I, Tamika C Odum, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology.

It is entitled:
Our Journey, Our Voice: Conceptualizing Motherhood and Reproductive Agency in African American Communities

Student's name: Tamika C Odum

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Annula Linders, Ph.D.

Committee member: Danielle Bessett, Ph.D.

Committee member: Patricia Hill Collins, Ph.D.

Committee member: Jennifer Malat, Ph.D.
Our Journey, Our Voice: Understanding Motherhood and Reproductive Agency in African American Communities

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Cincinnati in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Sociology of the College of Arts and Sciences by

Tamika C. Odum

M.A. University of Cincinnati

Committee Chair: Annulla Linders, Ph.D.

Committee Members:

Danielle Bessett, Ph.D.
Patricia Hill Collins, Ph.D.
Jennifer Malat, Ph.D.
ABSTRACT

Motherhood is not always a clear journey to a desired end, but at some point in their lives, most women grapple with the idea of motherhood and ponder whether or not they want to become mothers. A thorough understanding of the process whereby African American women navigate the territory of motherhood is still lacking, even though recent literature has begun to fill in the gaps. The overall problem this dissertation seeks to understand is why and how black women decide to become mothers (or not) and how, more generally, they make sense of their reproductive journeys. Using intersectionality as my theoretical lens, I argue that the decisions women make in terms of motherhood and the societal influences they interact with must be examined and understood in light of the constellations of constraints, opportunities, and experiences that their particular social locations provide. Data come from in-depth interviews with 50 African American women from different social classes. The interviews focused on the women’s thoughts on and experiences with motherhood. Findings show that 1) that poor and working class women view motherhood as their destiny whereas middle class women view it more as an option; 2) middle/upper class women think of their reproductive lives in terms of a plan whereas poor women are more likely to accept motherhood whenever it comes; and 3) while all women refer to community mothering, only poor women live lives where community mothering play an important role and serve as an important resource in their own experiences as mothers. Despite these differences, it is clear that the black women who participated in this study were all agents of their own lives; that is, they exercised reproductive agency. Here I argue that understanding reproductive agency for African American women can help us better understand how differently situated women think about and practice motherhood. As such, this research contributes important knowledge to the literature related to motherhood and intersectionality.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

What an amazing journey and I’m excited for my life’s next chapter! The saying goes that every ending is the start of a new beginning and finishing my doctorate while it’s a happy ending to an amazing journey, it is just the start of a new chapter in life. My journey was not easy and there were moments when I wanted to give up but thankfully I had many friends, family and colleagues rooting for me when I couldn’t root for myself. I am very thankful to the Department of Sociology and the University of Cincinnati for investing in my success. While the University as a whole was integral in shaping my journey there were key people that without their time, support and dedication I could not have made it this far. There are many I would like to thank but I cannot acknowledge everyone otherwise my acknowledgement page(s) would turn into a novel. I will do my best thank those who were closest.

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Patricia Hill Collins knows me well. She graciously agreed to serve on my committee early on but had one stipulation she said (something to the tune of) “Tamika I’m retiring soon so you better get it done before I retire, otherwise I will be too busy shoe shopping”. As my mentor and former boss she gets me in ways that many people do not. She knew when to push me and when to leave me to my own devices. She has always believed in me from the moment I stepped foot in her office. She invested in my growth. She pushed me and challenged my thinking in ways that only she could. I am a better scholar because of her. Her investment in me was huge and I couldn’t have asked for a better mentor and boss throughout this process. Jennifer Malat a devoted committee member has been with me since the very beginning, her role toward the end was more supportive but she has always encouraged me from a far. From telling me like it is, straight no chaser, to recommending me for work across campus she has always supported me and did what she could to insure my success. I also want to make sure to thank Danielle Bessett my forth and final devoted committee member. When my mind was about to explode and I was about ready to throw in the towel her encouraging words helped me to refocus move forward. There are many people within the academic community that whose support was integral and I can’t name them all but I do want to make sure that I acknowledge Robin Lightner who gave me an opportunity. She saw something in me that I didn’t see in myself. She believed in me as a scholar and faculty member, in fact she was one of my biggest cheerleaders! In her I found a surprise connection that helped me in ways I could never imagine. Thank you for always encouraging me and for taking a chance on me. Without your support and encouragement I would not be where I am today.

