the Mountain and mid-West. Upon reflecting on the surveys, two themes were most salient for survey respondents: The first is *the obstacles impeding Black mothers in the West*, which is comprised of smaller themes such as monolithic representations, navigating simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility along with intra-community expectations, and the struggle to develop and pass positive self-image to their children. The second theme is *the resistance strategies they use to survive*, and occasionally thrive, which contains smaller components such as challenging narratives through reflection and self-definition and holding and transmitting self-love with faith and inherited lessons. Highlighting the experiences of Black mothers in Wyoming and surrounding areas is necessary to tell a more complete picture of life in the Mountain and mid-Western regions. The perspectives shared by these individuals can be used to locate gaps of care, lack of resources, and highlight the untold diversity of the area.

**Mothering in Their Own Words: Uplifting the Voices of Black Mothers in Wyoming and  
Surrounding Areas**

By

Ambreia R. Meadows-Fernandez

A thesis submitted to the American Studies Program

and the University of Wyoming

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of **Master of Arts**

in

**American Studies**

Laramie, Wyoming

May 2022

## DEDICATION PAGE

Enrico, there are no words for the rants you've listened to, the pages you've read or the number of sandwiches you've made. Thank you for forcing me to think differently and show up directly and honestly. Your person, Paprika.

Salem & Saige, I thought the best thing I could do for you was be educated. I'm learning the best I can give you is my time.

Momma, we made it! I am the fruits of your labor. Thank you for all the patience, support, and sacrifice. Dad, thank you for always being able to see further for me than I could see for myself.

Jakobe— "Got everythang, I got everythang, I cannot complain." Long before I had kids, if "they asked me what I do and who I do it for" I'd say you.

To the community of aunties and uncles that helped raised me, thank you. (Auntie Deb all your trips to the school paid off.) Cousins, you are loved. Shout out to the extensive network of friends and fictive kin—especially Keenan & Alex—that continue to hold space for me.

Katie & Auntie Jean, I'd be nowhere without your belief and investment in me.

Lastly, I will borrow this quote as an adaptation of a Calvin Cordozar Broadus Jr "Snoop Dog" speech:

"Last but not least: I want to thank me," she said. "I want to thank me for believing in me, I want to thank me for doing all this hard work. I want to thank me for having no days off. I want to thank me for never quitting. I want to thank me for always being a giver, and trying to give more than I receive," she continued. "I want to thank me for trying to do more right than wrong. I want to thank me for just being me at all times. Ambreia, girl: you a bad motherf---er."

I've been me. But I'm growing into a better me. This thesis is imperfect; it's also incomplete. I'm excited to see where these lessons take me. But now I'm giving myself permission to rest.

Table of Contents	
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<i>From Mammy to Motherhood</i> .....	8
<b>Methods</b> .....	27
<b>Chapter Outline</b> .....	36
<b>Chapter One: The Obstacles Impeding Black Mothers in The West</b> .....	39
<i>Limited Community and Monolithic Representations of Blackness</i> .....	42
<i>Navigating Simultaneous Hypervisibility and Invisibility, Along with Intra Community Expectations</i> .....	47
<b>Chapter Two: The Resistance Strategies They Use to Survive and Occasionally Thrive</b> .....	58
<i>Locating the Positives of a Place</i> .....	58
<i>Community and Kinship</i> .....	66
<i>Holding and Transmitting Self-Love with Faith and Inherited Lessons</i> .....	70
<i>Challenging Narratives Through Reflection and Self-Definition</i> .....	74
<b>Epilogue: It Is What It Is</b> .....	87
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	94
<b>Appendix: Survey Questions and Consent Form</b> .....	102

If you Google the term “motherhood,” you will receive primarily images of white women; as this is what society is used to portraying. Genuine efforts have to be made to change the dialogue to speak directly toward Black women, as we are not looked at as being nurturers; despite our lineage of taking care of other people’s children. I am an educated, working mother and wife. I literally had to fight to uphold each one of those titles, because women, especially Black women are made to choose instead of embracing such life milestones.

— a 33-year-old Wyoming mother

## **INTRODUCTION**

With little effort, one can notice the not-so-subtle prescriptive checklist that defines legitimate motherhood. A mother is white — specifically American — straight and married, able-bodied, and middle class. Some might challenge the accuracy of this claim. Yet media portrayals of motherhood remain intensely white as news outlets fearmonger with inflammatory dog whistles. Those whose ears are tuned to the right key burn at ethnocentric hymns which attribute the downfall of a nation to immigrant mothers and their offspring and the inherent delinquency of the children of Black mothers. Further, the social policies of the United States — lack of access to parental leave, affordable childcare, and a social structure that stigmatizes parents for being under-involved but forces their absence through the cost of survival — are weaponized against the residents of the country. The failure of a nation to ensure all constituents are legitimate beneficiaries to a stolen inheritance is masked as evidence of the ineptitude of its most vulnerable Black, immigrant, Native, and poor mothers. These mothers often find themselves stigma rich but cash poor holding responsibilities and overlapping marginalized identities.

Mothers and caretakers who find themselves parenting along the margins might be overwhelmed by the influx of information needed to navigate the world. Still, doing so when socially and geographically isolated while also finding yourself excluded from narratives on motherhood and erased from the history of a place is another struggle altogether. In 2016, I

found myself traversing lands and circumstances as an expectant military spouse with limited funds, fewer supports, and no sense of belonging in Wyoming. I understood the underlying messages of my situation quickly. My belonging was contested through the archival images of the Mountain West with lynching and intermittent use of the word “nigger” in landmark descriptions. The unworthiness of my motherhood, and dare I say my humanity, was conveyed through medical professionals who ignored my postpartum pain leaving me with retained placenta for nearly four weeks.

The purpose of this thesis is to actively assert the presence and validity of Black mothers in the Mountain West. I explore the tools Black mothering individuals employ when attempting to navigate, survive — and hopefully, learn to thrive in — the structural, political, and social influences on their experiences. My thesis engages how Black women in the Mountain West make sense of their experience mothering their children. It amplifies some of the perspectives these mothers hold and accepts that time and space limit the ability to be comprehensive. This research turns away from the tradition of trying to *prove* why Black mothers and caretakers have value or challenging negative portrayals through respectability politics, though it addresses an explanation of the stereotypes that plague Black mothers. Instead, this research engages with the language that Black mothers use to describe their own experience as they raise children in the Mountain West.

Likewise, though there is much overlap between the experiences of Black mothers and their Native and Latinx counterparts that this research mentions on occasion, it is not an in-depth exploration of any of these. As a Black mothering person in Wyoming, the full complexity of my mothering philosophy is still unfolding. Still, I am curious about the perception of other Black mothering people in my area. This work adds to the body of research around motherhood and

gender studies anchored in Black maternal feminist epistemology. I explore internalized and resisted scripts on critical elements of identity, namely gender, race, and motherhood by investigating the way Black women mother their children.

I move through my life — and this thesis project — with the awareness that countless personal and academic sources aim to define motherhood versus mothering, Blackness, reproductive agency, and a host of related topics. I have accepted that I cannot hear or read them all, although I have certainly tried. Instead of accepting the feeling of being overwhelmed and the imposter syndrome that is commonplace when you are nonwhite, nonmale, and do not necessarily have the “right” words, I have decided to start with MY story. To make sense of my experience and future as a Black mothering person, I explore a mixture of academic, literary, and interview-based resources. Not surprisingly, I reference foundational scholarly texts in Black feminist theory, such as Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought*, but I also use texts from other disciplines, like *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* by Patricia Limerick Nelson, to show that Black women’s experiences should be studied at the intersection of region and geography as well as race.

I enter this project with research questions informed by my lived experiences. I am curious how Black mothers and mothering people, like myself, use an awareness of the framing of Black motherhood as a site of continual crisis to bypass legacies of dehumanization, violence, and abuse and to avoid fear-based reactionary parenting. Since this goal is already ambitious, it feels natural to attempt to reutilize this knowledge to inform efforts to parent from a place of agency and self-definition that nurtures our children at no detriment to ourselves. Anti-Blackness limits my capacity to do this. The transregional impact of anti-Blackness is visible in the story of Baseman Taylor, a Black man who was lynched in



Torrington, Wyoming in 1913 (Jones). His story and countless known and unknown instances of racism and “mob-justice” inspired fear in the daily movements of early Black settlers. Baseman was one of the residents in Empire, Wyoming a Black homestead community that had sixty-five Black owned farms at its peak (Jones). The story of these settlers, and their efforts to thrive under the expectations of self-sufficiency that are characteristic of the Mountain Western climate—both with harsh soil and harsher racism. For the purposes of my research, this story extends beyond the pain of racism and exclusion in a land that was supposed to represent promises of new beginnings and vast untapped potential. (Though this land was, of course, never unoccupied or a blank slate.) My focus on Black maternal experiences calls my attention towards the Black mothers and mothering people hardly a full generation away from slavery who had to find ways to raise children in an uncertainty of how to navigate the social climate that communicated nonbelonging, and the climate and soil that made it hard to feed a family. I am overwhelmed at the thought of what it was like for the Black mothers of early settlement.

My first child was born in 2016, 103 years after Baseman was murdered. Nevertheless, I carry those experiences and I feel the terror that accompanies murdered Black flesh positioned for public display. I tripped into full racial awareness Sophomore year of my undergraduate education between the pain of Trayvon Martin's murder and Barack Obama's November 6, 2012, reelection. (Back then I lived in Dallas, Texas. Two years later I would move to Cheyenne, Wyoming with my husband who is in the Air Force.) Since then, I have existed suspended between the unprecedented increase of Black public figures making history and a stream of overwhelming headlines of Black murder. It was as visible in my visit to the Wyoming State Archive, as the current news cycles. I see myself as a continuation of Black

Wyoming migrants just as I see myself as a continuation of my birth family. I see my kin as spatially, temporally, and genetically diverse.

I carry awareness of the position of “invisible hypervisibility” experienced by Black people in the West in this research (T.O. Patton 153). This contradictory state is visible in many public areas, like political matters. But it also informs my parenting choices. I was curious how much of—and if—that diasporic consciousness is shared by my Black mothering peers in Wyoming, Colorado, and Nebraska. In that way, my research is somewhat self-serving. I seek the thoughts and behaviors that enable other Black mothers in low Black population areas to continue existing, mothering, and often thriving as they raise their families in a constant see-saw of “invisible hypervisibility” and the tipping pressure of historical and contemporary anti-Blackness. At the same time, I am desperately hungry for a liberated Black mothering strategy that challenges continuous images of grief and crisis.

The journey towards these answers gestated and eventually birthed my central ethnographic question: How do Black mothers between 25 and 45 who live in Wyoming, Colorado, and Nebraska describe their efforts to parent as best as they can in a climate that overshadows their existence and devalues them as mothers? At times, I have wondered if I am asking the wrong question. I do not doubt that there are numerous Black mothers who have decided their race is not a factor in their lives or their motherhood. Surprisingly, my small sample of participants did not contain any of those mothers. Might a hyper-awareness of my experience force me to project a longing for community and attachment to Blackness that is not shared by others and influences my interpretation? Possibly. However, the responses to the surveys I conducted show that while my experience is not universal, it is shared. It would be easier to measure how many Black mothers share these experiences if more effort was given to

explore nonwhite, nonmale, and mothering populations in the area. This would be a sharp contrast to erasure of our diversity under the figurative image of the cowboy. That said, my decision to prioritize the perspective of this group of mothers is a reclamation of our presence and belonging in this region. Whether or not others see us, Black mothers offer new ways of seeing the Mountain West. If used correctly, these perceptions might improve the experience for all peoples who find themselves here.

I move through this project with the belief that mothering is an action available to all, and while some find comfort in the role, it does not have to be an identity. As individuals of any gender are capable of mother work, this study uses gender-neutral language as frequently as possible to challenge the gendered expectations of the labor of mothering. It is primarily concerned with the experiences of those assigned female at birth and frequently uses the term “woman” as that is how all of my participants identify. As a Black mother in a sparsely populated region with a low presence of Black people, I have decided to survey the experiences of Black mothering people in geographic areas with similar populations and demographics. I intend to set a foundation that develops what I am considering a distinctly Black Mountain Western maternal theory, which privileges the lived experiences of Black mothers in the Mountain West and asserts that Black mothers in this area have unique experiences raising children and therefore potentially unique interpretations and insight into parenting. Still, despite limited access to transregional community, they are not necessarily in crisis. They have determined “it is what it is” and adapt to their surroundings.

Black mothers in the Mountain West face many of the same stressors as their counterparts in other geographic areas—as evidenced through their experiences with police brutality and the maternal mortality crisis—with the added pressure of having their needs and

experiences misunderstood by Black families in other regions. They also find themselves misunderstood by white rural mothers who face the challenges that accompany parenting in rural spaces— but cannot comprehend racism. This research follows in the footsteps of Patricia Hill Collins’ Black feminist theory and marries it with principles of Reproductive Justice. Reproductive Justice contends that there is a human right to “maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities”, as defined by SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective (SisterSong). As a scholar, I believe that Black mothers, like all parents and caretakers, deserve access to the tools to nurture themselves and their children. I use intermittent moments of reflection and autoethnography to speak to how this region makes support and care difficult to locate, especially for those raising children while aware of pervasive anti-Blackness. This study makes progress towards that future where Black children are raised in safe and sustainable communities by asking a sample of mothers how they make do in a climate where they are not expected to exist, let alone thrive.

This research makes a necessary contribution to the body of work in many fields. First, it adds to the latest waves of scholars who seek to complicate the hard boundaries between ethnic and racial studies and American Studies. My research asserts that by studying Black mothers in the Mountain West I am exploring the elements of what makes this nation-state “America.” In that regard, it naturally adds to the body of work in gender and the developing area of motherhood studies. The experiences of Black mothers are rarely explored in a way that does not pathologize our experience. Academic exploration that seeks to understand motherhood rarely acknowledges the similarities and differences in perspectives on how Black women experience motherhood, outside of Black feminist scholarship. It is not an

overstatement to say that the experience of Black mothers in the Mountain West is rarely discussed, especially in a way that centers Wyoming. With that in mind, I am contributing to New Western studies and providing more data for scholars to encounter narratives and experiences of the West that are often excluded.

When my qualitative research is coupled with excerpts of my own life, I produce a dynamic — yet inconclusive and noncomprehensive — picture of how some Black mothers in these three states experience motherhood. It is worth noting that I expand the conversation of motherhood to be more inclusive of the Black experience. I also wish to expand the conversation on Black motherhood to be more inclusive of those of us who mother in isolation, both regionally and occasionally culturally through voluntary separation from the traditions of our foremothers. Still, this is the beginning of a larger conversation that resists monolithic portrayals of motherhood and Blackness, not an ending.

## **Literature Review**

Discussing Black mothers in the Mountain West requires exploring a particularly nuanced set of experiences. The mothers in this survey have dynamic lives that develop from both present and contemporary categorizations around gender, region, and race. It is especially important to process the historical scripts imposed on Black women, who exist at the intersection of race and gender.

### *From Mammy to Motherhood*

Sara Haley details how hegemonic gender expectations informed conditions that left Black women vulnerable to specific forms of social and sexual victimization in and out of the

criminal justice systems in her book, *No Mercy Here*. She speaks of the “normative female gendering” which was produced through the “spectacular cultural and legal production of the Black female invert as a relational and trammled social category defined by deviant motherhood, physical grotesqueness, the capacity for hard labor, the impossibility of sexual, emotional, and physical injury, mental inferiority, and disposability” (Haley 6).

Black women’s exploitation allowed for the development of consistent gendered expectations for white women. To put it mildly, the qualifiers that comprised white womanhood were centralized around Black women’s perceived inferiority, hypersexuality, and exclusion from the social compact. Black women were “queer colonial subjects” whose deviations existed in opposition to — and often solidified — white femininity (Haley 40). Shrinking Black women into one-dimensional characters provided a method through which society could limit their access to America’s social compact that determined citizenship, womanhood, and often humanity. The Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire stereotypes were crucial to shaping public perceptions of Black womanhood and establishing control over their lives (Collins 80). With time, these representations of Black women were normalized and regarded as “common sense” through minstrel, media, and Black people’s limited access to platforms to speak for themselves. These one-dimensional perspectives of Black women were not static. They adapted seamlessly — and occasionally could be combined — to communicate Black women’s subhuman status.

### The Mammy

Often, scholars focus on the sacrificial, docile, and asexual presentations of the Mammy. However, Mammy’s phenotypical representation communicates as much as, if not more, than what society expects from her. In America’s collective imagination, she is dark-skinned, middle-

aged, and considerably overweight. If she possessed even one of these qualities, she would embody a deviation from American conceptions of beauty and gender expectations; embodying all of them simultaneously suggests an inescapable state of hopelessness and exclusion for Black women. According to this depiction, Black women are physically undesirable in every way.

When examined, this stereotype allows us to dive deeper into the delusions that white America holds when perceiving Black women and Black mothers. For example, her presentation as overweight, subservient, and asexual allows white individuals to find false security despite the risks for sexual abuse and pregnancy that Black women experienced from white authority figures in this period. The subliminal sentiment was that mammies were safe to enter the home due to their deviance from white beauty standards. Of course, this ignores the role that dehumanization, minimal access to agency, and the perception of Black bodies and labor as extensions of property played in creating the climate for sexual abuse regardless of one's appearance.

Similarly, the Mammy's unwavering dedication and servitude supported delusions that enslaved and domestic workers benefitted from surviving their white supervision – and even preferred it. Patricia Hill Collins notes that “the mammy image is central to intersecting oppression of race gender and class” and that the purpose of the mammy and other controlling figures is to influence Black maternal behavior (Collins 80). On the micro-level, the Mammy provides whiteness access to an understanding of Black womanhood that allowed them to exploit Black women's labor without the cognitive dissonance that accompanies acknowledging the injustice. On the macro-level convincing the public that Black women are happiest and most useful providing labor in white households prevented the need for further investigations of the systems of gender, racial, and class oppression that locked Black women into servitude and

embraced mothering while invalidating their efforts to mother their own children. By this logic, Black children were a waste of Black women's mothering skills.

Scholars consistently note that this uncomplicated fictional version of Black womanhood, whose only desire was to serve white households, never existed (Harris-Perry 72-73). Even individuals who found themselves serving in this role had feelings, resistance, and internal conflict about how this task impacted their own families. Black women's reluctance to accept this representation did not prevent white society from uplifting, furthering, and profiting from perspectives implying that Black women's labor was the solution to white problems (Harris-Perry 76).

### The Jezebel

Myths regarding Black women's hypersexuality and reproductive capacity signified deviance in a way that was only comparable to the false narrative of Black men as sexual predators (Freedman 27). Each of these served as a smokescreen for the risks of sexual and systemic violence that Black women continue to experience. While there are many legal, social, and racial reasons for this marginalization, Black women's relationship to property and agency was most prominent. As explicit and later implied property, Black women were robbed of the legal voice required to get sympathy, let alone civil or criminal justice (Freedman 27). The perception of Black women as insatiable and hypersexual nonhumans excluded them from womanhood and virtue.

Initially, the myth of Black women as hypersexual beings was used to force Black women into reproduction and rape to the economy's benefit (Roberts 23). This perspective has evolved to suggest that Black women require sexual and reproductive regulation and control over



time (Roberts 113). In some ways, the Jezebel was the image that necessitated the construction of the Mammy. This caricature of Black womanhood is seductive, worldly, and sexually manipulative (Roberts 10–11). Since the Sapphire (discussed below) was often portrayed as mixed race — like the tragic Mollato — she was regarded as a threat based on her proximity to white beauty standards alone (“Tragic Mulatto Myth”). Still, skin tone is not required to hold this title; it merely amplifies the risk. White society’s obsession with Black women as Jezebels is as reflective of cognitive dissonance as the Mammy; it is easy to justify Black women’s sexual abuse if hegemonic perspectives say they are hypersexual.