My academic support community was only part of my journey, without my family rooting me on I couldn’t imagine where I would be today. To the best son in the entire
universe I couldn’t have done this without you. I remember when I started graduate school he was just a baby I would carry him in his pumpkin seat and hand him off to my classmates when I was in class and they were not, you see times were tough and I couldn’t always afford a sitter so he went wherever I went. While other children where being read the Cat and the Hat Aaron was listening to journal articles and statistical formulas. And toward the end he became my number #1 fan. When he really understood what was going on he stepped in and supported his mom like no other. He cleaned and cooked, he put aside his wants and desires for his mom. I know he was tired of eating frozen pizza and corn dogs for dinner but he never complained! When the going really started to get rough he stepped in by reminding me that I would get this done. At night before he went to bed he would say “Mom you got this”. I would over hear him talking to his friends about me and I could tell he was so proud of his mom and what I was doing. One night after a long day we were talking about how our day went and he said “you always cheer me on when I play sports it’s my turn to cheer you on now!” To my best friend my mother, we don’t always see eye to eye and our closeness can sometimes be dangerous but I never questioned her love for me. The day my mother told me she was proud of me was one of the best days of my life. She never gave up on me she reminded me that giving up was not an option. She would ask several times a week how my writing was going and if she sensed I was irritated by her inquiry, which was more often than not, she would simply ask “have you talked to Anna today”. She too knew when to push and when to back off. If I turn out to be half the woman she is I’m sure to get mother of the year! I learned through this process that she will do anything for me and I couldn’t have asked for a better mother and friend. I have a bottle of Monument Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon sitting on my nightstand as a reminder to push. My Uncle Charles gave this bottle to me last year and said you can’t open it until you are finished. So every night I would look at the bottle as a reminder that I have to finish. My Uncle Charles is my fathers best friend, and when my father passed away he promised my dad that he would take care of our family and he has done that and so much more. He stepped in and did things my father would do. Because you see my father was in deed my biggest support and with his physical presence missing I struggled to keep going without him. Uncle Charles called, he encouraged and he looked after my mother so I didn’t have to worry so much. Words can never express the amount of gratitude I have for my family and all that they have done to support me on this journey.

I saved the best for last. Dad I did it! This one’s for you! To the man who never broke a promise to me, I promised I would finish and I did. I miss and love your dearly. Physically you aren’t here but I felt your presence every step of the way. Thank you for never leaving my side.

As I close I want to be sure to acknowledge that God set forth a plan and placed the right people along the way to make this happen. I am thankful He provided the resources in many shapes and forms throughout this journey. Thank you to everyone who made this journey possible!
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This is a dissertation about African American women and motherhood. African American mothers occupy a precarious position in both the (white) public imagination, where they are often labeled as irresponsible welfare queens, and in the scholarly literature on women’s reproductive practices, where they are often rendered invisible in statistical tables and other analyses that point to their “pathological” or “deviant” – different than white – reproductive practices (e.g., high rates of teenage and unmarried motherhood) (e.g., Moynihan 1965).

Historical, anthropological, feminist, and African American research has demonstrated that Black women’s experiences with motherhood are indeed different from white women’s, but not for reasons linked to pathology. Rather, this scholarship focuses on the various structures that sustains racial inequality and/or on the persistence of discrimination and prejudice in social and political life. There can be no doubt that the institution of slavery destroyed any semblance of stable family life for the enslaved, even as it encouraged child-bearing to ensure a steady supply of workers (Dunaway 2003; Frazier 1966; Jones 2010). There has been some debate, however, over how to best understand Black women’s subsequent family and reproductive practices (Heiss 1975; Mullings 1997). Some scholars have argued that an understanding of African American family patterns would be incomplete without taking seriously the impact of the African heritage (DuBois 1909; Hill 1999) whereas others maintain that slavery effectively severed the ties to African culture (Frazier 1966). Yet others argue that the development of the family is best viewed as a combination of influences from the African heritage and white culture (Gutman 1976). Focusing less on the origins of Black family patterns and more on the lived realities of Black families, some scholars emphasize the continued devastations to Black family life that
inequality and poverty keep delivering (Franklin 1997), whereas others have focused on the innovative strategies that especially Black women adopt to protect their families and communities (Lewis and Looney 1983; Martin 1985; Stack 1974). This literature points to the role of public policy, ranging from the Freedman’s Bureau to the New Deal to contemporary welfare policies, in ensuring continued Black subordination and disadvantage (Franklin 1997; Hill 2007; Jewell 1988), as well as a wide range of institutional practices that impacts Black women’s ability to make reproductive decision and raise their children (Edelman 1987; Rousseau 2009).

Prevailing scholarship provides invaluable insights into poor women’s experiences with family and motherhood, but less so into middle class women’s experiences (but see Curwood 1974; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). Moreover, it focuses much more on the perils and uncertainty of motherhood and family life than on the varying dreams, hopes, plans, and life circumstances that characterize the reproductive practices of differently situated black women. Furthermore, while it documents the many obstacles that African American families must overcome, it sometimes ends up fetishizes African American mothers’ ability to stay strong and hold it all together. As Nathan Glazer remarks in the foreword to Frazier’s The Negro Family in the United States, the “only thing that was good was that the mothers, in conditions that should never have existed, did their best by the children” (Frazier 1966, p. xi). More recent iterations of this observation are captured in the idea of the strong Black women (Collins 2005; Wyatt 2008). Thus, even if leaving aside older analyses that clearly pathologize Black mothers, there is still a tendency in the literature to treat Black mothers either as hopelessly ensnared in conditions they have no control over or as super-women who can bear any burden and fight any obstacle.

It is for these reasons that paying attention to how African American women actually think
about and practice motherhood is so significant. Empirically it is obviously important to fill in existing gaps in the literatures pertaining to motherhood generally, where Black mothers still occupy marginal positions, and Black motherhood specifically, where studies of poor women still predominate. But the project also has important theoretical implications and promises to provide an important contribution to our understanding of how differently situated Black women understand and grapple with motherhood and womanhood. Using intersectionality as an intellectual starting point, my aim is to better understand the complexity of the life choices and chances that relate to motherhood and mothering among Black women. As an analytical tool, intersectionality is designed to help us understand how the major social positions we occupy – especially race, class, and gender – come together and produce different constellations of privilege and disadvantage, and opportunities and constraints (Collins 2000 and 2005; Crenshaw 1989; Wilkins 2012). This means, for example, that we can never assume that we know how gender inequality works if we study only white women and that we know how racial inequality works if we study only Black men. More specifically for this study, an intersectional approach directs me to an examination of how both race and class, and race and class together, play significant roles in shaping both the choices that Black women make regarding reproduction and the ways in which I try to make sense of their lives. Here I am relying on Black feminist thought (Collins 2000) to understand how the notion of motherhood has long played a significant role in the lives of Black women and also in the communities they live. This project aims to help us better understand Black women’s varied experiences with motherhood and thus provides a meaningful contribution to the literatures on motherhood, reproduction, and Black women’s reproductive agency.

1 I will use the concept of reproductive agency in terms of how the women individually women made choices related to
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A fairly significant proportion of the literature on child-bearing focuses on adolescents, single women, and poor women. This suggests that researchers are more concerned with, and curious about, women who fall outside the norm of typical mothering. That is, mothering outside the traditional nuclear family formation seems intrinsically troubling and thus more attention is given to it within the literature. Moreover, the literature on mothering reads, at least in part, as if having children within the confines of a traditional nuclear family structure is somehow self-evident and hence in no need of explanation, whereas child-bearing outside the confines of heterosexual marriage warrants explanation. Much of this research reflects concerns about the impact on family structure on the economic security of children. For example, research suggests that children born to single mothers typically have more limited social and financial resources (National Center for Disease Control 2009). Much of the literature on contraceptives, moreover, focuses on the barriers of use that result in unwanted and/or unfortunate pregnancies, again reinforcing the assumption that some life circumstances are more conducive to motherhood than others and, hence, that women whose lives are not conducive to motherhood should be provided with opportunities to prevent motherhood.

The literature on childbearing outside the confines of a traditional heterosexual marriage, perhaps inadvertently, feeds into larger social concerns that non-traditional childbearing is a social problem that warrants intervention. This impression is reinforced by the family formation literature which is mostly focused on two-parent households (Gibson-Davis 2009) and follows an economic-rational model which holds that the decision to form a family by adding children depends on three factors: 1) the structure of opportunity or organizational benefits available to a family, such as family friendly policies; 2) what resources a couple has available, such as their understanding of reproduction. These choices and chances were shaped by their interaction with and position within social structure. This concept deviates a bit from the medical sociological use of the term reproductive agency.
education and income, and 3) the desire to have children (Gibson-Davis 2009). That is, family formation theory suggests that people are essentially rational actors that calculate pros and cons before they decide to start a family. The problem with this model is not necessarily that it is wrong, at least for some families, but instead that it provides only limited tools for understanding why women in a wide range of circumstances decide to become mothers. When it comes to adult, married childbearing, there is little research outside of demography (McLanahan 2008) and family formation, and even less that addresses why adult women do or do not decide to have children outside of traditional family formation. The point here is not to deny the scholarship on nuclear family formation or the literature on the wide range of difficulties and struggles that young, poor, and single mothers experience, but instead to emphasize what it often leaves out, which is the thoughts, dreams, and ambitions of women as they ponder their lives as actual or potential mothers.