The Jezebel highlights society’s fear of Black women’s agency. From this perspective, Black women were the real threat worth fearing. Black women, with their deviant and curvy bodies, threatened white men’s morality as temptresses, the structural soundness of white families with their potential to serve as mistresses, and the integrity of society at large with their potential to birth more nonwhite babies. Under these perceptions, Black motherhood was a threat to a functional society

Of course, there was a lingering sense of contradiction present in enslaved women’s — and later free Black women’s — sexual agency as something to be feared when they had none. Any opportunity that the public had to view Black women’s unclothed bodies was a direct consequence of the systems of exploitation — namely the auction block and sexual abuse at the hands of white men — not agency. Whereas white perspectives of Black humanity left them exposed in the literal and metaphorical sense, Black people were forced to carry the burdens of their perceived lack of civility. Occasionally, this meant carrying those burdens as literal child they gave birth to as a result of sexual abuse (Roberts 29).

## The Sapphire

Despite the scripts that sought to reduce Black women to caretakers for white families or sexual deviants focused on disrupting civil society, many Black women found ways to exercise agency. From the Reconstruction forward, free Black women had families and sought employment for themselves. Pervasive racism forced them to locate alternative strategies for exercising this newfound agency and engaging with parenting and partnership. Unsurprisingly, mainstream society was unhappy with Black women's refusal to accept mistreatment silently.

The Sapphire characterization of Black women suggested they were controlling, emasculating, and disruptive (Harris-Perry 88). She was verbally and physically aggressive, always ready to police the existence of a Black man. Unlike Mammy, Sapphire is assertive to the point of abuse, frequently angry, and theatrical. She has violently rejected the status quo. Her aggression has consequences for her partner, children, and the community at large. Like the Mammy, she is typically portrayed as dark or brown-skinned and large—but not obese. She is perpetually irritated and angry with arms folded, fingers waving, and neck rolling (Harris-Perry 88). She also is likely the most overt representation of Black women displaying an oppositional gaze (hooks 116).

This representation of Black womanhood as brutish and confrontational was punishment for Black women's continued deviation from the same script that refused to give them access to self-characterization or agency. The Sapphire identity was used to justify Black women's exclusion through continued comparison to whiteness while refusing to consider the social realities that necessitated this deviation (Harris-Perry 290). Regardless of exclusion, Black women's agency and the existence of egalitarian relationships in the Black household directly threatened the structural integrity of white supremacist gender roles. Black women were

expected to uphold the culture of white womanhood despite having access to none of its benefits and many more stressors. Similarly, this characterization was employed to depict Black women as not only disruptive but also criminal.

Once Black women's agency was coupled with deviance, the journey towards criminality occurred much more smoothly. The Sapphire stereotype connected Black women's expression to perceptions of their exclusion from womanhood, allowing for the invalidation of their relationship as partners and parents. In the aftermath of this designation, Black women's incarceration was normalized. Haley details how Black women could be arrested for offenses as small as arguments. Unlike white women, their role as mothers and wives were not worth considering when assigning punishment. Black women were removed from their households due to their supposed irredeemable aggression and placed into labor camps, chain gangs, and white homes where they were considered more useful (Haley 36).

These representations of Black womanhood continue to limit the agency — sexual and otherwise — of Black women in contemporary times. Flat depictions of Blackness have evolved to present themselves in new ways in mainstream media. The Sapphire has a successful career and is goal-oriented but feared by subordinates and unable to secure a family in modern times. The Mammy is given more character depth and recognition, but remains sacrificial to the point of suffering, is deeply religious, and asexual. The Jezebel often has access to a character arc of redemption and self-discovery that allows them to find their way at the cost of sexual liberation. Likewise, the scripts continue to expand some of the more common evolution: The Strong Black Woman, Welfare Queen, Hoochie, Bitch, Ho, Side Chick, Chicken head — each of which seeks to invalidate Black women's agency and humanity and encourage assimilation to dominant gender expectations. Collins notes that through the years the characterization of Black

mothers has shifted as well. Now, the emasculating and controlling Matriarch, scamming but also neglectful Welfare mother, and baby mama/hoochie mama demonstrate evolutions of deviant Black womanhood to deviant motherhood. All of these, together and separately, impact how Black women are viewed in the role of motherhood today.

### *Motherhood*

The historical scripts forced upon Black women impact the way that they are seen as mothers. Still, even without the weight and complications of the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire stereotypes that continue to leave Black women vulnerable to mistreatment and misperception, motherhood has its own weighted history. The mother figure is a complicated—yet continually oversimplified—social role. This research focused on the lived experiences of Black mothers in the Mountain West. Still, long before it is possible to contextualize the nuanced experience of Black motherhood in Wyoming and surrounding areas, it is crucial to explore the general struggles and perceptions attached to mothering. The perceptions of motherhood as a social role vary. For some, it is a ball and chain that serves as a barrier to creation and agency. For others, it is a welcome responsibility with the potential to inspire new ambitious. For most, I would say it is a complicated combination of the two.

Developing an account of the experiences of Black mothers means first diving into the literature of what motherhood means generally. One of the best ways to discover the perception of motherhood is to explore the experiences of those who are voluntarily childless. Rebecca Harrington argues that childfree women are often uncomfortable with the reactions they receive from others after announcing they do not have children. Still, she notes, the exact reaction—frustration, sadness, apathy—depends on the conditions of whether they don't have children due

to “choice” (she has made a conscious decision), circumstance (because of infertility or other involuntary reasons), or chance (she might have wanted to have children, but time ran out because she had not found a suitable mate or was pursuing an education). The invasive inquisition into whether someone is a parent is gendered as well, Harrington notes: saying, “I less often hear about remarks like these from my male childfree friends and patients or from my childfree husband.” She also argues that others’ inquiries about whether a woman has children are based on the need to categorize individuals into identities that “unleash a whole narrative of projections, assumptions, and transferences.” Harrington connects this effort to categorize as evidence of gender policing, “the social enforcement of normative gender expression demanding that people conform to their biological birth sex,” as articulated by Judith Butler in her work 1990’s work *Gender Trouble* (23). Harrington continues noting the motherhood mandate, which describes the “centrality of motherhood” to one’s identity as an adult woman, expects “at least two children” and raising them well has an institutional and individual impact on the perceived roles of women and the way they are studied as articulated by Nancy Felipe Russo in 1976 (23). The mandate assumes all women want children and pathologizes those who do not, in a social context that assigned the full responsibility of child-rearing — and the accompanying risks and sacrifices — on women.

There is an equally present conversation on who can access motherhood, what it means to be a mother, and what can feel like “the cult of motherhood.” I chose this reference as it closely resembles, and is preceded by, the “cult of true womanhood” which emphasizes the “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” four cardinal virtues (Welter 152). The “cult of true womanhood” was a phenomenon solidified in the 18th century describing the belief that women belong — and were destined to rule — in the home. Domestic, or in-home matters were labeled

private and therefore separate from the public sphere where men made decisions and sought employment. However, it is worth noting that the mandate is not applied equally to nonwhite women, and as white women are forced into mothering, women of Color, particularly Black and Latinx women, are stigmatized for their reproduction.

As noted by Haley, Black women were excluded from the criteria and the category of womanhood altogether. Rickie Solinger writes of how the same racial scripts that informed the historical and contemporary perceptions of womanhood informed motherhood in the 19th century. On one hand, she described the glory assigned to white motherhood that uplifted “a sentimental mix of love, tenderness, ‘rigor and bliss’ and domestic power”. The value of the white mother affirmed the value of white children and therefore white citizens. The perception of Black motherhood developed in juxtaposition to white motherhood. If the white mother was a portrayal of humanity due to her inherent purity, the Black mother was the vessel to a deviant non-humanity—and enslavement. Black mothers were constructed as a “sexualized, negligent, super fertile ‘counterimage’” (Solinger 29).

This perception was most clearly evidenced through *partus sequitur ventrem* or “the offspring follows the mother,” a notion of heritability was used to perpetuate the system of slavery (Morgan 4). This English legal principle that determined that a child's status as enslaved or free was based on that of their mother. White women could only birth free children, and only Black women could birth enslaved children. Both white and Black men had the potential to father free or enslaved children based on the status of the mother (Solinger 20). Solinger notes prescriptive literature described white mothers as “dependent but dignified, innocent and pious but knowing, domestic but able to shape the affairs of the nation through their child-rearing responsibilities, deeply emotional but judicious” (54).

These early perspectives on the role of women, heavily shaped by race, continue to have a significant impact on how we define quality motherhood. Whiteness invisibly impacts perceptions of motherhood, as it is assumed through subliminal suggestion that white mothers are the only valid mothers in American society, though at times class is more visible. Just as there was once a preoccupation with perfect womanhood, there is an investment in perfect motherhood. A particular amount of attention around motherhood argues in favor of Sharon Hays' concept of "intensive mothering." "First, the mother is the central caregiver;" second, such mothering requires "lavishing copious amounts of time, energy, and material resources on the child;" and finally, "the mother regards mothering as more important than her paid work" (Hays 8). Additionally, this perspective on mothering embraces a "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive and financially expensive." This style of mother is impractical or marginalized parents, especially Black mothers who are disproportionately single-income and mother-led families.

Still, Solinger notes that under a social hierarchy anchored in white male superiority, even the most revered mothers experienced minimal power. She says that historically, even the most affluent married white mothers "could not own property, work for pay, divorce, claim custody of their children, or look for legal protection" if sexually abused. Although legally designated as "free," they lack the ability to determine if, how, or when, they became mothers like their enslaved counterparts (54). There were also limited opportunities to articulate the overwhelm, discomfort, or lack of desire to be a mother. Some of this continues into modern motherhood.

The pressures and perceptions of motherhood have shifted in some ways and remain the same in others. Under the intensive mothering model, the world gains an incomplete glimpse into

the struggles that accompany mothering tasks, let alone around-the-clock mothering. Public images of motherhood are grateful and cheerful, except for the unfortunate souls impacted by postpartum depression, of course. Any mother can tell you this image is so incomplete it is essentially false; “motherhood is filled with conflict, anxiety, and ambivalence. Yet maternal ambivalence often remains unacknowledged. When acknowledged, ambivalence about motherhood is often considered deviant or problematic,” writes Ivana Brown in her essay, “Ambivalence of The Motherhood Experience” which was included in *Twenty-first Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency*, edited by Andrea O’Reilly. Brown writes of the themes’ “divergence between the expectations and reality of motherhood,” formation of “maternal identity,” difficulties in combining work and childcare, and mothering according to prevailing social expectations” as the commonly visible during her exploration of writings on motherhood (126).

The last of these seamlessly filters into what Adrienne Rich aptly describes as the contradictions of motherhood as a “powerless responsibility,” which forces mothers into the position of rule enforcement without the power to develop the rules. Mothers are expected to produce children that easily adapt to their assigned social roles across racial, gendered, and class categories.

### *Black Motherhood*

One could imagine that in Black households, these phenomena hold true in nuanced ways. Whereas all mothers are expected to pass on the dominant society’s values, Black motherhood is depicted as a place of designated deviance, dehumanized, with social and material consequences. Yet the overbearing constructions of Black motherhood can place Black women



in a position that by simply surviving, Black women can easily employ small acts of resistance in their mothering strategies. Since Black women experience the “matrix of domination” made up of structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal components, each of which aims to establish, normalize, justify, or interweave domination and compliance, they experience motherhood from a particular sociocultural vantage point (Collins 21).

Still, white women are the standard image of American motherhood, although Black, Brown, and especially immigrant women have been designated the image of caretakers. This dichotomy of assigned roles and status is communicated through a variety of channels namely, the exclusion of anyone determined to be “other.” A quick flip through *What to Expect When You are Expecting*, a pregnancy guide in its 5<sup>th</sup> edition, provides a glimpse into this. The book is a long time *New York Times* bestseller and refers to itself as “one of USA Today's 25 most influential books of the past 25 years.” Despite having gone through five editions— with revisions in 1996, 2002, 2008, and most recently 2016— several spinoffs covering things like trying to conceive, what do expect the first year after giving birth, and what diet you should have when expecting and multiple cover remakes, all but one shows a white woman or infant.

A quick flip through the text is glaringly clear: the knowledge is not reflective of the things I heard from loved ones and members of other Black communities. And despite the claim of being read by 90 percent of pregnant women who read a pregnancy book, I have never seen one in a Black woman’s hands — or on her bookshelf. The twenty-three chapters address a host of physiological shifts and tips about milestone-based appointment screenings. *What to Expect When You are Expecting* does not acknowledge that not all pregnancies are “expected,” let alone how social and familial dynamics impact the mental and emotional response one has after discovering their family is expanding. The phrase “African American” is mentioned twice when

discussing gestational diabetes and sickle cell. As an identifier, “Black” is written fourteen times, one of those again about sickle cell. Racism is never mentioned, nor what to do if you feel your doctor demonstrates any type of bias that impacts your care. This is a concerning exclusion considering Black mothers routinely express concern around being “three times more likely to die from a pregnancy-related cause than White women.”, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (“Working Together”).

Thankfully, modern texts, like Shanicia Boswell's *Oh Sis, You're Pregnant! The Ultimate Guide to Black Pregnancy & Motherhood* written in 2020 are “tailored to today’s pregnant Black woman” and considers relevant topics like protective hairstyles for labor and maternal risks faced by Black women, are proof of Black maternal effort to self-define and provide a guiding light to other Black mothers. Much of the literature on Black motherhood begins by discussing how the violence of enslavement forever shaped the dynamics of Black family networks and the Black maternal experience (Roberts 54). There has been an uncertainty both within and outside of Black communities on whether to tether the experience to the struggles or to the joys. For much of history, Black mothers have been stereotyped as always birthing, but never truly “mothers.” Enslavement presented the most obvious example of Black women experiencing a separation between reproduction and motherhood. Dorothy Roberts’ *Killing the Black Body* demonstrates how white women represented ideal mothers, and white infants were the only welcome offspring. Roberts argues this perspective allowed for convergence between the tactics of sterilization, the pressure to use consequence-filled long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs), and scapegoating of women of colors’ reproduction as the source of social ills in the face of a decreasing white birth rate. Roberts also introduced the term “fetal-maternal conflict” (40), which demonstrates how society puts Black mothers in opposition with

their fetuses through the law, social policies, and medical practice. Occasionally this conflict places pregnant people's interests in opposition to capitalism and the nation-state, an insight instrumental to understanding the characterization, demonization, and prosecution of Black mothers.

Just as Black mothers are characterized as unfit, they are also often a site of sympathy. In *Birthing Black Mothers*, Jennifer C. Nash uses the story of Malaysia Goodson, a Black woman who made headlines in 2019 after she fell down a flight of stairs and died (Nash, *Birthing* 1). The New York subway station did not have an elevator, forcing her to try and carry her one-year-old daughter in one arm and her stroller in the other. Her daughter Rhylee was somehow found beneath her and unharmed. Despite a life of invisibility, media accounts transformed Goodson's story into one of a heroic symbol with unlimited capacity for sacrifice, who "transformed her body into a human shield to protect her child" in death. In this careful and sentimentally crafted retelling, Goodson offers herself as a tribute for her daughter; she dies to bring attention to the long-standing crisis of what Nash calls "Black maternal trauma," highlighting the overlooked structural and systemic struggles of Black mothers (*Birthing* 3).

The visibility and sympathy for Black mothers is new, but the perception of Black maternity as a state of crisis is not, as Nash argues, asserting that the rhetoric of crisis has permanently changed the contemporary understanding of Black motherhood. Now, Black mothers are portrayed from a space of continuous struggle and heroism; before they were a crisis of deviance requiring regulation by the state and white surveillance. One might conclude this from the infamous *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* written in 1965 by then Assistant Secretary of Labor (later US Senator) and sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan which cited Black mothers as the source of Black family dysfunction. Nash suggests the result is Black

mothering being (publicly) reconfigured into a “political currency” which frames the status as a “Black mother” not as a “form of relationality, a set of practices, a form of labor, or an embodied experience, but instead to a political category that is “a synonym for pain” (*Birthing* 4). Nash’s analysis is that the conditions that have continued across time and space, in the form of limited access to care, risk of experiencing racism, and vulnerability to interpersonal, systemic, and structural violence suddenly being viewed as sympathetic areas of crisis increases Black mothers’ visibility in spectacular and dangerous ways but does little to change our actual circumstances (*Birthing* 4).

Despite the public uncertainty on how to describe Black motherhood, Black mothers continue to seek ways to reclaim their right to parent from a place of self-assuredness and self-determination. Nash acknowledges the duality that accompanies increased visibility to Black maternal trauma. For government officials, talk is often cheap with the rhetoric of crisis rarely resulting in real change. Yet for Black mothers and community activists, it is the language of revolution. The contradictions present in Black motherhood, particularly the simultaneous glorification and abandonment of strong Black mothers, present a problem.

In her foundational text, *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins suggests Black women’s ability to possess a free mind and self-define as evidence of empowerment. Self-definition and challenging the scripts that shape the perceptions of Black women are the first steps to action them towards activism, making motherhood a source of ideological shift for Black women, noting “Motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting others, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women’s empowerment” (191).

For Black mothers, heroism can be dehumanizing and create as many vulnerabilities as demonization. Both overshadow the structural and familial challenges that accompany mothering while Black. Collins speaks to how this dynamic plays out when a Black male attempts to improve the public image of Black motherhood through a focus on sacrifice:

However, by claiming that Black women are richly endowed with devotion, self-sacrifice, and unconditional love—the attributes associated with archetypal motherhood US Black men inadvertently foster a different obvious seemingly positive image for Black women. The controlling image of the “super strong Black mother” praises Black women’s resiliency in a society that routinely paints us as bad mothers. (188)

Black women who find themselves mothering daughters encounter an additional set of considerations as they prepare them to survive the world without being pulled into a life of subjugation and self-sacrifice. According to Collins, Black mothers aim to balance “the need for the physical survival of their daughters with the vision of encouraging them to transcend the boundaries of sexual politics of Black womanhood” (200). One can conclude that Black motherhood is a blank canvas with limitless potential after reading Collins’s with a wide range of perceptions form of motherhood. The range includes those who find “motherhood as a truly burdensome condition that stifles their creativity” through their exploitation to those who see it as an opportunity for personal growth, status, and “a catalyst for social change” (191).

Yet like their non-Black counterparts, Black mothers are impacted by what Sara Ruddick (1989) calls the “gaze of others which expects mothers to “relinquish authority to others, [and] lose confidence in their own values,” which can be enforced by teachers, grandparents, mates, friends, employers, even an anonymous passerby (111).” Ruddick continues saying a mother’s fear of the gaze can “can be expressed intellectually as inauthenticity, a repudiation of one’s own perceptions and values.” Like all mothers of color, Black women experience demonization informed by cultural scripts that prioritize middle-class heterosexual white women as the ideal

mothers of ideal children. Black women are uniquely vulnerable to a “gaze of everyone” that delegitimizes them as mothers, and “adultifies” — or ages up — their children (Ruddick 111; Blake & Epstein 1).

Haley expands on Collins’s statements on the gendered racial scripts that have made Black mothers vulnerable to a layered gaze: “The imprisoned Black female subject was, in some ways, one vestibule to queerness; she was “the principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world” or “the route by which the dominant modes decided the distinction between humanity and ‘other’” (25). While this quote address Black women as a “vestibule to queerness” in the subject sense, one can easily see it as a double entendre noting that Black women embody queerness, but their wombs are a portal to queer subjects.

Public media is shifting to provide authentic explorations of Black mothering. In the last decade, memoir-style works like *Revolutionary Mothering*, *We Live for the We*, and *Motherhood So White* have expanded the conversation on motherhood in a way that centers on Black women’s experiences and fears. Short and long-form essay pieces, like Dani McClain’s “I won’t let racism rob my Black child of joy” and my own reported essay, “The unbearable grief of Black mothers” which was published in 2020 in Vox provide opportunities for rapid response perspectives from Black mothering individuals that keep up with the news cycle in mainstream and cultural publications.