Given this background, the overall problem this dissertation deals with is why and how Black women decide to become mothers (or not) and how, more generally, they make sense of their reproductive journeys? There is, of course, some existing scholarship that informs the problem, including research on poor and unmarried women (e.g, Edin and Kefalas 2005). But overall, our knowledge of Black women’s reproductive lives is incomplete and overly focused on either pathological patterns or the imperiled state of their family life. Until quite recently, the two tendencies that Andrew Billingsley noted half a century ago about scholarship on Black families could have be applied to research on Black motherhood – scholars either ignore Black women altogether from studies of motherhood or “consider them only insofar as they may be conceived as a social problem” (Billingsley 1968:198; also Engram 1982). This dissertation, in contrast, focuses on Black women’s own ideas about reproduction and motherhood and is grounded in the
assumption that, despite all the well documented obstacles they face, Black women, are agents of their own lives; that is, the exercise reproductive agency. Exactly how they do that, however, is the empirical question I address here.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Understanding the range of decisions Black women make related to motherhood was my initial goal. What decisions or choices do Black women make that either drive them towards or away from motherhood, and are these decisions different from women who occupy different social locations? Some research suggests that social location, especially race and class, is linked to reproductive decisions (Barman-Adhikari et. al. 2014). What does that mean for Black women? Why are their choices and/or outcomes related to having and raising children different from other women’s? An intersectional lens can help us understand how the complexities associated with intersecting social statuses greatly affect the lives of Black women and thus contribute to their understandings of, and experiences with, motherhood. How women formulate their reproductive lives and how they arrive at, and make sense of, the decisions they make are related not simply to their social positions as women and prospective mothers, but also to their positions as Black women who occupy different positions in the various communities that make up the African American Community. In other words, African American womanhood is not monolithic but instead constitute a wide range of experiences that help define who they are, and how they understand their own position and responsibility in relation to both their own lives and the greater communities they are part of. Existing scholarship has documented the centrality of motherhood for African American women (e.g., Collins 2000; Hill 1999; Sudarkasa 1996), whether or not they are mothers themselves, but as of yet we do not know enough about how differently situated Black women either define motherhood or think about what it means for
them as they try to stake out their own life paths.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This research uses qualitative data to give voice to a community that is often silenced. It examines how women who occupy different positions at the intersection of race, class, and gender experience and think about motherhood. More specifically, and given the significance of mothering in the African American community, the focus of this research is on how Black women understand, manage and negotiate motherhood. This line of research will offer a fruitful addition to the sociological study of intersectionality and motherhood. The theoretical emphasis on intersectionality and motherhood suggests that the decisions women make and the societal influences they interact with should be examined and understood in light of the constellations of constraints, opportunities, and experiences that their particular social locations provide.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This dissertation focuses on how African American women think about and practice motherhood and how they make reproductive decisions more generally. Given the strong emphasis on motherhood I am especially interested in examining how, and to what extent, existing ideologies of motherhood play a role in their reproductive lives. We already know that motherhood ideology is an important component of the African American community, but we know less about how differently situated women respond to, navigate, and (re)construct motherhood ideology as they go about their own lives.

Therefore this study is designed to address the following research questions:

1. How do Black women (re) construct motherhood ideologies?
2. How do Black women make reproductive decisions?
3. How do Black women’s understandings of community expectations influence how they
raise their own children?

ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

Literature Review: This chapter provides a comprehensive survey of the scholarly literature on African American women and their reproductive lives, motherhood, and intersectionality. These literatures help lay the foundation from which we can build an understanding of Black women’s journeys toward and away from motherhood. In addition, this chapter details how this project contributes to existing scholarship on Black women and motherhood.

Methodology: This chapter describes the methodology used in this project. I conducted open-ended, qualitative interviews with fifty African American women who occupy different class locations and who have different experiences when it comes to motherhood and family life. The chapter includes a description of the research participants, the particular study procedure, the instruments used in the study, the data and coding strategies, and my approach to the data analysis.

Findings Chapters: The three findings chapters each address one of the research questions:

Chapter IV: Meaning, Purpose and Thought: Understanding How African American Women Construct Motherhood and Mothering Ideologies. This chapter focuses on how Black women construct motherhood ideologies, and is organized around four major themes:

- Theme 1: It is what it is: Defining Motherhood
- Theme 2: Motherhood as Power
- Theme 3: Motherhood as Sacrifice
- Theme 4: Money and Motherhood.

Chapter V: Managing Reproduction. This chapter focuses on how Black women make reproductive decisions throughout their lives, and is organized around three major themes:
Chapter VI: The Expectation of Motherhood: Community Mothers and Leaders, Raising the Race. This chapter focuses on Black women’s understandings of how community expectations influence how they raise their own children, and is organized around three major themes:

- **Theme 1: Learning from Within: Good Mothers and Bad Mothers**
- **Theme 2: Community Mothering**
- **Theme 3: Scripting Leaders: Middle Class Mothers Creating Leaders**

**Summary and Conclusion:** The final chapter summarizes the most important findings of the study and describes how the findings contribute to existing scholarship. It also addresses the limitations of this particular study and provides suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