### *Black motherhood in the Mountain West*

There have been studies that explore Black people’s public views of health care, discrimination, and the pandemic, like Kaiser Family Foundation and ESPN’s *The Undeclared Survey on Race and Health* published in 2020, that sought to compare their experiences to white

and Hispanic adults (Hamel et al.). There have also been surveys like *Listening to Mothers in California* published in 2018 which explored mother's experiences with racism in the healthcare system. Each of these surveys highlighted an opportunity to look at birth experiences of Black mothers (Sakala et al.). Neither of the discussed the mothers experience raising the children they gave birth to. Neither of these sought to make sense of the process of mothering in a rural area, let alone the Mountain West. In 2010 a third study, *Buffers of Racial Discrimination: Links with Depression Among Rural African American Mothers*, achieved several of these. Still, the study focused on the experience of Black mothers in North Carolina and did not consider the experiences of Black people in Mountain or midwestern areas like Wyoming. My research takes each of these a step further and acknowledges the experiences of Black mothers in Wyoming, Nebraska, and Denver.

What Black mothers face as they raise children in the Mountain West is overshadowed both by the stories of white mothers and the experiences of Black mothers who live in more densely populated areas. On the rare occasion we hear stories about Black mothering stories from the region, they are described from a place of lack or struggle. For example, there are articles — including those I wrote — discussing the struggle of locating a parenting community in this region while facing risks and concerns similar to our Black counterparts in areas with a higher Black population.

For example, the Colorado police detaining Brittney Gilliam, a Black mother, who was falsely mistaken for having stolen a vehicle in the company of her six-year-old daughter, 14- and 17-year-old nieces, and her 12-year-old sister (Hall). They were all removed from the vehicle at gunpoint. There is also the pain and frustration expressed by Sheneen McClain, the mother of Elijah McClain, a 23-year-old neurodivergent Black man who died in police custody after police

performed a now banned chokehold and administered ketamine, a powerful sedative, in Aurora, Colorado (Tompkins; Gliha). The continuous environment of racism and homophobia leaves parents of Black children concerned for their safety in Wyoming schools (Palmer). The stories of Black mothers in Nebraska—but also Wyoming and Colorado—face enormous risks during pregnancy and postpartum stages (Simon; Costello). Yet there are also stories of Black mothers doing what they can to thrive.

There are historical figures, like the late Harriet Elizabeth Byrd, who was an educator and the first Black woman in the Wyoming Legislature who fought tirelessly for the passage of Wyoming's version of Martin Luther King/Equality Day (Van Pelt). There are more recent headlines of Black doulas fighting to ensure Black women and birthing people feel safe while pregnant despite the increased risk of death they experience resulting from institutional racism in hospitals in Colorado and Nebraska (Mathurin). My own documented efforts to make sure my son sees himself even as Black mothers and community members are largely absent from the community. Black mothers in the Mountain West might be underrepresented but we are not absent or underactive. This study provides further insight into the experiences, concerns, and awareness of national trends held by those of us who are mothering in this region. It sheds light on how we navigate this exclusion from local and national dialogue as we remain both rendered invisible and hyper-vulnerable to experience the stressors of our counterparts located across the region.

## **Methods**

I was not always aware that I would focus my research on Wyoming, Nebraska, and Colorado. Selecting Wyoming was a natural extension of experiencing my first years of “real”



adulthood and starting my motherhood journey in this place. I do not doubt that my preoccupation with Black mothering in Wyoming was intensified by facing this transition less than two years before Donald Trump became president of the United States. I am certain that being in this particular place, at that particular time, shifted much about how I see the world. I desperately wanted to explore Black mothers *only* in Wyoming. But I did not know if there were enough of us to limit myself to this state. I chose to expand my focus to include Nebraska and Colorado because they share state lines with Wyoming, as well as similar geographical features and population distributions. For this study, I surveyed a sample of Black mothers between the ages of 25 and 45 were surveyed and asked them to describe their experience as they live in Wyoming, Colorado, or Nebraska to illuminate how they see themselves in comparison to their non-Black counterparts and Black mothers raising children in other geographical regions.

*Table 1*

<b>Age</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Number of children</b>
38	Omaha, Nebraska	4
33	Cheyenne, Wyoming	1
34	Omaha, Nebraska	1
42	Cheyenne, Wyoming	3
32	Omaha, Nebraska	1
34	Omaha, Nebraska	3
27	Laramie, Wyoming	One child, pregnant with second
39	Cheyenne, Wyoming	2
38	Cheyenne, Wyoming	2

35	Omaha, Nebraska	1
30	Aurora, Colorado	1
43* (did not complete survey)	Denver, Colorado	3
28	Cheyenne, Wyoming	1

Participants were eligible for the survey if they identified as Black, were between the ages of 25 and 45, lived in Wyoming, Nebraska, or Colorado, and were mothers through birth or adoption or primary caretakers of a child. My research is qualitative and used surveys as the primary collection method to understand general characteristics of Black mothers in the Mountain West, particularly Wyoming, Colorado, and Nebraska. This work is a hybrid ethnographic work. By this, I mean that I not only surveyed Black mothers for their perspectives, but also at various points throughout this work I insert my own perspectives as a Black mother raising children in Wyoming as a narrator with insight into the experience.

Wyoming is the least populated state according to the United States Census (United States Census Bureau). It has a last recorded population of 578,803 which is 83.7 percent white alone (not Hispanic or Latino), 2.2 percent two or more races, 1.3 percent Black or African American alone, 2.7 American Indian and Alaska Native alone, 1.1 percent Asian alone, and 10.1 percent Hispanic or Latino. Colorado has a population of 5,812,069 is 67.7 percent white alone not Hispanic or Latino, 3.1 percent two or more races, 4.6 percent Black or African American alone, 1.6 American Indian and Alaska Native alone, 3.5 percent Asian alone, and 21.8 percent Hispanic or Latino (United States Census Bureau). And finally, Nebraska has a

population of 1,963,692 which is 78.2 percent white alone not Hispanic or Latino, 2.3 percent two or more races, 5.2 percent Black or African American alone, 1.5 American Indian and Alaska Native alone, 2.7 percent Asian alone, and 11.4 percent Hispanic or Latino (United States Census Bureau).

Still, the online format increased my ability to successfully receive responses from all three states, although the results primarily came from Wyoming and Nebraska. The youngest respondent was twenty-seven and the oldest was forty-two. Just as the age and experiences varied, so did the length of stay. Some lived in these states temporarily while others had lived in these places their entire lives. Still, in order to locate Black mothers living in Wyoming, Nebraska, and Colorado I reached out to an important Black-led reproductive justice organization, “I Be Black Girl,” based in Nebraska which describes itself as a “collective that creates space for Black women, femmes and girls to access our full potential through economic liberation and reproductive freedom,” which aims to “envision a world where Black women, femmes and girls can access their full potential to authentically, be. (I Be Black Girl).” Lastly, I made cold contacts reaching out to those who identified themselves as mothers or caregivers on their Instagram social media pages.

The survey was available on Survey Monkey, beginning September 18th, 2021, and was closed on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021. Surveys were administered on Google Docs until I closed the survey on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2021. After accepting an electronic consent to participate, respondents were given a brief description of who I was and the intent of my research. After this information, they were directed towards a 40-question survey. The survey began with eight demographic questions each of which aimed to gain insight into participants family and life context. I asked questions about their age, gender identity, sexual orientation, relationship status, relationship to

their children's other parent(s)/caretakers, location, duration of time living there, and lastly the number of their children. I asked participants about their comfort level raising children in their area, the frustrations they have, the joys, and a number of other questions that aimed to paint a thorough yet not comprehensive portrait of their experience as Black mothers in these locations. (See full survey, in Appendix) The survey contained a mixture of Likert scale, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions. A few, like “what does a ‘good mother’ look like to you?” (Question 36), “what's the most important thing for you to teach your children?” (Question 39), and “are there visible differences in how your parents raised you and how you choose to raise your children?” (Question 14) aim to highlight what quality mothering looks like to respondents and asks them to consider generational differences in parenting strategies.

After collecting this information, I reviewed participants’ responses for similarities and differences. It felt most reasonable to use this information and sort responses into themes to better perceive the sentiments expressed by respondents. I examined and compared responses to highlight larger themes related to regional, generational, and racial themes in their experience and placed analyzed their quotes side by side with excerpts from public and academic scholarly works.

Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke described thematic analysis in 2006 as a method comprising five phases, each of which allows individuals to see and process qualitative information systemically, and through coding. The first step involved with thematic analysis is data familiarization in which researchers interact with data, transcribing it if necessary. At this phase, information is highlighted and categorized for an opportunity to better identify major concepts. The second phase is coding the language and categorizing information into small phrases often with memos and notes about the underlying messages. “Coding interesting features

of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collecting data relevant to each code” (Braun & Clarke 87). The third phase is developing codes to categorize that data, organizing codes into themes. “Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme” (Braun & Clarke 87). The fourth phase reviews themes, “Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts at the first level and then the entire data set at the second level, generating a thematic map of the analysis” (Braun & Clarke 87). Lastly, the themes are reviewed and compiled into a report enabling researchers to illuminate the connections and underlying messages between codes and their resulting themes. “The final analysis; selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, the final analysis of selected extracts, relating to the analysis to their search question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis” (Braun & Clarke 87).

This method is especially well suited for my needs as a Black woman researcher who seeks to carry the perspectives of my community into academia. It allows me to do so in a way that also seeks to preserve authenticity, context, and dignity, preserving the original intent of those sharing their perspectives. My choice to employ thematic analysis in this work also represents an intentional and strategic choice to reject the concept of objectivity. As research historically looks for absolute truths, I distance myself from the pursuit of a centralized meaning to other people’s experiences.

Throughout this process, I made a choice to actively lean into the nuance and contradictions that accompany Black women's stories in the Mountain West. The perspective to do so was directly inspired by a term — “it is what it is.” I have heard this expression from my mother for as long as I can remember. As a child, I would express a sense of righteous indignation for our circumstances, namely poverty, and held a low tolerance for things that felt

inequitable or unfair. My mother raised me with the freedom to express these frustrations as long as they were communicated respectfully. However, she is always clear that you cannot stop moving, or living, just because circumstances are unfair. Initially, I saw this perspective as one of hopelessness and giving up on the possibility of better. Life has taught me this is not true. My mother has never given up; she also refuses to pause her life as she waits for a shift in conditions that is not promised and has rarely been available to Black mothers. The longer I live, the more her “it is what it is” perspective resonates with me. I’ve come to view “it is what it is” as a fluid theoretical perspective that Black women, especially Black mothers, have employed through centuries of unfavorable conditions. As I raise my children in the United States it has become painstakingly clear that “it is what it is” is not giving up. Instead, I have come to understand it as a transitional space where one accepts life and remains open to the potential of better with the knowledge you must persist. This standpoint is essential when interacting with individuals’ feelings towards their experience in a location. Further, thematic analysis gives me the ability to listen to these stories while also holding the full awareness that the perspectives these women sent me are living and breathing perspectives of living in a particular place, at a particular time in not only their lives but also American history. That said, I would be remiss if I did not understand respondents’ thoughts are far from timeless and may look different to them in the moments that immediately follow asking the questions, let alone years down the line.

I encountered several limitations throughout this process. The first significant challenge I experienced was that SurveyMonkey had technical issues that necessitated that I transfer my survey to Google Docs. The survey was distributed online initially through SurveyMonkey and later through Google Docs. This was both out of concern for the coronavirus pandemic that continues to impact the United States and the struggle of connecting Black mothers at a time that

works with their work schedules. SurveyMonkey was a much more secure platform, however, after several respondents filled out the survey and the SurveyMonkey application returned blank responses with their IP addresses attached I switched over to Google Docs for convenience. Survey Monkey was more secure, but it saved my data inconsistently, Google Docs was a more reliable and user-friendly platform although it was less secure.

The second challenge I faced was discovering that ten people who reached out requesting to complete the survey did not meet my survey criteria and likely produced fraudulent profiles. I made the choice to isolate and exclude these participants after seeing their survey responses had concerning differences from those who met the criteria for participation. Responses were flagged based on several qualities. Several of them noted being referred by Vanessa Franklin, who described herself as a trans mother of two claiming to live in Casper, Wyoming. The introductory email for these flagged responses had identical greetings that used the word “kindly.” These responses also contain stereotypical responses to questions. For example, one of Vanessa’s responses said, “The government also provided a stimulus package last year of low-income families and it was of help to me.” Black people communicate their experiences in many ways. However, reading this participants’ response and seeing that two or three others expressed similar things was concerning. The survey responses for these individuals spelled words in ways that aren’t common in the United States— for example using “colour,” “neighbour,” and “learnt” instead of “color” and “neighbor”, and “learned.” It was also concerning that PayPal flagged these accounts as not belonging to the United States and noted “recipient may receive less due to foreign taxes,” during attempts to pay. In response, I contacted the Institutional Review Board at the University of Wyoming for guidance. They advised me to exclude the responses from the four participants with these red flags and refuse payment. The other six concerning participants

never completed the survey. Another limitation was that my survey allowed me to learn a little about a few people, yet unfortunately I didn't learn a lot about anyone. Some participants were detailed and descriptive in their responses. Others provided as little information as possible. As a result, the information and context I can offer when analyzing my participants quotes are limited and inconsistent. Given the chance to do this again, I would select three Black mothers — one from each state — and interview them in person with more traditional methods. I relied mostly on convenience sampling and contacted Black mothers who I knew personally as well as requesting that they reach out to friends and community members who would be interested in completing a survey around their experiences mothering while Black in the Mountain West. I believe responses could have demonstrated larger trends if I did not have to rely on convenience sampling.

During every step of this thesis, from ideations to execution, I was reminded of the constant feelings of being overwhelmed for many of the participants of the survey. As a Black mother who has lived in Wyoming for seven years, I was painfully aware of what I was requesting of these individuals when asking them to fill out a 40-question survey. The moments used to support my research were moments that many of these individuals would have preferred to be using to rest between multiple jobs, as limited opportunities to interact with partners or make meals, or to transport children. Several Black mothers in Colorado expressed interest in the survey but never started the survey. I do not fault these individuals. I engage with their responses and the process of graduate school with the awareness that there are numerous opportunities to drain the strength and energy of Black mothering people but there are much fewer opportunities to replenish that empty cup. For this reason, I was determined to compensate participants for their time and provided each recipient 40 dollars after completing the full survey.



The process of conducting research while working a full-time job, mothering two children of my own, and trying to be present for myself, my children, and my husband, proved to be extremely overwhelming. In addition to this, I did so while nearly 900 miles away from my loved ones. I mentioned this for several reasons: in order to shift my perspective from aiming for a perfect thesis to the philosophy that the best thesis is a complete thesis, I had to undergo a maturation process. With time, I was able to reflect on this experience and see not only similar struggles, but similar coping strategies and resistance methods in their responses.

When I felt overwhelmed, I contacted my loved ones across the United States. This network was composed mostly of Black women with varied levels of education—some had no higher education, some were in school, others were educators themselves with PhDs. Yet all of them had valuable insight to some aspect of the process. They reminded me that I was not the first nor would I be the last to undergo these challenges. They encouraged me to trust myself and know that I am capable of anything that comes my way. They reminded me to revisit my faith, both in myself and in a higher power. There were also women that I only met once, who offered words of comfort and affirmation in response to my overwhelm. Once all survey responses were collected, I reviewed participants' responses and coded them to identify overarching trends and common themes despite widely different origin stories among surveys. What follows is a thematic analysis of the survey responses.

## **Chapter Outline**

I walk into this project as the first person on either side of my family to receive a master's degree. At the same time, I attribute the women in my family as co-creators of this thesis project, especially my mother and grandmother.

The literature review introduces the necessary context for my survey results. This initial section introduces the reader to the not-so-subtle suggestion that traditional depictions of motherhood fail everyone but are particularly under-suited to support Black women, often resulting from the scripts and stereotypes forced on Black women as individuals. I argue that the embrace of intensive mothering — a term coined by Sharon Hays in 1998 to capture the expectation for mothers to give every aspect of themselves whether time, energy, or money, to child-rearing. This research overtly rejects the premise of this model and acknowledges that for marginalized people, such models cause devastating self-perceptions. Still, the intensive mothering model evidences the criteria with which society uses to demonize Black mothers and many others who lack the time or material resources to achieve this constantly moving target.

Likewise, there is an underlying suggestion that a “good mother” is visible in her prioritization of her children's needs above her own, and willingness to leave her life behind. Excerpts from scholars like Nash and works like Rickie Solinger’s *Pregnancy and Power* published in 2019 and Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Feminist Theory* released in 2009 identify the foundational conversations on how the institution of motherhood has failed all women as we attempt to mother our children but has produced particularly harmful criticisms for Black women.

Chapter One explores the obstacles that impede Black mothers in the Mountain West. It engages with the survey responses and the contexts provided by participants in their individual circumstances. For example, questions like, “How long have you lived in your area?” and “How do you think your concerns compare to NONBLACK PARENTS raising children in your area?” provide a surface-level exploration of how they feel about living in their places of residence. I make sense of the obstacles these participants face by focusing on the impacts of sub-themes like

having access to limited community while also navigating monolithic representations of Blackness and the stress that comes with navigating simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility while also being mindful of intracommunity expectations. The way these two interactions create barriers to developing and transmitting a positive self-image for Black mothers and their families is also explored. I place survey responses in conversation with events from national news and the theories of scholars.

Chapter Two builds on the awareness of these women's lives to explore the resistance strategies they use to survive and often thrive against the background and cultural landscape of the Mountain West. I synthesize these strategies by again highlighting sub-themes. Questions like, “What does a good mother look like to you?” and “How often do you see people of your race, culture, and location reflected in conversations about motherhood?” set the stage to learn more about how these mothers see themselves and the lessons they learned as they aged. This chapter considers how participants have used place-based optimism and intentional efforts to craft community as they hold and transmit self-love with faith, and inherited lessons, challenge narratives through reflection and self-definition, and express their struggles and communicate with intention.

The conclusion briefly circles back to how these themes connect to my own attempts to nurture my children while rejecting intensive mothering to save myself. It will do so with brief mention of what participants want to see more of in their region while also noting, “it is what it is.”

## Chapter One: The Obstacles Impeding Black Mothers in The West

Black Americans are rarely considered in the origin stories of the West. Imaginings of the area include the outdoors, open spaces, and even animals that are safest outside of the city limits. But Black people in general do not easily fit into the widely held narrative of region, even less so the Black mother. Patricia Nelson Limerick writes of many things, in her work *Something in The Soil, Legacies and Reckonings in The New West* which was published in 2000. This including the cavernous gap between the lived experience of Indigenous and Black individuals on the frontier and the folkloric image held by larger American society: “Logic and history say that the frontier was, in fact, a place where violence served the causes of racial subordination, but a more powerful emotional understanding says that the frontier is where people of courage have gone to take a stand for the right and the good. For people of a wide range of ethnicities, when it comes to the idea of the frontier, logic, and history yield to a much greater power of inherited image” (91).

Limerick speaks of the West as an interim place of transition within the development of American society saying, “regardless of the politics, methods, or age of the textbook’s authors, the West registers as a transitory phase of national history and not as a permanent place” (96). Limerick is speaking of the West as a place of transition and the larger theme of American empire. One could easily conclude that in the eyes of many, the West remains a space to pass through as they transition to newer opportunities. The typical portrayal of the West is profoundly incomplete: “One can glimpse the full power of a place only by the full story of human presence there. Thus, exclusive attention to the movements, actions, and impressions of Anglo Americans is equivalent to the arbitrary editing of a scripture, skipping entire chapters and devoting disproportionate attention to a few featured verses” (192).

Yet the West has been an unspoken epicenter for a number of cultures, namely Black families seeking connection. Further, the West presents opportunities to reflect on the benefit of ethnic identification: “By defining and claiming an ethnic identity, individuals try to place themselves in larger currents of life, try to find some sense of destiny and purpose, try to get out, at least momentarily, from under the burden of being isolated individuals responsible for their own self determination and direction at every moment (254).” The image of “uniquely self-reliant, individualistic American pioneer” (239) of the West has a particular impact on Black families, especially Black mothers, trying to raise children within the Mountain West. The expectation of self-sufficiency downplays the impact of structural and impersonal violence on Black families in the West and beyond throughout the centuries post settlement. Black mothers in the Mountain West are left to navigate the same stressors that plague the larger narrative of Black motherhood with fewer or no resources. If unaddressed, this can intensify the national state of crisis that has become too common in conversations on Black reproduction.