To understand the complexity of motherhood we must also understand the role of race and social class in shaping how women define and practice motherhood. Traditional themes of motherhood for white women are not always applicable to the experiences of Black women and other marginalized women (Connolly 2000; Moore 2011; Ragoné and Twine 2000; Roschelle 2013). Historically, “the nineteenth century cult of motherhood was complicated by a number of class and race-based contradictions” (James 1998, pp. 211). Moreover, a traditional Eurocentric view of motherhood assumes that mothering takes place in a nuclear family where the mother is responsible for childrearing and the father for financial support (Hays 1996; Hill 2005). This is not representative of African American families, neither historically nor contemporaneously (Davis 1981). For instance, the idea that in order to be classified as “good mothers” women must make childrearing their full-time responsibility has never quite pervaded the African American community (Staples 1991). However, this does not mean that motherhood is devalued in the African American community, on the contrary. The reverence for mothers in Black communities, in principle if not always reality, has long been so strong that it approaches cult status (Hill 2005). The idea and image of the strong Black woman who mothers not only her own children but also the community has strong historical roots. Black woman, in a word, are not only raising children but are also “raising the race” (Barnes 2016). While in many ways a celebratory image (e.g., Sudarkasa 1996), it is nonetheless controlling, and continues to ensure Black women’s subordinate position (Collins 2005; Ladner 1995).

It is also an image that serves to erase significant variations among Black woman (Tatum 1987). Therefore, the starting point of this dissertation is that women’s social positions within
society – especially race, class, and gender – greatly influence their understandings of motherhood. As Tina Miller points out, experiences of “becoming and being mothers are inextricably linked to ‘race’, social class, and socio-cultural location and as a result are diverse and fragmented (Miller 2005:46).

RAISING CHILDREN IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

In this section I briefly review the literature on African American parenting and how it is different from white parenting. This review is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather to set the stage for the more in-depth discussion of Black motherhood that follows it. Following the literature, I discuss, in turn, mothers, unmarried mothers, teenage mothers, grandmothers, fathers, and community parents.

Mothers

Mothers have long been praised and respected in the African American community (Ladner 1995; Washington 1988). While idealized motherhood for both Black and white women involves sacrifice, the expectation of and the forms that their respective sacrifices take are nonetheless somewhat different (Dow 2016; Hill 2005; Ladner 1998). Most significantly, perhaps, in contrast to white women, Black women’s standing as mothers is threatened neither by their participation in the labor market (James 1998) nor by their relationship status (St. Pierre 1982). Moreover, strong women-centered networks have fostered an expansion of the notion of motherhood in the Black community to include women who help care for the well-being of children outside the nuclear family and others in the community as well (Martin and Martin 1985). These networks make women less dependent upon, and concerned with, male participation, and hence strengthen their position within the family and in the community at large.
Thus, the historical evolution of the Black family, combining internal cultural developments with severe external constraints, has contributed to the much higher proportion of female-headed households among Black families and a continued respect for women as mothers.

From the perspective of the white majority community, however, the strong woman who is celebrated in the African American community has often been turned into a threat and/or been morally vilified (Feldstein 2000). Historical images of the mammy and the matriarch and, more recently, the welfare mother are designed to oppress and control Black women (Collins 2005). That is, entrenched negative stereotypes, including especially the undeserving welfare queen, are held up as examples of what is wrong with society and hence can be used as political weapons against the movement to achieve equality and eradicate racism (Masters, Lindhorst, and Meyers 2014). Moreover, because the image of the “welfare queen” designates a single mother without a husband, it can also be used to control Black men. That is, the continued reliance on explanations for the fractured Black family that emphasize female-headed households and the absence of fathers and husbands implicates not only particular fathers but also Black manhood more generally.

**Single Mothers**

The historical evolution of the Black family has contributed to the much higher proportion of female-headed households among Black families, compared to white families (Banks 2011; Collins 2000; Johnson and Staples 2005; Washington 1988). The result of this development is that African American women have emerged as an important force in the Black community. During slavery family life was inherently unstable and subject to continuous disruptions – husbands and wives were separated, men died prematurely, and enslaved women were often raped and forced to carry children by their masters (Roberts 1997). Post-slavery
developments, similarly, served to undermine Black family life, with the result that both marriage rates and rates of children born within marriage have long been lower for African Americans (Banks 2011; Bryant and Wickrama 2005). This trend is also seen today with 73% of African-American children being born to unmarried women (CDC 2012).

Single mothers, especially poor single mothers, face a unique set of challenges when it comes to raising children, but that does not mean that such families are either inherently or practically dysfunctional (e.g., Heiss 1975; Moller 2006; Sparks 1998). In both the public debate and scholarship, single motherhood is still typically seen as negative. Moreover, because of the high proportion of African American mothers who are both single and poor, they have not only long come to dominate scholarship on Black mothers (Johnson 2010) but also in many ways come to define Black motherhood (Kennelly 1999), despite the fact that, as a small but persistent literature has shown, Black motherhood generally, and single motherhood specifically, take many different forms (Barnes 2016; Hill 1999; Moore 2011; Sudarkasa 2007; Tatum 1987).

**Teenage Parenthood**

While there is a fairly extensive literature on teenage pregnancy, generally speaking this is not a literature grounded in family studies; rather, teenage parenthood is typically approached as a form of youth deviance, not as a legitimate family form (Luker 1996). This is the case especially regarding African American teenagers, who get pregnant and have children at significantly higher rates than their white counterparts. It is this particular family form that is so often referred to as a major cause of the vicious cycle of absent fathers and economic instability that has come to characterize Black families in both scholarship and the public debate. Although there is no doubt that parenthood can bring hardship to many teenagers and that, generally speaking, children who live in two-parent households do better in many ways, the placing of the
explanatory focus on the family form itself—a teenage mother with children—can easily distort a deeper understanding of the social forces that privilege some family forms and bring disadvantages to others (Erdmans and Black 2015). Moreover, the pervasive assumption that teenage childbearing is essentially accidental and a result of poor planning, lack of information, inability to negotiate sexual encounters, and any number of other unfortunate circumstances has long preempted research on teenage families in their own terms (Flanagan 1998; Williams 1991). At least some evidence suggests that Black teenagers do not always view having a baby as stifling and/or debilitating; instead, they view it as a “rite of passage” (Collins 2000; Collins 2005; Luker 1996). Moreover, rather than viewing a pregnancy as an unfortunate accident, some teenage girls are actively looking to replace something that is missing in their lives, whether a connection to a missing father or the prospect of a successful future.

_Grand parenting/Intergenerational Parenting_

African-American families have historically been more likely than other groups in the United States to maintain extended family household (Staples 1991). In addition, Black women are more likely than white women to take on parenting roles as they get older (Lee et. al 2005). This is because Black women are more likely than white women to be parenting grandmothers. Black grandparenting can be understood as a form of organization by the elder generation to sustain families (Johnson and Staples 2005). Historically, the extended Black family generally, and grandmothers in particular, have played important roles in African American childrearing (Johnson and Staples 2005). A traditional Eurocentric view of family assumes that primary childrearing is the responsibility of the mother, whereas in Black families the grandmother is often the primary caregiver (Gibson 2005).
Fathers

The celebration of motherhood does not necessarily de-emphasize fatherhood in the Black community. The consistent absence of Black fathers has been a major issue since slavery (Clayton and Mincy 2003). More recently, high incarceration rates, the difficulties undereducated Black men face in the job market, and various regulations in the welfare system that discourages marriage are among the issues debated both inside and outside the academy (Banks 2011). For some observers, this picture constitutes a crisis in the Black family, especially since absent or distant fathers are ineffective role models for African American boys and young men (Bowman 1993). The reintroduction of Black fathers into the family, from this perspective, will foster a healthy and stable environment for Black children.

Others suggest that although it may be unfortunate that Black men play a more marginal role in family life than their white counterparts, the tradition of strong women makes the presence of husbands and fathers less critical for the stability of Black families than for white families (Clayton and Mincy 2003). The lesser reliance on men for economic support, however, does not necessarily mean an absence of men in the Black family (Johnson and Staples 2005; Livingston and McAdoo 2007). On the contrary, the tradition of extended family networks makes each individual family less isolated than the ideal-typical nuclear family and hence facilitates the development of other male familial roles, such as brother, grandfather, cousin, or what Jayakody and Kalil (2002) call “social fathers” (also King 2010; Smith 2010).

Yet others argue that the notion of the absent Black father is in large part a myth (Coles and Green 2010) that simultaneously contributes to the devaluation of Black men and vilification of single Black women (Hill 2005). In other words, the fact that African American families are more likely than other racial groups to be headed by unmarried women is not in itself evidence
that Black men are not involved in the children’s lives. Moreover, the notion of the absent Black father contains a moral indictment that does not capture the many ways (e.g., welfare rules, incarceration, job insecurity) that Black fathers are structurally prevented from doing normative fathering (Coles and Green 2010). Furthermore, the typification of the absent Black father renders the many varieties of present Black fathers invisible, including stably married fathers (Marks et al 2010) and single custodial fathers (Coles and Green 2010).

Community Parenting

Raising children in the Black community is very much a community effort (Ladner 1998; Martin and Martin 1985). The role of mother is not defined by a biological connection as the term “othermother” so clearly conveys (Collins 2000). Both men and women have long been responsible for raising not just their own biological children but also the children in the community (Barnes 2016). Men and women who do not have children are also responsible for taking care of and watching out for the young in the community (Johnson and Staples 2005). Involvement in community-based programs can help to reinforce bonds of social trust and cohesion as well as serves as a guide to understand the path to empowerment. The middle class Black community serves as an example of how some Black communities formally organize as a community to raise children. Organizations such as Jack and Jill, fraternities and sororities serve as a formal way for children to learn the path to success (Barnes 2016). These organizations were designed to help raise leaders in effort to fight oppressive behaviors within the larger society. Lower class communities have a more informal structure that serve the same purpose but looks very different. For example neighborhood features in lower class communities can include both positive and negative features that may or may not have the same effect on family processes as middle class (Edwards 2000). The community raises these children by community involvement
that can include churches, gang involvement, and/or after school programs/extra curricular
activities such as sports. Through these organizations young children are learning how to be an
adult and adults are taking on the responsibility of mother, father or grandparent regardless of
biological connection to the children in their community.