In her work, *Birthing Black Mothers*, Nash describes how Black motherhood — and often even Black reproduction — are often understood as a site of perpetual crisis. “Crisis — the primary frame through which Black mothers and Black motherhood become visible — has effective, temporal, and aesthetic dimensions that collectively conjure up an image of Black mothers occupying a non-time and non-place, one that is thought to be qualitatively different from the here and now of the contemporary United States” (Nash *Birthing* 12). Nash is one of many Black women scholars who have put words to the “Non-universality” of the Black maternal experience. In a separate piece, “Black Maternal Aesthetics” she also explains Black maternal subjects are made legible through politics of protection in Black motherhood stating the stage their “legitimate political work precisely because of its proximity to disposable Black

(male) flesh, and thus it forges its politics in ‘defense of the dead’” (Nash “Black Maternal” 555). Nash emphasizes how this political motherwork operates differently than the intimate confession of what she calls “white political motherhood.” She elaborates on its “collective performance of motherhood” visible in profitable memoirs in which “naming desires not to reproduce, voicing regrets about motherhood, and making visible disavowals of motherhood are thought to constitute a radical politic (Nash “Black Maternal” 555).”

Nash continues noting that this form of resistance to compulsory reproduction is not without impact and provides a “crucial counter-archive to the prevailing patriarchal narrative of maternal fulfillment.” Yet for Black mothers, who have been historically and contemporarily robbed of the opportunity to raise children and forced to live in anticipation of their mistreatment or death, Black political motherhood and ambivalence shows up differently. Nash demonstrates the divergence between white political motherhood and Black political motherhood explaining that in “the Black political motherhood genre, ambivalence speaks to maternal anxieties about children's survival, and about the conditions of the world that make Black mothering staged in the face of death (Nash “Black Maternal” 555).” Nash articulates the biggest difference between the two being that the Black political motherhood genre is Black motherhood as inherently political. This is in comparison to the refusal of motherhood embodied by the white maternal genre, which as demonstrated above is based in a pressure to reproduce. In turn, Black motherhood is potentially a site of creation, which is “synonymous with self-making, world-making, creativity, spirituality, and utopianism waged in the face of anti-Blackness” (Nash “Black Maternal” 556).”

In this same article Nash speaks of “a kinship based in state violence,” a nonbiological relationship best illustrated through the organization Mothers of The Movement, which is

comprised of Black women whose children were killed by police officers and gun violence, including high profile incidents like Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Eric Gardner, and Michael Brown. Few of us will experience the actual violence of losing our child to the apparatus of racism transforming our children's image from commonplace in household photography to nationally if not globally spread across posters, clothing, and news stories calling for justice (Nash "Black Maternal" 562)." Yet, I would argue that this kinship extends beyond those who have lost their children and includes intimate relatives in those of us who spend every moment of our lives in fear and concern for the livelihood of our children, due the unfortunate reality of the inheritance of a lived familiarity with what Ruth Wilson Gilmore refers to as "the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death in *Golden Gulag*, released in 2007 (247)." Despite the power of this definition, it is unnecessary for those of us who have lived life in Black bodies, it is best suited to articulate our experiences to others.

### *Limited Community and Monolithic Representations of Blackness*

Black scholars have long theorized about—and spoken out against—the homogenization of Black populations despite a multitude of cultural, geographical, classed, and countless other forms of difference. Collins and hooks are two of the most notable voices speaking on the role that class mobility and integration played in the divergence of Black cultures. "One of the most difficult and delicate subjects to discuss among African Americans is the reality of class differences and of class difference among us," hooks notes in her work *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice* written in 2013 (2). She illuminates the challenges for Black people to accept these differences among themselves and continues saying "the central position race has occupied in our political discourse has often obscured the way in which class differences disrupt

notions of racial unity.” This is not to say that there are not unifying factors among Black populations, but that those similarities are often overstated to justify a white supremacist agenda that removes personhood from Black people: “And yet, today, class differences coupled with racial integration have created a cultural context where the very meaning of Blackness and its impact on our lives differs greatly among Black people. There is no longer a common notion of shared Black identity. In other words, a sense of shared identity is no longer a platform that can draw folks together in meaningful solidarity (hooks *Writing Beyond 2*).”

Collins notes the shift away from unified Black perspectives left many Black mothers, particularly those who were middle class and financially mobile, with limited access to the support networks that accompanied the diversely classed but racially homogeneous context of segregated cities and towns. “Racial desegregation as well as the emergence of class-stratified Black neighborhoods greatly altered the fabric of Black civil society. African Americans of diverse social classes found themselves in new residential, school, and work settings that tested this enduring theme of bloodmothers, othermothers, and woman-centered networks” (Collins 196).

Though the number of my survey respondents was small, various forms of difference surfaced in participants’ responses. These differences were cultural, political, physical, and personal. My respondents represented diversity in income and class, dealing with and raising children with challenges and disabilities, and ethnic difference in those socially understood as Black. Other differences include relationship status, access to support from loved ones, relationship to their child(ren)’s other parent, population size in their city of residence—for example the difference in size between Laramie, Wyoming and Denver, Colorado. Even though they did not express this information in the same language as Collins and hooks, their calls for



diverse representations of Black people in the Mountain West illuminate the fact that Black people living in the area request dynamic portrayals even when there are limited opportunities for representation. The barriers to accurate representation and ongoing concerns of violence drive home the importance of community for Black people raising families in the Mountain West. Yet unfortunately, survey participants regularly noted that access to community was a significant area of concern.

Many of the questions asked focused on the experience of mothering while Black in a low Black population area. This meant similar, yet surprisingly unique, things to each survey participant. When asked “As a Black mother raising children in your area, how do you think your concerns compare to NONBLACK PARENTS raising children in your area?” all but one selected the choice, “I have more concerns than non-Black parents raising children in my area.” Another survey question asked participants, “What is the most frustrating part of raising children in your area?” The question sought to investigate the location-specific frustrations of those surveyed. The responses were diverse, and can be summarized as concerns for family support, tools and resources to foster positive identity, education safety, cleanliness, and basic needs. However, numerous responses indicated a longing for community. For example, one 28-year-old Wyoming mother said, “[There’s a] lack of representation and there are very few children who mirror my child.” As anticipated, many of these frustrations are in line with those of parents across the country regardless of race — the cleanliness of the neighborhood and desire for more family support. Others Black mothers expressed the struggle to find representation and concerns that their children have exposure to diverse experiences speak to the particular needs of Black and mixed-race families in low Black population areas. Since many respondents were parents to mixed-race children, there was also concern about the importance of not just having Black

representation, but diverse Black representation. These considerations surfaced for those who were upwardly mobile or of a different ethnic group. “There's a lack of Black middle class in Omaha,” one Nebraska mother who is 34 wrote before also noting the struggles to find Afro-Hispanic representation for her daughter. Another 32-year-old Nebraskan mother said, “Lack of diversity for middle class Black families in West Omaha area.”

One can conclude some of the reasons for these parents’ unease was anchored in a concern for a homogenized interpretation of the Black experience. One participant, who lived in Wyoming and was 38 years old, noted that she worried about “stereotypes being forced on my children causing them to be discriminated against.” Microaggressions were an area of concern before recounting a racially offensive incident that she and her children had experienced shortly before filling out the survey. For these mothers, a lack of community meant increased vulnerabilities to racism, mistreatment, and lack of mental and emotional support of their experiences. Unfortunately, many of these risks continue in areas with a larger Black population.

At the same time, several of these mothers reported having more concerns than Black parents raising children in places with a more significant diversity or a higher population of Black people. One 42-year-old Wyoming mother said, “I believe I have more concerns just because a place with more racial diversity is going to be more accepting of my children,” speaking to the concerns held by some other respondents. For these mothers, the process of adapting to this region and living in the Mountain West was bigger than themselves. They express concerns for their ability to adapt and feel comfortable in the region. They held concerns for their children’s ability to adapt and belong as well.

A 27-year-old mother who lives in Wyoming noted that she also believes she holds more concerns than Black people in areas with a higher Black population. After noting that cultural diversity is important to raising a well-rounded, empathetic child, she went on to say:

Black parents raising children with more significant racial diversity are able to more naturally show their children the differences in people in culture. Additionally, they may have a better support system. For example, during the George Floyd demonstrations, even though all Blacks in the community may not know each other, they are better able to band together in a time of need or posterity. In my area, during demonstrations, the few Black families or community members had no choice but to rely on white allies that may or may not have openly displayed their position on racial equality or justice. In other words, there is a certain amount of vulnerability.

Her response highlights several of the concerns often mentioned by Black mothers raising children within the Mountain West. Not only might there be a lack of representation, but there is also an uncertainty about who can be trusted. This lack of clarity around who believes in your freedom is especially stressful when national instances of racial injustice spill over into social interactions within the Mountain West. This response also does the important work of pushing back against the narrative that the culture of the Mountain West is somehow separate and isolated from incidents of injustice that take place in other areas of the United States. Similarly, as these mothers are trying to process the everyday stressors that accompany being some of a limited population of Black people within this area, they also feel the pressure of events that impact the Black communities elsewhere.

The continued oversimplification of the Black experience is visible globally. Still, for Black mothers raising children in low Black population areas, like Wyoming, Nebraska, and Colorado, there is a contradictory challenge of navigating hypervisibility and invisibility. Unfortunately, this pressure impacts internal and external community interaction.

*Navigating Simultaneous Hypervisibility and Invisibility, Along with Intra Community Expectations*

In her book *Sister Citizen: Shame Stereotypes, And Black Women in America* Melissa Harris Perry details the impact of the misrecognition of Black women on various aspects of their lives, including their public perception. “Recognition is a useful framework because it emphasizes the interconnection between individuals and groups. Individuals from disempowered social groups desire recognition for their group but also want recognition of their distinctiveness from the group,” begins Perry. “Thus, many African Americans bristle at the idea of color blindness because it suggests that race is irrelevant to identity. They want to be understood as Black, and thus tied to a history and culture associated with Blackness. At the same time, they do not want to be reduced to their racial identity alone. Just recognition means being neither blind to nor blinded by identity differences” (39).

Perry then describes how works like Harriet A. Washington’s *Medical Apartheid* offer opportunities to reconsider perspectives held by Black women, and the larger Black community. Washington's work challenges the narrative that Black Americans are inherently and unjustifiably non-trusting of the medical system by providing intensive, yet not comprehensive, insight into the medical abuses experienced by Black Americans within the United States from enslavement to a more recent history. The work also challenges the narrative that the abuses of the medical system are a matter of the past and provide a useful context to explore the disparities happening to Black people contemporarily. It also provides particular insights to how invisibility and hypervisibility, both of which are a form of misrecognition, contribute to medical crises, like the high rates of morbidity and mortality experienced by Black people searching for reproductive health care, particularly during labor and delivery.

In 2018, the first state-level listening to mother's survey, *Listening to Mothers in California* took place in California, and sought to explore the views and experiences of childbearing women while providing an in-depth focus on maternity care (Sakala et al.). The survey found particularly negative outcomes for Black mothers. In addition to describing the widely shared Centers for Disease Control statistic that Black mothers are 3-4 times more likely to die during childbirth than their white counterparts, *Listening to Mothers in California* highlighted the conditions that inform this risk in California. Black *Listening to Mothers in California* survey respondents experienced discrimination during childbirth, anxiety, and depression during and after pregnancy, and had a high number of postpartum visits. Survey participants described the harsh climate Black people experience while giving birth, including but not limited to harsh communication, not being believed, and being intimidated or pressured into decisions, like c-sections and epidurals, they did not want. The emotional discomfort they reported occurred for numerous reasons. One California mother from the *Listening to Mothers in California* survey of unknown age, who described her doctor's subpar communication and blatantly discriminatory perspectives, said, "He then threatened to not allow me to take her home if I didn't consent to a 3rd blood test. Then he commented on how Black babies are almost always formula fed, but since I was insisting on breast feeding, she needed to be monitored more carefully (Sakala et al.)." Another Black Californian mother, also of unknown age said, "when I arrived the first doctor on the scene kept pressuring that a C-section be done. I felt like it was too early for her to say that. If I didn't have one of the nurses to be my advocate, I'm pretty sure the doctor would have performed the surgery."

Since then, more surveys, like The Kaiser Family Foundation and The Undeclared's *Survey on Race and Health*, released in October of 2020, have sought to explore the experience

of Black people, especially parents in their mental, emotional, and financial interaction in the health care system since the pandemic occurred (Hamel et al.). The *Survey on Race and Health* notes, “Seven in ten Black adults believe race-based discrimination in health care happens at least somewhat often, and one in five say they have personally experienced it in the past year (Hamel et al. 4).” It also found that Black mother’s reported higher rates of healthcare discrimination before saying “Black women overall are also more likely than Black men to report feeling that a health care provider didn’t believe they were telling the truth, assumed something without asking, or suggested they were personally to blame for their health problems ((Hamel et al. 5).”

Another study, *Buffers of Racial Discrimination: Links with Depression Among Rural African American Mothers* documents the continued the impact of racism on Black mothers, in rural and non-urban areas (Odom et al. 354). The study surveyed 14 rural, low-income African American mothers of young children in an effort to “examine the relationship between racial discrimination and maternal depression” and “understand if there were health-promoting characteristics that might buffer these women from maternal depression.” The found Black mothers used cultural elements like spirituality to cope, noting “high levels of optimism and church-based social support buffered mothers from increased depressive symptomology attributable to perceived racism.” Still, this research did not take place in the West. The experiences of Black mothers and Black birthing people in the Mountain and mid-West seeking healthcare have been overshadowed and possibly ignored in the national conversation of parenting while Black and medical disparities. However, media stories on the experiences of birthing people in Colorado and Nebraska suggest these trends persist within the Mountain Western

region. When they do, they're equally horrific but less likely to be heard by the rest of the country.

On September 13th, 2021, I received a newsletter from the advocacy organization Soul to Soul Sisters, which is in Denver, Colorado, announcing the death of Kinyata LaCreshia Jackson. The images included about Jackson were breathtaking, as was the news that the 35-year-old mother of two, who's youngest was eight months old, died before her second child was a year old. While I did not know Jackson, seeing individuals who I had been in virtual community with made her loss feel personal. Similarly, as an individual who covers Black maternal health on a national scale, her story was the latest in an extensive line of painful examples of Black mothers who have been lost shortly after birth.

As I scrolled through social media doing what I could to piece together the story of her life and death, I realized something. Jackson had been previously featured in an article about the health risks that Black mothers faced in Colorado that I already intended to include within this thesis. Since then, I've encountered other regional stories, like Lisa Billingsley, who lives in Omaha, Nebraska who spent the first three weeks of her motherhood journey hospitalized with limited ability to move or eat, triggered by severe blood loss during labor, in 2009 (Costello). Billingsley, who had a Cesarean section, told the doctors she could feel the pain, and was told she couldn't. Another Nebraska resident, Candy Zollicoffer, had to convince her doctor that she was suffering from something that her doctor insisted was gestational diabetes. After switching providers, she discovered she had preeclampsia, a life-threatening condition characterized by high blood pressure that can result in organ damage (Costello; "Preeclampsia").

The above stories, including my own efforts to be heard in the aftermath of a painful birth and a long journey to receive a diagnosis and eventually treatment for retained placenta, show

that Black women are both hypervisible due to racism yet also rendered invisible in a way that leaves us vulnerable to negative health outcomes. A 32-year-old Nebraska mother I surveyed discussed the mental health challenges she experienced during pregnancy. “I became increasingly anxious during pregnancy,” she said. “COVID and a high-risk pregnancy due to fibroids were major factors. Family drama was also a factor. I wanted help better coping and sought out help from a therapist. I'm still seeing her although not as frequently. It's been a little over a year now.” It's reasonable to wonder how long it took for this participant to find assistance both with her mental health concern of anxiety in her physical health concern of fibroids. Thankfully, she had access to support. But limited access to mental and physical health care within the Mountain and Mid-western region, especially within rural areas, makes access to quality healthcare a concern for many. This is especially important with awareness of the risk faced by Black women. As one would expect, these risks continue long after the delivery and child-birthing process is over. For many Black mothers, the trauma of childbirth follows them leaving them uncertain when racism is going to impact their lives and that of their families.

Still, these issues extended beyond those of birth and reproduction. Black mothers in these areas reported structural concerns as well. For example, a 30-year-old Denver mom said, “They are closing the public schools in my area. Plus, there are times when I'm worried about the criminal activity near my neighborhood,” A 39-year-old Cheyenne mother, “no stop signs in the neighborhood! No grocery stores on our side of town. We used to have a Safeway then they tore it down for a city employee parking lot.” These mother's concerns are on par with the concerns of Black mothers in areas with a higher concentration of Black people. They serve as reminders that though these mother's may be left out of the overarching conversation of the experiences of



Black people based on their living within the Mountain West, the concerns and risk factors for lack of access to necessary resources are often the same.

Further, one Nebraskan mother who is 34 expressed the additional concerns of being isolated and at the whims of conservative politics:

Omaha is the largest metropolitan city in Nebraska, but there are times when it is very clear we live in the middle of the country, in a fly over state. I don't feel like there are a lot of diverse experiences my child can naturally experience (they must be seeked out). Also, the laws that impact her created and voted on by the heart of conservatism in our country.

Across the United States, conservative principles are barriers to necessary and often lifesaving resources for Black mothers and their families. Living in a conservative state often means less funding for education, lack of access to Medicaid expansion to ensure all individuals have access to health care, and reduced access to necessary reproductive services like quality prenatal, birth, and postpartum health care services as well as abortion care. Thankfully, Nebraska and Colorado have accepted the Medicaid expansion (Schulte; “ACA at 10 Years”). But in Wyoming, the battle for health care access continues and the expansion is continually rejected (Hall and Haderlie). This has dire consequences for Black mothers who are trying to ensure they and their loved ones and themselves have access to the care that they need. This becomes even more important with the physical and mental health consequences of isolation and racism.

### *Intracommunity Concerns*

Their concerns with education, access to food, and better health care mirror those of Black parents in other parts of the United States. If external pressures weren't enough, there are intracommunity pressures as well. In addition to these above, Black mothers who break tradition, as many of these have, and deviate from authoritarian styles and choose to parent differently

from their parents or relatives face scrutiny from their parents and the larger community. Stacey Patton, a journalist and historian, writes on how “tough parenting” is assumed, if not forced on Black parents to cope with a white world in her work, *Spare the Kids: Why Whipping Children Won't Save Black America*. She writes,

For many Black parents, not spanking is viewed as selling out or acting white. We mock parents who use “time-outs,” who take away phones and iPads as punishment, and who employ verbal reasoning with children. We scoff at their privilege and how nice it must be to have the luxury to ignore the misdoings of your children in public spaces. Only those with privilege have the time to read parenting blogs and books about positive discipline. Only those who don’t have to worry about being seen as another bad Black parent can think that no TV time for little Connor and Becky will lead to them knowing how to act right in the world. This kind of racialized mockery has become part of how we rationalize hurting Black children’s bodies (20).

Often, these critiques are presented by older Black people and point toward the generational differences surfaced at various points within the research. Responses were mixed on how their concerns compare to those their parents had while raising them. Several of these mothers expressed parenting practices that were in line with the growing shift of Black millennial parents to embrace positive or gentle parenting, though for some this model was uplifted by their rather than providing their children with something that they themselves lacked as children. When my survey asked, “Are there visible differences in how your parents raised you and how you choose to raise your children?” a 35-year-old mother from Omaha, Nebraska said, “I am actually raising my daughter. My parents did not raise me. I have also committed to positive parenting. I was raised in an environment of fear and abuse.”

The parenting style communicated by participants was in line with the growing trend of Black parents embracing a more positive gentle parenting style, a “style of parenting that promotes an authentic two-way relationship between parent and child (Alamrew).” Gentle parenting leans into children’s capacity to exercise free will and decision making within healthy

boundaries informed by three pillars: understanding, empathy, and respect for both parties, parents and children alike (Alamrew).” Some participants noted that they learned this parenting technique from their parents, who always demonstrated a method of parenting anchored in grace, the space to think critically, and unconditional support. Others embrace this style having realized that their parents’ mode of parenting was ineffective when compared to the needs that they had while growing up.

The same 35-year-old mother from Nebraska said, “I give my children equal freedom and equal rules” describing her parenting style. She elaborated later, responding to the question “How much of your parenting style was inspired by — or in resistance to — how you were raised?” she said “I was raised being abused daily and didn’t know any freedom at all until, I left for college, I am happy to teach my baby as we go. To let her find her way and provide healthy boundaries.”

When compared to their parents, there were many differences reported between both the climate in which these mothers were raising their children as well as the practices employed as they raised their children. These mothers are raising their children with newer technology like cell phones and tablets and unprecedented levels of connectivity and virtual community through the internet. It’s likely that this access to an abundance of information contributes to the frequently reported desire to be involved and present in their children's lives, in ways their parents were not because they were working.

Several of these parents were parenting in a different location than their parents had, because of having migrated to a new place. This was especially common for military-affiliated families. Respondents reported differences in income and time available to them as compared to

their parents. Several participants noted the adjustment required for raising children in a two-parent household having been raised by single parents.

Overwhelmingly, respondents expressed a desire to not only inform and prepare their children for the harshness of the world but do so in a way that allowed their children to see them as a safe place to communicate their needs and ask questions. These mothers have typically decided to deviate from “do it because I said so” forms of parenting towards an individualized mothering style that grants children autonomy and the opportunity to develop themselves as critical thinkers. They leaned into this by doing less yelling, with many reporting a desire to have an intimate relationship with their children that is not based in fear or abuse. It was important to these parents that their children grew up capable of speaking for themselves and having a voice, and they are not afraid to seek out the resources to make sure they are parenting their children as best as possible. Still, it is important to note that one parent explicitly stated that there is little to no difference between how she raises her children and how her mother raised her. This reveals that for some Black mothers, parenting techniques and perspectives are passed down generationally with little adaptation.

One 39-year-old Cheyenne mother said there were no visible differences between how her parents raised her and how she has decided to raise her children. She elaborates that the balance of rules and freedom she gives her children varied, based “on how they act that day.” When asked, ‘How much of your parenting style was inspired by — or in resistance to — how you were raised?’ she said, “I was born in the 80s. I understand the value of how I was raised and how important it is to know how to do shit. Old school values and ethics.” Her perspective reveals that the tools Black mothers feel are important to raise their children are fluid. Though this woman is one of few in this sample who parents like their own more traditional parents, her

perspectives are a reminder that many Black mothers feel that their parents provided them with an effective framework with little room or need to shift.

Many of the questions asked focused on the experience of mothering while Black in a low Black population area. This meant similar, yet surprisingly unique things to each survey participant. All but one respondent indicated that they have more concerns than non-Black parents raising children in their area. The mothers reported a number of key concerns. One of the most visible was how to transmit a healthy self-image with so few opportunities for exposure to Blackness. Participants consistently reported wanting their children to be protected yet prepared for the world, having a desire for them to be self-sufficient and independent, and the unique lessons that Black children require to thrive. One said, “the most frustrating part of raising children in my area is making sure my son establishes a positive self-identity despite minimal representation in the area.”

The Black mothers surveyed communicated many lessons that they deemed essential for their Black, and African-descended children to be prepared for their geographical contexts. The willingness and flexibility of Black mothers in the Mountain West to reconfigure the lessons for their children to fit their surroundings is reflective of the adaptability that Black mothers have had to develop as members of a multiply marginalized class. Collins describes this ability to adapt as an essential element of the institution of Black motherhood which she calls “dynamic and dialectical” (190). Each of these lessons was communicated in alignment with their lived experience. Still, despite diversity, there was considerable overlap. All of these are best summarized into three subcategories: lessons on how to survive, lessons on self-love, pride, and dignity, and lessons on cultural and diasporic history.

Within these lessons, respondents repeatedly expressed the importance of raising their children to understand their ancestral history, and the dangers that accompany racism in structural, interpersonal, and institutional forms so their children understood the risk that Black children face often with specific mention of police brutality. Some of these lessons like wage disparities, codeswitching, understanding the significance of Blackness to their identity have an obvious cultural element. There were other lessons around how to describe and perceive the language of racism, how to embrace a complex and dynamic identity, and the importance of education are lessons that are not necessarily unique to Black parents although they might hold particular significance following a history of race-based dehumanization.

From here though, there were key differences in how these mothers felt it was best to achieve this outcome. It was also clear that though they were all concerned with the impact of stereotypes and discrimination, there were different pressures to balance culture based on their ethnic identity and that of the children. Participants responses also suggested that while all Black children required lessons around race and identity, the type of lessons that felt important varied for those who were raising Black boys versus those raising Black girls. Similarly, there were unique considerations for mixed race families or those who belonged to ethnic groups other than African American. These specific lessons will be further explored as we discuss the strategies the mothers employ to survive their circumstance, and occasionally thrive.

## **Chapter Two: The Resistance Strategies They Use to Survive and Occasionally Thrive**

There are many things that Black mothers in the Mountain West must adapt to. A number of these mothers found themselves migrating to their location after having been raised in other places. As a result, there are numerous cultural, regional, and racial considerations that can cumulate into a culture shock. For those who were raised in the area, the transition to motherhood is likely smoother. Nevertheless, these mothers have adapted and found aspects of the region to celebrate. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the tools, lessons, and strategies these mothers in Wyoming and surrounding areas use to survive and occasionally thrive despite living in a climate where it can feel difficult to do so.

### *Locating the Positives of a Place*

Despite frustrations and concerns, many of the Black mothers sampled have located some positives in their experiences raising children in Wyoming, Colorado, and Nebraska. When asked, “What is the biggest benefit of raising children in your area?” many answers were surprising. Safety was mentioned most frequently. Cost of living, less crime, and quality schools were also mentioned. Participants in Nebraska expressed particularly vivid joys. One 34-year-old mother in Nebraska described Omaha as a “big, small town.” She said, “It has the benefits of being a metro area with a population of almost a one million, but without the traffic and unbearable costs of living. This allows me to provide a life for my child full of experiences,” before adding the benefits to her unexpectedly close-knit community. “Also, everyone (especially Black folks) are so connected here. That feels comfortable knowing that when she grows up, she will always get in company with someone who knows and cares for her.”

Two mothers, both who live in Wyoming, noted that access to education or quality of the schools were the biggest benefit of living in their area. This is significant considering many of the mothers comes from Southern states where education funding and opportunities to attend quality schools are limited. The Economic Policy Institute notes that despite the Brown v. Board of Education ruling that determined “separate but equal” unconstitutional, sixty years later schools are still mostly racially segregated (Garcia 1). The EPI says this has consequences for students, especially Black youth, and describe four of them as follows:

It depresses education outcomes for Black students; lowers their standardized test scores. It widens performance gaps between white and Black students. It reflects and bolsters segregation by economic status, with Black students being more likely than white students to attend high-poverty schools. It means that the promise of integration and equal opportunities for all Black students remains an ideal rather than a reality. (Garcia 1)

They summarized their findings saying,

Black children are five times as likely as white children to attend schools that are highly segregated by race and ethnicity, more than twice as likely as white children to attend high-poverty schools and are highly likely to be in high-poverty schools with a high share of students of color, but white children are not. (Garcia 2)

The education system in the Mountain West is far from perfect. In Wyoming, as an example, there are ongoing efforts to cut education funding in the state legislature and heated debates about book bans and a consensus that neither masks nor critical race theory belong in schools. Yet Black mothers with ties to the South know the education system in these areas is leagues ahead of the under resourced, lower-performing, and overcrowded environment common in areas with higher Black populations.

Other respondents from Nebraska emphasized the professional and communal opportunities in their area:

A 32-year-old mother in Nebraska said, “Omaha has a relatively good cost-of-living. My husband and I have a good life here. We own a home, have good paying jobs, and are close to family.”



A 35-year-old mother noted that “Omaha has massive professional potential.”

Lastly, And, a 38-year-old Nebraska mother said, “The diversity of families in our neighborhood. We get to meet and talk with people who look different from us and can share parts of our lives experiences together.”

These responses show that Black mothers in the Mountain West who live in Colorado or Nebraska were likely to have access to opportunity and more diversity. “The biggest benefit will be raising my child in a culturally and socio economically diverse neighborhood,” said a 30-year-old Colorado mother before discussing her upbringing in Florida. These responses make sense considering the higher populations and therefore higher access to culturally congruent peers and experiences that exist in these areas. By contrast, Wyoming is more sparsely populated and less diverse state with fewer of these resources.

Still, some experienced unexpected positives in Wyoming as well. A Wyoming mother said, “There’s a Black owned martial arts school in our neighborhood,” a possibly unanticipated opportunity to foster positive racial socialization and Black role models despite having limited access to Black people. Though few would place the words “liberal” and “Wyoming” in the same sentence, one 27-year-old Wyoming mother said, “Laramie Wyoming is the most ‘liberal’ city/town in all of Wyoming, so the groups of friends and small support system we have here is welcoming and mostly inclusive.” Her responses remind us that minoritized people are creative enough to locate the support that they need, even when it seems unlikely to others. Another 33-year-old Black mother in Wyoming noted that “there is a smaller amount of negative influences than living in a larger city” while raising her child in her area.

Other positives reported by mothers were somewhat conditional. Though many mothers spoke to the quality of the schools, one 30-year-old Colorado mother spoke to the trend of Black children being less likely to attend those quality schools. Similarly, a number of individuals

spoke to a reasonable cost of living. But those who indicated a desire for better jobs also suggest that the cost of living is more accessible for those who are middle class.

Contemplating the resistance strategies employed by Black mothers in the Mountain West offers an opportunity to reinterpret a quote used within the last chapter. As Patricia Nelson Limerick states,

By defining and claiming an ethnic identity, individuals try to place themselves in larger currents of life, try to find some sense of destiny and purpose, try to get out, at least momentarily, from under the burden of being isolated individuals responsible for their own self determination and direction at every moment (254).

When read closely, this speaks to the power of community as a tool for not only belonging, but identity and direction. Survey respondents consistently noted the role of community, both near and far, in their efforts to make the most of life in this region.

bell hooks uses her introduction in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, to empower readers by offering "practical wisdom about what we do and can continue to do to make the classroom a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality where teacher and student together work in partnership" (hooks *hope* xiv). The text includes reflections on anti-racism, educational methods, and sexuality. Yet more than anything, she speaks on the necessity of hope for change: "Hopefulness empowers us to continue our work for justice even as the forces of injustice may gain greater power for a time. As teachers, we enter the classroom with hope" (hooks *hope* xiv). Although these words have obvious and indisputable value when applied literally in search of relevance to the efforts of formal educators, hooks' community anchored perspective makes this easily transferable to the experiences of mothering people as they offer various types of life lessons, and therefore knowledge, to ensure their children are prepared for the world. hooks reminds us that mothers are often the first teachers within the community. "My hope emerges from those places of struggle where I witness

individuals positively transforming their lives and the world around them. Educating is always a vocation rooted in hopefulness (hooks *hope* xiv).” These words serve as evidence that Black mothering and pedagogical tradition is linked to hope and the belief that things can get better. Black mothers globally, but especially in the under supported context of the Mountain West, move through life and family rooted in hopefulness as well. In this case, Black mothers are both the embodiment of community educators as well as an alternative method for a praxis anchored in love and community. In this way, the Black mothers surveyed pass a legacy of hope through the lessons that they choose to transmit to their children. They also achieve this through the intentional community that they craft despite seemingly having limited resources to bond with like-minded individuals. These women gather historical, local, and national resources to make the best of what they have and create something unexpectedly beautiful.

The aforementioned concepts influence how Black mothers, and their families experience life at both the local and the national level. For Black women, the journey towards joy must be crafted with intention. As Nash notes, Black pregnancy and reproduction is typically presented from a state of crisis. Perhaps one of the most essential revelations of this realization is what it does to Black mothers when their reproduction is presented this way. One could argue the crisis narrative applied to Black motherhood objectifies Black women with children and those who may have children, while also removing the nuances of their subjective experiences and their agency. The crisis narrative leaves Black mothers along the margins of their own stories, forced to accept the unavoidable fact that their motherhood journey is understood as crisis by progressives and conservatives alike.

Yet somehow Black mothers have been intentional about broadcasting a counter narrative that centers joy. Whereas the larger world sees risk, statistics, and often trauma, Black mothers

continue to assert that joy is crucial and find myriad ways to secure that joy for themselves.

Imani Perry, the Hughes-Rogers Professor of African American Studies at Princeton University, writes for *The Atlantic* challenging the misplaced narrative that Black identity, not the persistent threat of racism, is a source of disappointment. "I cannot remember a time in my life when I wasn't earnestly happy about the fact of my Blackness" Perry writes in her 2020 essay "Racism Is Terrible. Blackness Is Not." "When my cousins and I were small, we would crowd in front of the mirrors in my grandmother's house, admiring our shining brown faces, the puffiness of our hair." The perspectives that follow are best expressed without interruption in hopes of preserving the full impact of Perry's words suggesting the rare sentiment that racial identity is not a burden and racial socialization can provide Black people with a positive sense of self amid a system of racial hierarchy:

My elders taught me that I belonged to a tradition of resilience, of music that resonates across the globe, of spoken and written language that sings. If you've had the good fortune to experience a holiday with a large Black American family, you have witnessed the masterful art of storytelling, the vitality of our laughter, and the everyday poetry of our experience. The narrative boils down quite simply to this: "We are still here! Praise life, after everything, we are still here!" So many people taught us to be more than the hatred heaped upon us, to cultivate a deep self-regard no matter what others may think, say, or do. Many of us have absorbed that lesson and revel in it.

Perry notes that long before she wrote about Black joy, Zora Neale Hurston challenged alleged perspectives that her racial identity was a tragedy. In doing so, Perry points out the diasporic legacy of Black people seeing pride in who they are even when the rest of the world feels it should be impossible. It is clear that Black joy is not divorced from tragedy. Black people have found ways to experience joy even though struggle, suffering, and discrimination have persisted. This is true for Black people—and Black mothers—globally. It is reasonable to say it is true for Black mothers in the Mountain West. When I think about my own life here, I see pain, disappointment, and longing for my loved ones, the nearest of whom is hundreds of miles away.

At the same time, I have had laughter with friends that I did not experience growing up in Dallas. I started a career as a writer to process my feelings and I have found ways to be a mother and wife on my own terms. Those things would be possible elsewhere but would show up the same way. Given the chance to go back, I would have asked my sample to describe the moments of joy they have had here. There is good and there is bad.

Perry takes full ownership of the truth that she does mourn, and is fully aware of the pain, namely the tragedy of police brutality that refuses to lift its grasp off of Black communities. She questions whether Hurston's refusal to weep at the world—because she is too busy sharpening her oyster knife, is unrealistically optimistic. But not even that uncertainty and vulnerability compel her to accept her life as tragedy. Regardless of this, joy persists:

Joy is not found in the absence of pain and suffering. It exists through it. The scourges of racism, poverty, incarceration, medical discrimination, and so much more shape Black life. We live with the vestiges of slavery and Jim Crow, and with the new creative tides of anti-Blackness directed toward us and our children. We know the wail of a dying man calling for his mama, and it echoes into the distant past and cuts into our deepest wounds. The injustice is inescapable. So yes, I want the world to recognize our suffering. But I do not want pity from a single soul. Sin and shame are found in neither my body nor my identity. Blackness is an immense and defiant joy. (Perry)

Perry has written on motherhood extensively. There are a few places where the joy that fuels the Black community is more visible than within Black maternal joy.

Leah Wright Rigueur expands on this in her 2021 article in the *Atlantic*. Her essay “The Persistent Joy of Black Mothers” informs readers that all three of her children were born to the sound of laughter. She's aware that joy and Black birthing experiences are rarely placed in conversation with each other. In that same article, Rigueur interviews historian Kellie Carter Jackson to explore how joy has been a key element of resistance for Black people:

My choice to laugh in the face of all of this was a reflection of what the historian Kellie Carter Jackson calls ‘violent joy’—a kind of joy that is rooted in an insistence on Black humanity and an assertion of Black personhood. ‘Joy is a weapon,’ Jackson told me over

Zoom recently, especially against an ethos of white supremacy, an ideology rooted in “ideas that Black people are not human ... that they’re not worthy of anything good in the world.

Rigueur then takes readers through a chronological yet noncomprehensive breakdown of the characterizations that plague Black mothers both past and present. As she asks Black mothers to define their vision of freedom, a common theme arises; a Black maternal politic based in the audacity to speculate towards better and lean into joy as it comes. She concludes the essay, “But Black women have consistently found value in creating new visions for ourselves—even when that new vision simply means welcoming your child into the world with “uncontrollable laughter.”

A different piece published in the *Washington Post* in 2019, “We asked Black mothers how they find their joy. This is what they said,” contained almost a dozen stories of Black mothers in various locations discussing the joy they find in Black motherhood. The responses collect for the piece, by writer Krissah Thompson, spoke to the resilience of the community:

I find joy in knowing my family’s legacy and in seeing the spirit of our ancestors and limitless potential of our kind, beautiful, smart, hilarious little babies,” wrote Alliah Agostini Livingstone, who lives in Montclair, N.J. “The cloth they’re cut from isn’t easily broken, but their bright auras have the power to coax smiles out of even the toughest individuals. Their love, their light, and their youthful, honest wisdom and observations — they bring me joy.

Thompson collected other perspectives, like one from Linda Burke in Silver Spring, Maryland, that said the pursuit of joy was intentional yet found in the things many take for granted: “I have learned to find my joy everywhere I can find it: through prayer, meditation, daytime lunch dates with my spouse, even brief conversations with my son as he leaves for his first job in the morning and texts with my daughter between her classes.”

Reflecting on the responses they provided about what lessons are most important to pass on to their children we gain insight into their effort to envision a future where their children — if

not themselves — get a grasp on freedom. This freedom is possible if they find themselves within a geographical location that has been resistant to writing their existence into the narrative of place, space, and time. Black maternal hope and joy are the cornerstones of resistance that Black mothers go after and secure for ourselves. Black mothers have begun to intentionally reject the narrative that our family stories are solely inscribed with trauma. The shift has even caused media to present stories of Black families thriving as we have begun to reject the singularly focused narratives of trauma and pain. The participants provide how these connect with their own stories by noting the positives of their place.

### *Community and Kinship*

The perspectives that the mothers provided in the previous chapter around the struggles they face as they attempt to acculturate to the dynamics in the Mountain West points towards one of the central desires expressed by survey participants: A desire for a community of mothers who understand and when possible, share their experiences as Black mothers in the Mountain West. In the absence of access to relatives, several participants note the importance of their faith community in mitigating the effects of geographical isolation: “I have access to all of this because of the community we curated among our friends and church family,” said a 38-year-old mother in Nebraska. Somewhat unexpectedly, survey participants reported being overwhelmingly comfortable with raising children in their areas. There were ten responses noting they were either comfortable or very comfortable living in their area. One response reported a sense of discomfort in their area. Three interviewees expressed being neither comfortable nor uncomfortable with living in their area. These responses point towards the diversity of experiences and perceptions held by Black mothers in Wyoming. Like Perry, they

want the larger society to recognize their struggles and see them worthy of solutions. Yet they also refuse to put their lives on hold as they wait for things to change. Mothers who reported being comfortable raising their children in their area are seemingly content with their home in the Mountain West. Those who are neither comfortable nor uncomfortable have accepted that their lives must continue regardless of where they are located. The participant who said she was uncomfortable raising her children here shows that even in the Mountain West there are Black mothers who find ways to enjoy life and make positive memories even when the conditions are not what they hoped for. Each of these survey participants and their willingness to share their opinions not only show a hope that better is possible—they also show that they believe their perspectives matter. Perhaps what makes these perspectives possible is their connection to a larger community and the tools they gain through those community networks.