Raising Children, Concluding Thoughts

In this brief discussion of the scholarship on African American child-raising, it is clear that
the Black family is as diverse as that of other racial/ethnic groups. Nonetheless, there is clearly a
greater emphasis on female-headed households, mothering against difficult odds, and the
importance of mothers at the community level than in scholarship on other ethnic groups. One
reason for this is that so much of the literature on the Black family is motivated by an effort to
rescue it from the devastating and pathologizing portrait painted by Moynahan and other
scholars. It is understandable, then, that Black mothers/women are often praised for their
strength, endurance, and ingenuity when it comes to raising children and that motherhood, at
least as an idea, is revered in Black communities. One consequence of the focus on Black women
as mothers is the risk of “casting Black women as perpetual mothers” (Hill 2005:136). Moreover,
what sometimes gets lost in this scholarship are questions of variations among Black women and
the many ways they think about and define motherhood. In what follows I first discuss
scholarship on the Black motherhood concept and then point to some areas of Black motherhood
that are as of yet underexplored. More specifically, the discussion leads towards the development
of the concept of reproductive agency (de Bessa 2006; Raspberry and Skinner 2011; Reed,
Miller, and Timm 2011) to help us better understand how differently situated women think about
and practice motherhood. This, then, requires an intersectional approach.
SOCIO-HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE OF MOTHERHOOD

The literature shows that motherhood for African American women is unique. Slavery, institutional oppression and culture all play a role in understanding mothering for African American women. This concept is often referred to as central and/or core to understanding African American women (Collins 2000). The ideology of mothering is rooted in an understanding of oneself within a structure of oppression, which informs how African American women think about their motherhood journeys. Traditional themes of motherhood for white women do not always apply to Black women and are therefore not always useful for understanding how Black women approach their reproductive lives (Feldstein 2002; James 1998). It is not so that traditional motherhood ideologies are immune to change; on the contrary, they shift in ways that align with larger social changes, including especially women’s labor market participation, technological changes, and the commodification of motherhood (Dally 1983; Hays 1996; Miller 2005; Taylor, Layne, and Wozniak 2004).

In Patricia Hill-Collins’s examination of women-centered networks the concepts of “othermother” and “bloodmother” arise (Collins 2000). While bloodmother refers to biological motherhood, othermother is related to the notion of “fictive kin.” But the notion of othermother signals a greater community involvement than kin typically does. Essentially, othermothers are women who help care for and monitor the children of the community. The meaning of motherhood thus goes much further than a simple biological connection. In other words, in the African American community women are mothers whether or not they have children. The sharing of childcare responsibilities among African American women is one expression of strong women-centered networks in many African American communities (Hill 2005). These networks make women less dependent upon, and concerned with, male participation, and hence strengthen
their position within the family (Collins 2000).

Early feminist work on motherhood reflected the experience of white middle class women (Connolly 2000) and often did not take into account variations in motherhood experiences and family formation across either social class or race and ethnicity (Collins 2005; Glenn 1994). This definitely makes a difference in how the ideologies of motherhood are constructed and understood, and also easily result in “mother blaming” (Coll, Surrey, and Weingarten 1998:xv). A Black women’s standpoint on motherhood is shaped by actual social practices and collective experiences. Why a woman chooses to become a mother (or not) is shaped by the circumstances of her life and the experiences she has with the groups to which she belongs (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Hill 2005; Reed, Miller, and Timm 2011).

The centrality of motherhood in the African American community means that actual mothering has long been the first step on the journey to womanhood. “If there was one common standard for becoming a women that was accepted by the majority of the people in the community, it was the time when girls gave birth to their first child. This line of demarcation was entirely clear and separated the girls from the women” (Collins 2000:196). However this type of mothering was very different from your traditional Eurocentric view of mothering. As I have already discussed, the history of slavery as well as the implications of “other mothering” have helped inform and develop how Black women think about mothering. The result is that African American women developed notions of mothering that were unique and challenged traditional thinking around what constitutes good mothering.