To best make sense of the tools these mothers have applied to be overwhelmingly comfortable, it's worth looking at their fluid definitions of home, and the unexpected longevity of the roots many of these Black families hold in these places. When asked, "Where is home?" participants' responses provided a diverse collection of sentiments. There was frequent mention of a connection to the South. Some achieve this by mentioning specific states; others did so by mentioning the impact of being raised in southern cultural traditions had on how they parent their children. Multiple respondents reported the challenge of maintaining connection with family over distance, and the importance of developing new support networks in these areas in the absence of a family of origin. Some consider their current locations home. One participant who is 39, and lives in Wyoming and has lived there for most of her life selected, "this is my home" when asked "What location do you consider home?"



However, when asked the same question, another 34-year-old mother who has lived in Omaha, Nebraska for more than nine years responded, “this is my home, I am from California, but I don't or no longer consider that home.” Some left home undefined. A 42-year-old mother who is married to a man in the military living in Wyoming said, “California was my home, but I haven't lived there for 15 years,” showing that for some of these mothers a transient lifestyle makes it challenging to pinpoint “home.” Others listed a host of places as home, like a 28-year-old mother in Wyoming who listed Houston TX, Atlanta GA, and Baton Rouge LA as the locations that they consider home. For example, one mother who is 30 years old and lived in Colorado responded, “I consider the home we live in to be a house. For me, home is less of where I live, but who I am with period I am home with my partner. I am home with my sister. I am home with my mother.”

Yet a number of survey participants emphasized their connection to their home of origin or the places that their families lived, regardless of how long they have lived there. This is best demonstrated by a 38-year-old mother living in Omaha, Nebraska who said, “Physically, Omaha is my home. But my heart often considers Alabama my home because a great deal of my family lives there.” Those fortunate enough to have family in their current area rely on them for support as they raise their children:

A 34-year-old mother in Nebraska said, “I do not live in the same city as my daughter's grandparents, so that has posed a challenge. We rely heavily on our friend circle that we have created over the past 15 years in Omaha. Both sets of grandparents do travel to Omaha to support us as well.”

The lack of family nearby is more representative of the responses within this sample. Family was an important theme within the survey even though many participants were not in the same community as their loved ones. One participant's responses describe an upbringing that set an expectation of collaborative child rearing:

I'm fortunate to have been raised by a village of family and friends, which allowed my mother to obtain her bachelor's degree in information systems and climb up the corporate ladder on her own. My grandmother, aunts, uncles, and extended family all played an active role in my life which I'm forever grateful for.

She reported later that she and her husband are now raising their son and have limited support from loved ones because they are in another region. She still believes in the value of this collaborative community of loved ones even though she and her husband have had to rely on each other, with little to no childrearing support. Still, she keeps in contact with those loved ones and know that, if necessary, she can call on them for financial and emotional support.

There are many efforts to create community. Defining Black families expansively is a Black tradition that highlights the sense of shared responsibility and collective perspectives held in Black communities. One visible example of this is "fictive kin," which describes non-blood-related family members like aunts or uncles who have been given titles that reflect honorary status as family member. Often these titles are based in how they support the family. Black mothers raising children in the Mountain West must expand "fictive kin" in ways that their non-Mountain Western counterparts may not. The term "fictive kin" is usually associated with racially similar "play cousins" and "play uncles and aunties." Nefertiti Austin defines "fictive kin" as "relatives also included fictive kin, or people in a child's life with no blood ties but who hold a significant emotional relationship with the child." These mothers find "fictive kin" or friends so close they feel like family, through traditional avenues, like church and work, and they take time to make sure these relationships are safe. One 27-year-old Wyoming mother said, "Because all of our family lives on the East Coast, our support system in Laramie consists of coworkers and close friends we have made over the years. The list is small but strong."

Though access to family varies, support from friends is mentioned in nearly every response. Yet some, like one Wyoming mother who is 38 years old with multi-racial children,

note that though they have access to physical support through their in-laws this often comes with unsolicited opinions and those who disregard their wishes for their children:

My in-laws will watch the kids when we need a babysitter this helps me have a date night, work late, have some time for a project. That's supportive in giving me time. However, my in-laws also criticize how the boy's hair looks, how they wear their hats on their heads, go behind my back and provide food that goes against their dietary restrictions, criticize my parenting choices with discipline. That is not supporting my opinion. The people who support me in cheering me on, speaking life into me, and offering wisdom in parenting are not in Wyoming for the most part.

This mothers' perspectives express gratitude for the support she has from extended family.

However, the help she gets from her in-laws can feel unsupportive because they do not understand that their grandchildren being mixed-raced creates new considerations about what comments about their appearance are appropriate. Her insight shows that Black mothers raising children in Mountain and Mid-Western areas might also have to protect their children from well-meaning comments from loved ones who have not taken time to understand race and identity. As a result, these mothers might also have to spend additional time making sure these comments don't impact their children's self-image.

### *Holding and Transmitting Self-Love with Faith and Inherited Lessons*

Faith is a multi-purpose site for Black women, particularly those who live in the Mountain West. It is equally as likely to be an opportunity for community as it is the space for transgenerational lessons and essential teachings on value and self-love for future generations. Yolanda Pierce describes "womanist theology," which was coined by novelist Alice Walker, as a space to tell stories and craft a liberating theology that prioritizes the way Black women's identity shapes how they show up in the world but isn't necessarily exclusive to Black women: "I cannot divorce my faith from the realities of living in the body of a Black woman, born in a country whose original sin is racism she explains in the introduction." (p. xvii)

Pierce uses the preface of her book *In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith, and the Stories We Inherit*, published in 2021, not only to explain the former, but also to discuss its significance as a “work of Grandmother theology, a subset of womanist thought.” Pierce defines Grandmother theology as one “rooted in generational wisdom, in the way that time and age and maturity provide an alternative lens through which to know and understand God” and acknowledges its impact as a counter-hegemonic way of knowing and theorizing the world (xvii). Pierce says,

In a world eager to promote the newest wunderkind, grandmother theology carries us two or more generations back: to the kitchens, hair salons, gardens, and church basements of older Black women who are often invisible in theological discourse but without whom the American Christian church would cease to exist. I had a praying grandmother, and nothing I have accomplished would have been possible without her prayers (p. xvii).

The presentation of faith in the survey responses I received looks different from family to family. One mother's responses shows that faith can be in oneself, or simultaneously internal and external. She describes the faith her mother had in her while also being a spiritual person for whom the relationship she had with Jesus Christ was important. When asked, how much of your parenting style was inspired by — or in resistance to — “How you were raised?” she said,

I definitely don't think I'm resisting anything. My mother trusted me and afforded me many opportunities... I commune with Christ on my parenting choices. I think that definitely was inspired by my mother. She was a God-fearing woman I admired. I am grateful that I have my own relationship with Christ.

The mothers sampled expressed many lessons that they hoped to pass on to their children, a number of which were inherited from their parents. The most visible was a sense of self-worth and efficacy. Beyond that, mothers in the Mountain West wanted their children to understand that they did not have to be perfect and that they deserve to be themselves unapologetically. Almost always, this involved wanting their children to be confident in who they were, speak up, and demand that they are being treated fairly.

When asked “Do you believe Black children, or mixed-race children of Black ancestry, require specific lessons?” nearly all parents said yes and saw themselves as responsible for transmitting those messages. A 33-year-old mother from Wyoming provided a response that pointed towards the impact of transregional influence on her child-rearing decisions. She said:

As a southern raised Black woman, it is important to me to constantly stress the importance of education and the cultural standards of a Black person, or Black man in the world. Although my son is 8, I have to prepare my son for racism and setbacks due to his race. We prepare our son to take on matters instead of being blindsided in hopes they don't happen. We introduce terms, phrases, and other situations that he can quickly identify so that he can let us know immediately.

The perspective that Black children needed to be realistically prepared for the larger world was a common sentiment. These perspectives show that Black parents take their responsibility of preparing their children for the world seriously. Conversations around race and identity are uncomfortable for all people. However, Black parents are often aware that neglecting to have those conversations can prove to be a matter of life or death at a later stage.

The responses to these questions prioritized lessons they felt were required for their children’s survival. Further, the question “What is the most important thing for you to teach your children?” revealed more sentimental responses. Many of these responses were quite profound, even when simple like that of a 35-year-old mother from Nebraska’s belief that “Strength is knowing when to pause.” I highlight a few of the lessons below:

One 32-year-old mother in Nebraska said about her daughter, “I want her to go into life knowing that she is cared for, loved, and whole period if I can teach her that, then she'll be able to withstand all the trials that come with life.”

A 38-year-old Wyoming mother believed her faith is a crucial element of the lessons she wants to teach her children: “I want them to be God fearing men. I am teaching them to walk in Christ not to be religious. I want them to love unconditionally and forgive quickly. I want them to own in their gifts and inspire. Speak life into others always.”

A 38-year-old Nebraskan mother believes that foundational in her child's journey: “To be confident in their identity. This confidence will help them make wise decisions from that

truth. They don't need to do anything to be considered amazing, they just are. To use their voice to speak up for the things that are important to and for them. To not compromise when it comes to how people should treat them.”

One Wyoming mother who is 33 years old said: “The most important thing for me to teach my child is to enter each day as a new day and with a positive mindset. Life is full of turmoil and grief; therefore, I do not ever want my son to think that if he makes a mistake that he is a bad person, or there is no room for redemption. A lot of good can come from just being kind to yourself and others.”

Perhaps more clearly than the others, this last contribution illustrates that, despite the uncertainty and chaos of the world these mothers dare to have the hope to dream bigger, better futures for their children and also make efforts to transmit this way of thinking to their children. A number of parents, but not all, expressed a desire to raise children who were God fearing, forgiving, kind, and embodied unconditional love. The mothers wanted their children to give grace to themselves as well as to others and find joy and possess compassion.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins notes that mothers of Black girls often encounter a unique set of pressures when educating their daughters:

Despite the dangers, mothers routinely encourage Black daughters to develop skills to confront oppressive conditions. Learning that they will work, and that education is a vehicle for advancement can also be seen as ways of enhancing positive self-definitions and self-valuations in Black girls. Emotional strength is essential, but not at the cost of physical survival (198).

One Nebraska mother's responses speaks to this indirectly, saying the lesson she hopes to teach her daughter is, “For her to be her own person, unapologetically. Also, that perfection isn't real.” It is clear that more than anything else, they want children who understand their inherent value is nonnegotiable despite often finding themselves in situations where they are the one and only or don't know encountering suggestions that they don't matter.

### *Challenging Narratives Through Reflection and Self-Definition*

As explained above, there are myriad negative perceptions and risks for harm experienced by Black mothers aiming to raise their children within the United States. For those raising children in a geographically isolated area like the Mountain West, there are additional considerations and potentially additional barriers to establishing a concept of Black motherhood that comes from inside instead of being prescribed. The 33-year-old Wyoming mother who was quoted at the beginning of this thesis describes this best:

It is very rare that I see people of the same race, culture and location reflected in conversations about motherhood. If you Google the term motherhood, you will receive primarily images of white women as this is what society is used to portraying. Genuine efforts have to be made to change the dialogue to speak directly towards Black women, as we are not looked at as being nurturers despite our lineages of taking care of other people's children. I am an educated, working mother and wife. I literally had to fight to uphold each of these titles, because women especially Black women are made to choose instead of embracing such life milestones.

Those surveyed had different answers to the question “How often do you see people of your race culture and location reflected in conversations about motherhood?” Several responses included some version of “rarely or almost never,” such as, “This is the first conversation I have had about race and motherhood” and “usually [portrayed] negatively.” Yet there were others that spoke to the intentional effort that Black mothers within this region put towards challenging hegemonic narratives on Black motherhood by finding a Black maternal community:

A 38-year-old mother in Wyoming said she intentionally seeks out books to fill in the gaps in representation: “Read a great book about it. It's happening more often because I am intentionally having these conversations by initiating them and being intentional to connect with more mothers who represent my race and culture.”

One Nebraskan mother said, “I try to surround myself with people who reflect my ideals around parenting and mothering, so quite often.” Her response demonstrates even though she lives in a low Black population area with limited representation some mothers are successful at finding a community that works for them.

Local community advocacy organizations also proved to be valuable for some of the mother's seeking representation that might be lacking otherwise. One 32-year-old mother living in Nebraska described this in detail:

I see these conversations played out often due to my connection with I Be Black Girl, a local organization dedicated to the experience of Black woman in Omaha. Because of them I have had access to conversations about Black maternal health. Outside of I Be Black Girl I don't know of many other local resources which has been hard. I also seek out media related to the Black mothering experience such as books and podcasts.

These organizations can be help for Black mothers in low Black population areas who want community. However, locating and engaging with these resources requires more intentional effort that it would require mothers who have access to more people who look like them and share their interests. One 30-year-old mother in Colorado spoke to the effort and intentional Black mothers in Wyoming and surrounding areas have to put forth as marginalized people seeking community inside a majority white community:

“I have access to these spaces but find myself being inconsistent around making time for sharing these spaces,” she says hinting towards the effort required to of locating community. For individuals who are raising children and trying to work this can be overwhelming.

Building relationships takes effort for all people. However, Black mothers in low Black population areas who seek community that affirms their identity and concerns feel this in specific ways. They may be aware of the value of like-minded and culturally congruent community and say that it matters to them. They can also simultaneously not have the energy to seek out or engage with these efforts as they attempt to raise children and navigate the stressors of everyday life. For some, feelings of inconsistency or not putting forth enough effort to get involved can bring feelings of guilt of feeling and responsibility. At times, these mothers decide the overwhelm, effort, or stress that accompanies the process is not worth the benefits.



Despite access to minimal representation, participants developed their own definitions of what good motherhood looks like based on the experiences they have had. To gain a better sense of what they witnessed in childhood, I asked “How often did you see your mother or primary caretaker ask for help or share the responsibility of raising you?” Often, the answers were a mixture of “literally never”, “none”, “never”, and “she still doesn’t.” Others gave mother-specific details of a lack or nonvisible form of support. A mother who is 38 years old and lives in Nebraska spoke of their family’s struggles and her mothers’ refusal to ask for help: “I did not see my mom asking for help. As I got older, I never understood why she didn’t ask for help because we had some very trying times. Her husband played a role in not asking for help also.” A 38-year-old Wyoming mother noted help happened, but she rarely witnessed the asking process:

I never saw her ask for help as a child. I know that I went to my grandmother’s house when school was out or stayed at my aunt’s house when she had to travel so I know she must have. When I got older, high school maybe in college aged, she did call an old track coach like parent and ask for financial help to get me somewhere. She also asked my two older brothers to help get me to California for my last class to graduate undergraduate school, so I know she did. Beyond that supermama did her thing.

The above participant’s “supermama” comment could be viewed as indicative of pressure Black mothers feel to be all and do all for their children.

Still a handful of participants reported having seen their mother model asking for help. A 39-year-old mother from Wyoming said her health necessitated that her mom ask for help: “She didn’t have a choice. I was diagnosed with cancer at three-years-old.” Though very different in content, each of these responses demonstrate that most Black mothers in the Mountain West have learned that asking for help is essential. Their responses from the previous chapter make it clear that they are not always certain who they can trust or count on to help them. They may also struggle to decide what types of help they are comfortable asking for because they were often raised by mothers and caretakers who felt the pressure to be strong and self-sufficient.

Revisiting one response mentioned above provides an opportunity to explore the understated significance of Black mothers' alternative kinship network, not explicitly "bloodmothers and othermothers" described by Collins (192): "I'm fortunate to have been raised by a village of family and friends, which allowed my mother to obtain her bachelor's degree in information systems and climb up the corporate ladder on her own. My grandmother, aunts, uncles, and extended family all played an active role in my life which I'm forever grateful for." This extended network of care and childrearing support is a cornerstone of many Black mothers. Collins describes the networks in which many of these women may have been raised as "organized, resilient, women-centered networks of bloodmothers and othermothers are key in understanding this centrality" comprised of "grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins" who step in and take on the child-care responsibilities for each other (193). She also notes these woman-centered networks developed in Black families a "theoretical importance" missed by most. Though this participant speaks on the collaborative method in which she was raised as a fact of life, Collins provides an opportunity to reinterpret this Black maternal practice as subversive in the traditional family model within which mothers are assigned "full responsibility for children and evaluates their performance based on their ability to procure the benefits of a nuclear family household."

In a capitalist male-led society, being married, monogamous, and having a nuclear family with a male head of household makes it easier to transfer property (Rich 60-61). Women and children are viewed as legitimate or valid through proximity to their father — or husband. There is also an expectation that they mother these children in isolation with limited external support. Black women re-envision family out of historical necessity and contemporary strategy. Collins dives into the circumstances that serve as a call to action for othermothers:

Othermothers can be key not only in supporting children but also in helping bloodmothers who, for whatever reason, lack the preparation or desire for motherhood. In confronting racial oppression, maintaining community-based childcare and respecting othermothers who assume child-care responsibilities can serve a critical function in African American communities. Children orphaned by sale or death of their parents under slavery, children conceived through rape, children of young mothers, children born into extreme poverty or to alcoholic or drug-addicted mothers, or children who for other reasons cannot remain with their bloodmothers have all been supported by othermothers, who, like Ella Baker's aunt, take in additional children even when they have enough of their own. (194)

Many of the mothers I surveyed might be accustomed to large supportive networks of care. This did not negate that for some participants, these networks were spearheaded by a single father and assistance of grandmothers. One 32-year-old mother who lives in Nebraska said:

I was not raised by my mother. My dad received a lot of help from my grandmother (his mother). I don't remember a specific moment he asked for help, but he was always there for us, whether it meant watching us during a meeting (my dad was in Alcoholics Anonymous), cooking us dinner or coming to a sports activity. We (my dad and my sisters) also lived with her on and off through my childhood.

Black mothers who are raising children in Wyoming and similar low Black population areas can face additional challenges when they are raised without access to a consistent mother figure. This is even more true for those who were raised in homes where their parents were navigating specific conditions or ailments, like alcoholism. Likewise, that can leave these mothers unsure of how —and who — they should ask for help when facing struggles. This participant's response was also a reminder that while extensive mother networks are discussed most often, some Black mothers in the Mountain West are teaching themselves how to mother with limited access to others' mothering.

For Black mothers in the Mountain West, this extended network of care may prove even more significant. Many of these mothers were raised in a collaborative network. Because of this they could have a differential baseline of how it *should* look when mothers are supported in effective ways. Whereas the culture of the Mountain West is interpreted as a space of rugged

individualism by Limerick and others, Black mothers are perfectly situated as evidence to provide alternative models. Similarly, having experienced different models of care could make it more challenging for these mothers to adapt after they move to this region. Black mothers in the Mountain West might face increased pressure to “handle it all” even with support and access to positive examples of motherhood. The cultural expectations to be strong without access to a mothering community can be even more intense when paired with regional expectation of self-sufficiency. With this in mind, I was curious about the coping mechanisms these mothers employed, having limited access to support and culturally congruent community. The question “What do you do when you feel overwhelmed by the demands of mothering?” sought to explore the strategies they call on during challenging times.

I interpret participants’ choices to lean on husbands and partners as a counternarrative to two things. The first is the myth that Black women and mothers are willingly handling family matter alone. In the absence of traditional Black care networks, these women have found time to reflect and effectively communicate their needs to their partners. Because of this, their partners, a number of whom are non-Black, share some of the responsibility of making sure these Black women and children have what they need to thrive. The second myth their responses counter is that child rearing should be the sole responsibility of women. The children’s fathers, and occasionally grandfathers, are sources of support and co-parenting with Black mothers in the Mountain West may be involved in nurturing and childrearing in ways that are less common in other regions with more support.

One 32-year-old Nebraskan mother spoke to the relationship she has with her father and the support network she developed in college as trusted sources of support:

When overwhelmed with mothering I talked to my husband. Sometimes, but not often I reach out to a couple of sorority sisters who are moms. I can also talk to my husband parents or my dad. I also seek out stories of other Black moms through media.

This mother offers an expansive understanding of Black maternal care networks. For her, this community is larger than those who directly care for her child. Instead, she has intentionally curated a community comprised of people of many generations and genders from several different stages of her life. It is even flexible enough to include the stories of people she has encountered virtually. A 30-year-old mother from Colorado echoes some of this saying:

I have an understanding and healthy partnership with the father of my child. With that being said, when I feel overwhelmed, I share space and community with loved ones. I value my alone time but still working on not jamming my free time from my nine to five with things to do. Still figuring out what balance looks like.

This mother knows that community is important. However, her reflections show that for Black mothers in these areas it is necessary to expand the understanding of community to include the self. Perhaps time alone is necessary to recharge and reevaluate the narratives about who they are as Black women raising children in low Black population areas. She is clear that she seeks balance of a “healthy” and “understanding” relationship with partners and loved ones and also with herself. By being mindful of this, she is taking care of herself or prioritizing self-care. Self-care has become a buzzword in society. But for Black mothers in these areas, it can hold particular significance.

A 33-year-old mother from Wyoming speaks to her effort to use self-care to help manage the demands of motherhood. She said:

When I'm feeling overwhelmed, I have to communicate that I am in need of a break. This may consist of me staying in bed for a weekend. This may look like asking my husband to assist with household task and picking up the load when it comes to our son and his activities. No matter what I feel is needed, it is key that I am able to communicate that ineffective way that allows for open dialogue. If I ignore the signs, I find myself sick and unable to function properly.

This response, like several others show that despite limited access to support and occasionally childcare, Black mothers in the Mountain West challenge the belief that they should struggle alone or deplete themselves to take care of their children. When participants are overwhelmed, they find moments to rest and recharge even if that means walking away and soliciting help. Participants identified numerous strategies they use to find breaks, including asking parents, older children, or partners to take over childcare, or taking deep breaths and making sure the children are safe before sitting them down and walking away.

Participants further demonstrate their willingness to self-define and lean into counternarratives by being honest about the overwhelming nature of mothering. Two participants note that marijuana is a coping tool they use when they feel especially overwhelmed. Many of these mothers noted a diverse set of coping strategies depending on the level of overwhelm. One 34-year-old Nebraskan mother said, “when I am overwhelmed, I usually discuss, at length, and therapy. I also try to connect with other mothers and talk about my challenges and find some resolve and camaraderie there. There are also times that sink into myself and sleep and watch TV or zone out. It depends on if the feeling of overwhelm is solely about mothering, or if it's layered with additional challenges.” Mental health in the Mountain West is rarely discussed in mainstream national conversations. This perspective is a reminder that Black mothers in the Mountain West are proactive enough to consider their mental health needs and test out a variety of strategies to be sure that they are well enough to support their children, families, and themselves.

Prayer was another common coping tool. Two responses demonstrate that while faith is central to many Black women in the Mountain West, it's one option in a larger toolkit.

One mother who is 38 and lives in Nebraska said, “[I] Pray, cry, ask for help from my husband and my community, take a hot bath, take a break, try to tap into fun or play with my children.” A Wyoming mother who was also 38 years old also said that her faith is important in her efforts to process the overwhelm of mothering in the Mountain West: “[I] Pray and seek Christ. Pray for my kids. Take time for myself. Call my adopted mom. At this time in my relationship, I can turn to my husband as well for certain things. He doesn't always understand but he will listen.”

These mothers unapologetic embrace of tears and prayers as coping tools are in direct conflict with the strong Black woman myth suggesting Black women, especially Black mothers, don't require support. They do, and often mothering while Black in the Mountain West is overwhelming. Colin's notes the mix of reward and high personal cost leaves Black women to perceive motherhood differently based on circumstances and explains the internal and external pressure Black mother experience.

In the context of this historical significance, many African American thinkers tend to glorify Black motherhood. They refuse to acknowledge the issues faced by Black mothers who “came back to the frequently thankless chores of their own loneliness, their own families. “This mother glorification is especially prominent in the works of U.S. Black men who routinely praise Black mothers, especially their own. However, by claiming that Black women are richly endowed with devotion, self-sacrifice, and unconditional love—the attributes associated with archetypal motherhood—U.S. Black men inadvertently foster a different albeit seemingly positive image for Black women. The controlling image of the “superstrong Black mother” praises Black women’s resiliency in a society that routinely paints us as bad mothers. (188)

The scripts, including the above negative historical characterizations and the suggestions of superhuman strength, can leave Black mothers unwilling to express their concerns. The mothers in the Mountain West can turn to self-definition as a resistance strategy. Collins says Black mothers often do just that. Like nonBlack women of other races, Black mothers often interpret motherhood in a range of ways:

...motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment. These tensions foster a continuum of responses. Some women view motherhood as a truly burdensome condition that stifles their creativity, exploits their labor, and makes them partners in their own oppression. Others see motherhood as providing a base for self-actualization, status in the Black community, and a catalyst for social activism. (210)

The mothers I surveyed affirmed this. They did not neglect an opportunity to redefine mother as a role to better meet their needs. I asked the question "What does a good mother look like to you?" to better understand how self-definition plays a role in the lives of the participants. Expectedly, a few of the mothers surveyed held a traditional perspective of what quality motherhood looks like, that had similarities (though not necessarily direct parallels) to the expectations of intensive mothering. Yet others demonstrate a fluid and reflective understanding of the self that enables them to break away from negative perceptions of motherhood while also holding on to some traditional interpretations of motherhood. Their perspectives can be organized into three categories. But all demonstrated reflection on what they miss out on – or could not live without – as they aged.

There were responses that spoke of motherhood in expected ways. The following demonstrate that though many Black mothers develop counternarratives to better see themselves in characterizations of motherhood they often hold on to traditional narratives of good motherhood. A few responses echoed the tenants of intensive mothering and emphasized the importance of being present, affectionate, and putting their children's needs first: "A good mother is present and does what she can to make sure her children are happy and taken care of," one said. "[A good mother is someone] who provides, never leaves their kids, sacrifices everything, hard as hustler, funny and nurturing," noted another. One response by a 34-year-old Nebraskan mother places a lot of emphasis on affection, saying a good mother is "someone who



is nurturing, caring, can say the words hourly that I love you, allows their children to share and open up about anything and everything, outward and public displays of affection.” Still, there were other responses that parallel intensive motherhood while demonstrating key differences. Often this showed up as a focus on the effort they put in and understanding that intentions may not always match the outcomes. Some describes this simply and express sentiments like a good mother is “one who provides love, security, boundaries, and guidance with our fear.” Others note that quality motherhood holds space for rough days. Many believe love and being intentional is someone is a good mother when she tries her best always are important aspects of good motherhood, even when that “best” looks different from day to day. Two Wyoming mothers, the first who is 32 and the second who is 33 years old, describe good motherhood with more details:

A good mom is present physically and emotionally. A good mom shows up for important events but is also there for the mundane day-to-day things. A good mom loves and protects her daughter. A good mom is curious and ask questions. A good mom instills a sense of pride, freedom, exploration, and confidence in her daughter. A good mom provides a soft place for her daughter to land when she takes risks. A good mom also builds a sense of intimacy by sharing her own life with her children.

A good mother to me is someone that is stern but fair. Patient and understanding. Open minded and a risk taker. There is nothing or no one I would put before being a mother to my son, which he knows my number one job is to keep him safe and protecting him. I see myself as a good mother, not because of what I sacrifice for him, but because there are no limits to my sacrifices. I love unconditionally and I work every day to show that love in different forms, in hopes that he can later show others as he evolves.

The above interpretations of quality motherhood emphasized effort but left room for imperfection based on an intention to do their best. However, others developed interpretations of motherhood that challenged who should be placed at the center in a clear rejection of intensive motherhood.

The perspectives that follow boldly assert that taking care of the self is essential to taking care of the family. They also further demonstrate how they navigate motherhood in the Mountain

West with expectations around mothering that better work for them as individuals with dreams outside of motherhood. One respondent who is 30 years old and lives in Colorado speaks to how the entire lineage benefits from a mother's decision to put herself first and does so in a way that emphasizes customs of community and shared responsibility as expressed by Collins above. She writes:

A good mother puts herself first. They showcase the positive aspects of vulnerability by leaning in on the community and taking a step back to let others lead. A good mother is introspective, always learning and evolving. Not only for her children, but most importantly for herself and her future selves. Whether that manifests into more children or grandchildren. A good mother remembers to laugh and embrace her WHOLE self.

Another mother explicitly rejects the narrative that mothers should sacrifice themselves for the causes of mothering. She writes, "a good mother takes care of herself so she can show up for herself and her family. A good mother gives herself grace. A good mother asked for help when she needs it and is not a martyr." This response provides acknowledgment that Black mothers in the Mountain West face challenges in their lives both inclusive of, and independent from, their mothering responsibilities. As they do what they need to show up for their children, navigating racism, regional isolation, and overwhelm, they know it is crucial to show up for themselves as well.

There were also responses that went as far as rejecting the concepts of "good" motherhood altogether. One participant mentions the loaded term "good motherhood" before denouncing it: "The term 'good' implies 'bad' as well and I don't believe in a 'bad mother.'" She recognized access to resources and difference in social situation impact these perceptions noting that, "I think we are all given a set of challenges, some that are more difficult to navigate than others based on our resources." Lastly, while she rejects the labels "good" and "bad" that oversimplify motherhood in a good/bad binary she identifies the characteristics that she wants

present in her own motherhood: “the type of mothering that I wish to exhibit (good) include nurturing compassionate patient encouraging loving realistic.” A final response communicates a similar perspective and uncertainty about the limiting ways we characterize mother: “I don't know if there is a such thing as a good mother,” she begins. “I think most of us are just doing the best we can at the time with the tools we have. We're mostly just winging this shit while trying to mother and parent ourselves.” Her response makes passive mention that mothers—including those in the Mountain West—are often parenting and childrearing while doing what they can to heal from the negative experiences in their own lives. The negative experiences can be many things, like the intergenerational trauma of being raised by unhealed caretakers, or the discomfort of feeling excluded and absent from community connections in the open space of the Mountain West. It could be the lack of access to childcare, well-paying jobs, mother networks and other loved ones, or the burden of preparing your children for a world that fears them while also writing them out of the narrative. Whatever it is, Mountain Western Black mothers interpret their experiences as a useful source of knowledge that not only holds the potential to educate the next generation but also reparent themselves.

Despite high pressure and occasionally limited support for mothering in the Mountain West these mothers have boldly reinterpreted the pressures of mothering to better fit their lifestyles and perspectives. They use this adaptive sense of self to accept the realities of what is around them, get also remain unafraid to move towards a mothering style, and community provisions that better align with their needs.

## **Epilogue: It Is What It Is**

These survey responses reveal that Black mothers in the Mountain West hold similar desires for themselves and their families—as well as frustrations—as those held by other parents who are differently situated in racial and ethnic identity, gender, and region. Still, their perspectives indicate that there are additional considerations associated with being one of few Black people in an area. This becomes even more true as their experiences take place within the context of ongoing multi-century anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and the ethnocentrism that has received increased attention after the 2016 election. Still, Black mothers in the Mountain West express an awareness that increased visibility doesn't make these struggles a new phenomenon.

Despite holding multiple marginalized identities, we—yes, I include myself in this statement—choose to live with a realist perspective that isn't without moments of hopefulness. Simply put, the perspective can best be understood with the phrase “it is what it is.” This statement does not fully align itself with a sense of hopeless pessimism, or an unrealistic joyful interpretation of our circumstances. Instead, it captures moving through life with an awareness of the historical realities that come with being one of few Black people in a mostly white area, and the contemporary risk factors that accompany that truth. Yet, for whatever reason, they see value, benefit, and occasionally even opportunity to staying in this place, even if for a short time. When asked what forms of support—namely in the form of emotional, financial, caretaking support—they had access to participants' responses varied from “limited emotional support and even more limited share of caretaking via friends,” as expressed by a 28-year-old Wyoming mother to “all of the above” as reported by a mother who is 39 and lives in Wyoming.

Most often respondents indicated that their partner or coparent was the main form of support: “Just my spouse,” as expressed by a mother who is 42 and lives in Wyoming. Less

often, respondents noted physical familial support, like childcare. Participants who lived near blood relatives appeared more likely to suggest that they had access to a dynamic range of supports. It was more common for responses to say relatives provided emotional support – and financial if needed – than physical forms of support. Participants often reported that access to resources in the community were a supplement to the support that wasn't otherwise present, especially in the absence of family. “Currently, we send our son to daycare, and I rely mostly on my husband and my sister, who lives in Virginia, for emotional support,” said a 27-year-old Wyoming mother. This response not only speaks to the importance of maintaining family relationships despite geographic distance, but also speaks to the importance of community programs ensuring access to childcare. Others use the space to indicate what they wish they had: “I wish I had more access to physical support from my child’s grandparents”, said a Nebraska mother who is 34 years old. A different mother, who lives in Nebraska and is 38 noted that while she has access to a wide range of supports through her church community, there are barriers to asking for that support:

I don't always like to because of the mindset that I need to take care of it all (something I learned growing up in dysfunction), but it is humbling to ask for help and it shows how much my family is cared for that people want to help.

Her response provides an opportunity to explore the lessons that Black women receive about seeking care and support from those around them. Often these perspectives develop from childhood and early life experiences. They also present opportunities for further research that explores how the rugged individualism of the Mountain Western region interactions with the cultural expectations for Black women to be strong and self-sufficient.

Respondents were clearly aware of the resources they would like to see which are missing from their communities. When asked, “What resources, if any, do you wish you had

more access to in your area?” and told to check all applicable responses, all but two expressed a desire for more access to parents who understand their experiences. Of course, participants had different needs based on their class, community, and family health status. Although I didn’t think to tease out this element at the time of the survey, their insights further emphasize the value these individuals place on community. Asking more about questions about class and health status can provide further insight into Black mothers’ desire to build relationship with those who see them for who they are instead of through one-dimensional scripts society assigns to Black women.

Other options on the list of desires were access to affordable childcare and housing, and higher quality (or more affordable) medical care. I wonder what participants would have said had I modeled the question as "fill-in-the-blank" instead of “check all that apply” with a write-in option. There were response selections for better paying jobs by some but not all, noting the class differences and lack of homogeneity between these individuals. Participants were also asked what types of support either from loved ones or the community that they wish they had more of, and this provided further insight into the diversity of their lives. A Black mother who is 42, lives in Wyoming, and has a child with a chronic disability said, “I wish there was more childcare and Medicaid waiver providers.” A different mother who lives in Wyoming and is 27 years old shows how these hopes for more resources are affected, for her, by the growth of her family: “The more children I have, the more I wish I had family around to help provide respite during those times I get overwhelmed and need a break,” she said.

Others, like a 38-year-old mother in Nebraska echo this sentiment of missing her family before expressing a complicated relationship that she has with her mother: “Sometimes I grieve not having the physical support of my family. “

A 32-year-old mom in Nebraska spoke of desires for an in-person community of Black mothers: “I wish I had a local Black moms’ group. Most of my support from other Black moms happens through text since many of our friends who are married with children have moved away.”

There were also a few unexpected, nontraditional answers. One 39-year-old Wyoming mother said she wishes she had access to more “revolutionary support.” Another mother in Wyoming who is 33 said that she and her husband are very protective of their son, but they have adapted and there is little more the local community can give them. The overlap and divergence present in these responses indicates that knowing the pressures Black women and mothers have experienced in the United States is helpful—though not necessarily the most important prescriptive tool—in effort to create impactful solutions.

The responses of these Black mothers in the Mountain West have also brought to light an important element of Black motherhood and identity: Reflection. I made the choice to save these perspectives for the conclusion instead of higher in the body of this thesis because I believe that this skill set is important to these Black mothers. I also believe it’s a model to do better by Black mothers and all people in the United States. At some point in the future, I want to use the information around their reflection to further deconstruct motherhood as a socially loaded identity. I also want to use this information to illuminate how Black mothers’ nontraditional interpretation of motherhood allows for more dynamic structures of love and caretaking for all people, someday.

In order to best support these individuals, and the many more than I didn’t have the opportunity to connect with, we must remember that despite similar collective histories, Black mothers experience different realities today and have different interpretations and coping mechanisms in the world around them. Yet as Harris-Perry states, it’s useful to anticipate that regardless of whether they feel directly impacted by the scripts around them these mothers are trying to stand in a crooked room: “Sometimes Black women can conquer negative myths, sometimes they are defeated, and sometimes they choose not to fight. Whatever the outcome, we

can better understand sisters as citizens when we appreciate the crooked room in which they struggle to stand upright” (32). She continues, noting that developing clear understandings of the “distorted images and painful stereotypes that make America a crooked room for African American women” is an essential nonnegotiable first step to understand how stereotypes “influence Black women as political actors.”

Placing survey respondents’ perspectives in conversation with those of scholars, and the lived experiences of Black mothers across the United States provides a similar benefit. In order for us to best shift the overlapping struggles of western individualism and racialized sexism, among other things, and their impacts on these women we must first acknowledge them and listen to how these things impact their daily lives. The best attempts to liberate the stories of Black mothering people in the Mountain West will breakdown the overlapping structures and myths that oppress all people within its designated borders.

The fact that people of all backgrounds migrate to Wyoming and consider it home regardless of its contradictions, it requires acknowledging and advocating for the fact that the Mountain West was never and will never be a primarily white space. The lived, historical, and other realities of indigenous populations invalidate this logic early on. Listening to indigenous perspectives is essential to rewriting false narratives on the Mountain West, inciting the effort to develop a more equitable and supportive mythology of the West. Then we can accept the fact that other populations, including but certainly not limited to Black people are a central, but not necessarily unproblematic, element of the quilt of cultures that makes up the region. We must accept that there are Black communities, not necessarily a Black community. Survey participants made it clear that they witnessed the complexity and diversity within the Black population. To



best support all Black people, we must acknowledge the regional, class, gendered, and parenting status among other designations.

In the future, I would like to select three Black mothers in different areas and explore their stories with more depth. Narrowing the number of Black mothers that I choose to engage with will allow me to further explore the full context of their lives. Given the opportunity, I would reconnect with these survey participants and ask them if living in the Mountain West, with its individualistic, rugged, “Pick yourself up by your bootstraps” culture makes them feel less confident asking for help. More research is needed to determine whether the combined expectations of “the strong Black woman” and the expectations of self-sufficiency in Mountain Western and rural communities places them under additional pressure. Future research will look into the impact of socioeconomic status, education, colorism, and generational differences between these mothers and their parents more intensely. Similarly, I would also like to use future research opportunities to explore the differences between modern Black scholars who are theorizing about the Black maternal experience like Jennifer C. Nash and historical scholars on the Black maternal experience like Patricia Hill Collins. These future research efforts will explore perceptions of sexuality among Black millennial mothers and dive deeper into how Black mothers in Wyoming and surrounding areas resist respectability politics.

Likewise, it is not enough to acknowledge these voices, we must listen to and believe their experiences. We must accept that the complexities of humanity occasionally mean that more than one thing can be true. And it is always better to fight through the complexities of what is, then find false security in an inaccurate oversimplification. We need more research acknowledging how lack of recognition creates vulnerability within American society. We need to embrace programs that ensure that all individuals have access to the resources that they need. Yet, we

must also pay attention to those who are least likely to receive the necessary support. I hope that I can play an active role and illuminating the stories of Black mothering individuals. But I hope that all of us take interest. Because whether we acknowledge it or not, our fates are forever intertwined.

## Works Cited

- Alamrew, Gloria. "Gentle Parenting Is a Chance for Black Children, and Parents, To Thrive." *Parents*, 18 Jan 2022, [www.parents.com/kindred/gentle-parenting-is-a-chance-for-Black-children-and-parents-to-thrive](http://www.parents.com/kindred/gentle-parenting-is-a-chance-for-Black-children-and-parents-to-thrive).
- Austin, Nefertiti. "Grandparents, Kin and Play Cousins: The Soul and Survival of Black Families." *New York Times*, 07 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/07/parenting/black-families-children-kin-grandparents.html>
- Austin, Nefertiti. *Motherhood so White: A Memoir of Race, Gender, and Parenting in America*. Sourcebooks, Naperville, IL, 2019.
- Blake, Jamilia J. and Rebecca Epstein. *Listening to Black Women and Girls: Lived Experiences of Adultification Bias*, The Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, April 2019, <https://genderjusticeandopportunity.georgetown.edu/adultification-bias/>
- Boone, Eli. "ACA at 10 Years: Medicaid Expansion in Colorado" *Colorado Health Institute*, 27 Jan 2020, [www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/research/aca-ten-years-medicaid-expansion-colorado](http://www.coloradohealthinstitute.org/research/aca-ten-years-medicaid-expansion-colorado).
- Boswell, Shanicia. *Oh Sis, You're Pregnant! The Ultimate Guide to Black Pregnancy and Motherhood*. Mango Publishing Group, 2021.
- Costello, Addie. "The Painful Truth About Being Pregnant and Black in Nebraska." *The Reader*, 04 Nov. 2021, [www.thereader.com/news/the-painful-truth-about-being-pregnant-and-Black-in-nebraska](http://www.thereader.com/news/the-painful-truth-about-being-pregnant-and-Black-in-nebraska).
- Davis, Dána-Ain. *Reproductive Injustice: Racism, Pregnancy, and Premature Birth*. New York University Press, 2019.

- Eidson, Jessika. "Black Maternal Health Week: Black Mothers Have Greater Risks in Pregnancy, Childbirth." *KMTV*, 15 Apr. 2021 [www.3newsnow.com/news/local-news/black-maternal-health-week-black-mothers-have-greater-risks-in-pregnancy-childbirth](http://www.3newsnow.com/news/local-news/black-maternal-health-week-black-mothers-have-greater-risks-in-pregnancy-childbirth).
- Garcia, Emma. "Schools are Still Segregated, and Black Children are Paying a Price." *Economic Policy Institute*, 12 Feb. 2020. [www.epi.org/publication/schools-are-still-segregated-and-black-children-are-paying-a-price/](http://www.epi.org/publication/schools-are-still-segregated-and-black-children-are-paying-a-price/)
- Galbreath, Robert. "Making a Home in Empire, Wyo." *WyoHistory*, The Wyoming State Historical Society, 1 Aug. 2016, [www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/making-home-empire-wyo](http://www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/making-home-empire-wyo).
- Hall, Jasmine and Carrie Haderlie "Legislature Rejects Medicaid Expansion"  
*Wyoming Tribune Eagle*, 28 February 2022.  
[www.wyomingnews.com/wyomingbusinessreport/industry\\_news/government\\_and\\_politics/legislature-rejects-medicaid-expansion/article\\_19915e28-98e3-11ec-86b1-8feb88fb939f.html](http://www.wyomingnews.com/wyomingbusinessreport/industry_news/government_and_politics/legislature-rejects-medicaid-expansion/article_19915e28-98e3-11ec-86b1-8feb88fb939f.html).
- Hall, Louise. "Black Family Handcuffed and Held to Ground at Gunpoint by Colorado Police After Mistaking Car as Stolen." *The Independent* (Online), 04 Aug 2020, [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/black-family-handcuffed-gunpoint-colorado-police-car-stolen-a9654141.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/black-family-handcuffed-gunpoint-colorado-police-car-stolen-a9654141.html)
- Haley, Sarah. *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2016.
- Hamel, Liz et al. "Race, Health, and COVID-19: The Views and Experiences of Black

- Americans.” *Kaiser Family Foundation/The Undefeated Survey on Race and Health*, Oct 2020, [www.kff.org/report-section/kff-the-undefeated-survey-on-race-and-health-main-findings/#Introduction](http://www.kff.org/report-section/kff-the-undefeated-survey-on-race-and-health-main-findings/#Introduction).
- Harrington, Rebecca. “Childfree by Choice.” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2019, pp. 22-35. doi: 10.1080/15240657.2019.1559515
- Harris-Perry, Melissa V. *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*. Yale University Press, 2011.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, New York, 2009.
- hooks, bell. *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*. United Kingdom, Routledge, 2013.
- hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. South End Press, 1992.
- I Be Black Girl. “About.” *I Be Black Girl*, [www.ibebblackgirl.com/about](http://www.ibebblackgirl.com/about), Accessed 06 March 2022.
- Jones Erin. “Wyoming's Black Pioneer Community That Disappeared” *Wyoming Public Radio*, 06 Nov. 2020, [www.wyomingpublicmedia.org/open-spaces/2020-11-06/wyomings-black-pioneer-community-that-disappeared](http://www.wyomingpublicmedia.org/open-spaces/2020-11-06/wyomings-black-pioneer-community-that-disappeared)
- Lamphier, Peg A. and Rosanne Welch. *Women in American History: A Social, Political, and Cultural Encyclopedia and Document Collection*. ABC-CLIO, 2017.
- Mathurin, Desiree. “Meet the Black Doulas in Colorado Who Are Hoping to Save Black Mothers One Deep Breath at a Time.” *Denverite*, 25 Feb. 2022, [www.denverite.com/2022/02/24/meet-the-Black-doulas-in-colorado-who-are-hoping-to-save-Black-mothers-one-deep-breath-at-a-time](http://www.denverite.com/2022/02/24/meet-the-Black-doulas-in-colorado-who-are-hoping-to-save-Black-mothers-one-deep-breath-at-a-time).

- Meadows-Fernandez, A. R. "This Black History Month's Lesson: Joy." *New York Times* (Online), Feb 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/parenting/black-history-month-kids.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/parenting/black-history-month-kids.html)
- Morgan, Jennifer L. "Partus Sequitur Ventrem: Law, Race, and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery." *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2018, pp. 1-17. doi: 10.1215/07990537-4378888
- Moynihan, Daniel P. "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" *Office of Policy Planning and Research United States Department of Labor*, March 1965, [www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan](http://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan).
- Gilmore, Ruth W. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. vol. 21, University of California Press, 2007.
- Gliha, Lori Jane. "Elijah McClain's mother 'cussing' under her mask as defendants appeared in Adams County Court" *FOX31 Denver KDVR-TV*, 01 Nov 2021, [www.kdvr.com/news/local/elijah-mcclain-defendants-appeared-in-adams-county-court/](http://www.kdvr.com/news/local/elijah-mcclain-defendants-appeared-in-adams-county-court/)
- Nash, Jennifer C., *Birthing Black Mothers*. Duke University Press. Durham and London, 2021
- Nash, Jennifer C. "Black Maternal Aesthetics." *Theory & Event*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2019, pp. 551-575. *Project MUSE* [muse.jhu.edu/article/729431](http://muse.jhu.edu/article/729431)
- Odom, Erica C., Lynne Vernon-Feagans, and The Family Life Project Key Investigators. "Buffers of Racial Discrimination: Links with Depression among Rural African American Mothers." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 72, no. 2, 2010, pp. 346-359. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00704.x
- O'Reilly, Andrea, editor. *Twenty-First-Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency*.

- Columbia University Press, 2010.
- O'Reilly, Andrea, editor. *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's of Woman Born*. State University of New York Press, 2004.
- Palmer, Kathryn. "McCormick Report Confirms Culture of Bigoted Bullying, Inadequate Staff Response." *Wyoming Tribune-Eagle*, 08 July 2020,  
[www.wyomingnews.com/news/in\\_our\\_schools/mccormick-report-confirms-culture-of-bigoted-bullying-inadequate-staff-response/article\\_651ddd9b-6926-5549-aa18-ab63104400a8.html](http://www.wyomingnews.com/news/in_our_schools/mccormick-report-confirms-culture-of-bigoted-bullying-inadequate-staff-response/article_651ddd9b-6926-5549-aa18-ab63104400a8.html)
- Patton, Stacey. *Spare the Kids: Why Whipping Children Won't Save Black America*. Beacon Press, 2017.
- Patton, Tracey O. "Jim Crow on Fraternity Row: A Study of the Phenomenon of Blackface in the White Southern Fraternal Order." *Visual Communication Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2008, pp. 150-168. doi:10.1080/15551390802235503
- Perry, Imani. "Racism Is Terrible. Blackness Is Not." *The Atlantic*, 15 June 2020,  
["www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/racism-terrible-Blackness-not/613039"](http://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/racism-terrible-Blackness-not/613039)
- Pierce, Yolanda N. *In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith, and the Stories we Inherit*. Broadleaf Books, 2021, doi:10.2307/j.ctv1b0fwm2.
- "Preeclampsia - Symptoms and Causes." *Mayo Clinic*, 15 Apr. 2022,  
[www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/preeclampsia/symptoms-causes/syc-20355745](http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/preeclampsia/symptoms-causes/syc-20355745).
- Rawlings-Carroll, Richelle. "Empire, Wyoming (1908-1930)" *Black Past*, 29 June 2019,  
[www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/empire-wyoming-1908-1930/](http://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/empire-wyoming-1908-1930/)
- Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Norton, New York, 1986.

- Rigueur, Leah Wright. "For Black Mothers, Joy Is a Weapon." *The Atlantic*, 11 Aug. 2021, [www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/08/Black-mothers-joy-weapon/619713](http://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/08/Black-mothers-joy-weapon/619713).
- Roberts, Dorothy E. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. Pantheon Books, New York, 1997.
- Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*. Boston: Beacon, 1989
- Russo, Nancy F. "The Motherhood Mandate." *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1976, pp. 143.
- Sakala, Carol, et al. *Listening to Mothers in California: A Population-Based Survey of Women's Childbearing Experiences, Full Survey Report*. National Partnership for Women & Families, Sept. 2018, <https://www.chcf.org/collection/listening-to-mothers-in-california/>
- Schulte, Grant. "Expanded Medicaid Begins in Nebraska After Years of dispute" *The Associated Press*, 30 Sept. 2020, [www.apnews.com/article/legislature-campaigns-nebraska-medicaid-572e3ac9bc92b5a88d58654486bcb724](http://www.apnews.com/article/legislature-campaigns-nebraska-medicaid-572e3ac9bc92b5a88d58654486bcb724)
- Simon, Jen. "Wyoming Lawmakers Can Do More to Protect Mothers and Their Babies." *Jackson Hole News and Guide*, 7 Apr. 2021, [www.jhnewsandguide.com/opinion/columnists/equity\\_state/wyoming-lawmakers-can-do-more-to-protect-mothers-and-their-babies/article\\_d607173b-da46-5dcb-a8c5-4bbb791f0e07.html](http://www.jhnewsandguide.com/opinion/columnists/equity_state/wyoming-lawmakers-can-do-more-to-protect-mothers-and-their-babies/article_d607173b-da46-5dcb-a8c5-4bbb791f0e07.html).
- SisterSong. "What is Reproductive Justice," *SisterSong, Inc*, [www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice](http://www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice). Accessed 02 May 2022.
- Solinger, Rickie. *Pregnancy and Power: A History of Reproductive Politics in the United States*. New York University Press, 2019.



Thompson, Krissah. "We Asked Black Mothers How They Find Their Joy. This Is What They Said." *Washington Post*, 20 Sept. 2019, [www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2019/09/20/we-asked-Black-mothers-how-they-find-their-joy-this-is-what-they-said](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2019/09/20/we-asked-Black-mothers-how-they-find-their-joy-this-is-what-they-said).

Tompkins, Lucy. "Here's What You Need to Know About Elijah McClain's Death." *New York Times (Online)*, 19 Jan 2022, [www.nytimes.com/article/who-was-elijah-mcclain.html](http://www.nytimes.com/article/who-was-elijah-mcclain.html)

United States Census Bureau. "QuickFacts: Colorado." *Census Bureau QuickFacts*, [www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/CO/PST045221..](http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/CO/PST045221..)

United States Census Bureau. "QuickFacts: Nebraska." *Census Bureau QuickFacts*, [www.census.gov/quickfacts/NE..](http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/NE..)

United States Census Bureau. "QuickFacts: Wyoming." *Census Bureau QuickFacts*, [www.census.gov/quickfacts/WY](http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/WY).

United States, Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention "Pregnancy-Related Deaths." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 07 May 2019, [www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/maternal-deaths/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/maternal-deaths/index.html).

United States, Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Working Together to Reduce Black Maternal Mortality." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 09 Apr. 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/healthequity/features/maternal-mortality/index.html>.

Van Pelt, Lori. "Liz Byrd, First Black Woman in Wyoming's Legislature." *WyoHistory*, 24 May 2015, [www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/liz-byrd-first-Black-woman-wyoming-legislature](http://www.wyohistory.org/encyclopedia/liz-byrd-first-Black-woman-wyoming-legislature).

Welter, Barbara, et al. "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860." *Journal of Women's*

*History*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2002, pp. 150-173.

## Appendix: Survey Questions and Consent Form

1. Do you consent to participate in this survey?

- Agree
- Disagree

2. How old are you?

3. What is your gender identity? (Definitions available, [here if needed](#))

Elaborate, if desired

4. What is your sexual orientation?

- Straight
- Straight with a history of same-gender desire or experimentation
- Queer/Pansexual/Bisexual
- Lesbian
- I do not label my sexual orientation
- Asexual

5. What is your relationship status?

- Single
- Partnered but nonmarried
- Married
- Other (please specify)

6. What relationship do you have with your child(ren)s other parent?

- Equally
- Co-parenting
- Married
- Infrequent/limited contact
- No contact
- This question does not directly translate to my experience as a mothering person

7. Where are you located? (City and state)

8. How long have you lived there?

less than a year

- 1 - 3
- 4 - 8
- 9 + years
- I have lived here for most or all of my life

9. How many children are you raising and/or responsible for?

10. How comfortable do you feel raising children in your area?

- Very comfortable
- Comfortable
- Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
- Uncomfortable
- Very uncomfortable

11. What is the most frustrating part of raising children in your area?

12. What is the biggest benefit of raising children in your area?

13. As a Black mother raising children in your area, how do you think your concerns compare to those YOUR PARENTS had while raising you?

- I have fewer concerns than my parents had while raising me
- I have an equal amount of concerns than my parents had while raising me
- I have more concerns than my parents had while raising me
- None of the above

14. Are there visible differences in how your parents raised you and how you choose to raise your children?

15. As a Black mother raising children in your area, how do you think your concerns compare to NONBLACK PARENTS raising children in your area?

- I have fewer concerns than non-Black parents raising children in my area
- I have an equal amount of concerns than non-Black parents raising children in my area
- I have more concerns than non-Black parents raising children in my area
- None of the above

16. As a Black mother raising children in your area, how do you think your concerns compare to those of other Black parents raising children in places with a more significant diversity or higher population of Black people?

- I have fewer concerns than Black parents raising children in places with a more significant racial diversity or a higher population of Black people
- I have an equal amount of concerns than Black parents raising children in places with a more significant racial diversity or a higher population of Black people
- I have more concerns than Black parents raising children in places with a more significant racial diversity or a higher population of Black people
- Please elaborate

17. What is the biggest challenge of raising children in your area?

18. What resource(s), if any, do you wish you had more access to in your area? (Check all that apply)

- affordable childcare
- affordable housing
- more access to parents who understand my parenting experience
- affordable/higher quality medical care
- Better paying jobs
- None
- Something else (write in \_\_\_\_\_)

19. What people support you as you raise your children? Other (please specify)

20. Which of these sounds most like you?

- I give my children unlimited of freedom with no rules
- I give my children a considerable of freedom with limited rules
- I give my children equal freedom with equal rules
- I give my children a considerable amount of rules with limited freedom
- I give my children many rules with little to no freedom
- Variable based on my mood

21. How much of this parenting style was inspired by - or in resistance to - how you were raised?

Please elaborate on the similarities and the differences.

22. Do you believe YOUR race impacts how you're perceived as you mother your children?

- No
- A little
- A moderate amount
- A great deal
- I believe my race is the most significant influencer in how I'm perceived as I mother

Please elaborate

23. Do you believe YOUR race impacts how you've chosen to parent your children?

- No
- A little
- A moderate amount
- A great deal
- I believe my race is the most significant influencer in how I'm perceived as I mother

Please elaborate

24. Do you believe your location impacts how you've chosen to parent your children?

- No
- A little
- A moderate amount
- A great deal
- I believe my location is the most significant influencer in how I've chosen to parent my children.

25. Do you believe your age impacts how you've chosen to parent your children?

- No
- A little
- A moderate amount
- A great deal
- I believe my age is the most significant influencer in how I've chosen to parent my children

26. If different than where you currently live, what location(s) do you consider "home"? (If same, please put "same" or "this is my home" Please elaborate

27. How similar is the culture of "home" compared to where you live currently?

- A great deal
- A moderate amount
- A little
- This is my home

Please elaborate

28. Is it important to you that your children have access to aspects of your home culture?

- A great deal
- A moderate amount
- A little
- My children are raised in my home culture.

29. Do you believe Black children - or mixed-race children of black ancestry - require unique lessons? If so, which of those lessons are most important to you?

30. Do you believe your mothering experience has been shaped by raising children in a state with a low Black population? If so, how?

31. Have you learned any new things about yourself during your mothering journey?
32. What forms of support (emotional, financial, sharing of caretaking) do you have access to?
33. Are there any types of support - either from loved ones or in the community - you wish you had more of?
34. How often do you see people of your race, culture, and location reflected in conversations about motherhood?
35. How often did you see your mother - or primary caretaker - ask for help or share the responsibility of raising you?
36. What does a “good mother” look like to you?
37. Are there any unexpected experiences you’ve had to resolve or heal from to show up for your family?
38. What do you do when you feel overwhelmed by the demands of mothering?
39. What is the most important thing for you to teach your children?
40. Is there anything you would like to change about the way you parent your children?

Please indicate your preferred method of payment and the contact information (email or phone number) to send this payment. Note: This information will NOT be kept on file and is only for payment contact only.

(Thank you for your support of this project. [A list of organizations to support the mental and emotional needs of Black mothering individuals can be seen here.](#))

### Consent for Participation

You are being asked to participate in my research project, “Mothering in Their Own Words: Uplifting the Voices of Black Mothers in Wyoming and Surrounding Areas.”

Through this study, I hope to uncover some of the perspectives and experiences of Black mothering people in Wyoming and surrounding areas and better understand some of the conditions Black mothers in Wyoming, Nebraska, and Colorado face.

The study aims to explore some of these by asking questions about how race/culture, tradition, and one’s personal beliefs influence your beliefs around mothering.

Participants will respond to an online survey asking about financial, racial, and social circumstances shaping their mothering experience in low Black population areas. I ask that you respond to each of these questions in as much detail as possible.

The expectation is at least two to three sentences per open response question. This may not be possible for every question. But it is possible for most of them. I'm looking for responses that say what the lessons are, HOW your experience has been shaped by being in a low population area, and WHAT new things you've learned. Surveys that don't follow the directions on the survey will not be paid.

Those who complete the full survey will be compensated \$40 on either the 15th of October, the 1st of November, or the 15th of November. If needed, a final batch of payments will occur on December 1.

Participation is voluntary - you can withdraw from the study at any time. However, only those who complete all questions will be compensated. Participants' names will not be collected. While the risk is minimal, some may be uncomfortable with the self-reflection necessary to respond to the questions. I will provide you with a list of resources where you can find community and support.

If you have questions about this study, you may reach me by phone at 307-314-2884 or email at [ameadow3@uwyo.edu](mailto:ameadow3@uwyo.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, do not hesitate to get in touch with the University of Wyoming IRB Administrator at 307-766-5322.

ELECTRONIC CONSENT: Writing "agree" below indicates that:

- you have read the above information
- you voluntarily agree to participate
- you are Black or African American
- you are between the ages of 25 and 45
- and are a mother through birth or adoption, or primary caretaker for a child

If you do not wish to participate in the research study, please decline participation and select "disagree".

Note, this survey was initially formatted for survey monkey, some parts have been difficult to adapt to Google docs. Contact me by text (307-314-2884) with any questions or concerns. I'm excited to see your responses! -A <3