These notions, however, ended up as caricatures in larger white society, where images of the mammy, the matriarch and, more recently, the welfare mother have long been used to oppress and control Black women (Collins 1998; Franklin 1997). Old stereotypes have been
renamed but remain present. The typical welfare mother is now the welfare queen and what was once known as a jezebel is now a “hoochie” (Collins 2000). Negative stereotypes such as the image of the welfare queen are sometimes used in the public debate as examples of what is wrong with societies. These very examples are the controlling negative images Black women must challenge and move away from:

“Welfare queen” is a phrase that describes economic dependency—the lack of a job and/or income; the presence of a child or children with no father and/or husband; and finally a charge on the collective U.S. treasury—a human debit. The cumulative totality, circulation, and effect of these meanings in a time of scarce resources among the working class and the lower middle class are devastatingly intense. The welfare queen represents moral aberration and an economic drain, but the figure’s problematic status becomes all the more threatening once responsibility for the destruction of the American way of life is attributed to it (Lubiano 1992:337-338).

The reproductive exploitation of Blacks by whites has taken many other forms beyond controlling stereotypes of Black women, historically as well as currently (Dunaway 2003; Rousseau 2009). Past eugenic concerns about “race suicide” have their contemporary equivalents in concerns around teenage pregnancy and the single-parent families headed by women (Flanagan 1998). That is, the public debate about women’s reproductive practices has always had a subtext of racial and/or class concerns. The historical debate about Norplant captures some of the eugenic/genocidal problems with reproductive control as the solution to the “problem” of overproduction of children among certain social groups, especially racial minorities (and underproduction among others) (Malat 2000; Roberts 1997). Since the recipients of these policies are typically Black women, this strongly suggests that our government targets Black
women for reproductive control measures, and exploits them as if they have no functioning reproductive agency (Rosseau 2009). According to Patricia Hill Collins, “controlling Black women’s reproduction was essential to the creation and perpetuation of capitalist class relations” (Collins 2000:51). Thus, since a large proportion of the women targeted by these practices are Black, it is possible to suggest that this form of white exploitation might also play a role in Black women’s decisions to become mothers, or not.

What holds true across the literature surrounding mothering is that an emphasis on a woman’s experience with her race, class and gender paints a clearer picture of why women choose to become mothers. A clear example of how explanations focusing on the interconnections of race, class and gender can help us understand why women choose to become mothers is provided by the history of Black motherhood. Motherhood has long been a central theme in the lives of African American women, and the “idea that mothers should live lives of sacrifice has become the norm” (Christian 1985, pp. 234).

The historical evolution of the Black family, combining internal cultural developments with severe external constraints, has contributed to the much higher proportion of female headed households among Black families, compared to white families, that characterize contemporary family patterns (Collins 2000; Franklin 1997; Hill 2005). The result of this development is that African American women have emerged as an important force in the Black community. The status thus achieved has come at a price, June Jordan outlines the high personal cost African American women can experience being mothers, whether single, working or traditional mothers. The following passage provides a prevailing description of a daughter’s account of how her mother experienced motherhood:

As a child I noticed the sadness of my mother as she sat alone in the kitchen at night…. 
Her women’s work never won permanent victories of any kind. It never enlarged the universe of her imagination or her power to influence what happened beyond the front door of our house. Her women’s work never tickled her to laugh or to shout or dance. But she did raise me to respect her way of offering love and to believe that hard work is often the irreducible factor of survival. Her women’s work produced a reliable home base where I could pursue the privileges of books and music. Her women’s work invented the potential for a completely different kind of work for us, the next generation of Black women huge, rewarding hard work demanded by the huge, new ambitions that her perfect confidence in us engendered. (Jordan 1981:105)

In this depiction, June Jordan describes from a child’s point of view what the experience of a Black mother must have been like. The motherhood she describes is marked by hardship and sacrifice, but the mother herself emerges as a forceful woman who demands respect and attention. Thus, rather than looking at her sacrifice with regret, the author encourages us to view motherhood as the means by which women achieve power.

Given the historical significance of Black motherhood and its deep foundational roots within Black feminist literature, but also the emergent literature on the diversity of motherhood experiences in Black communities (Barnes 2016; Hill 2005; Moore 2011), it is necessary to think about mothering and motherhood through the lens of intersectionality. Intersectionality offers a unique way of positioning women within the context of their lived experiences and paints a richer and more nuanced picture of how women navigate the world in which they live, particularly in terms of their engagement with ideas and practices of motherhood. In other words, in order to gain insights into Black women’s sense of reproductive agency, it is necessary to approach their experiences and thoughts about motherhood from a perspective that not only
prioritizes their own voices (Vakalahi and Starks 2010) but also takes seriously the different opportunities, constraints, assumptions, and practices that differently situated women are exposed to and engage with.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: INTERSECTIONALITY**

Intersectionality provides us with a way of thinking that does not force people into fixed categories and does not assume that all people who occupy a social category have the same experiences. The heart of intersectionality theory focuses on our relationships with interlocking systems of oppression, understanding that at any given moment one system of oppression (i.e., race, class, gender, and sexuality) may be more salient than the other (Crenshaw 1989).

According to Patricia Hill Collins,

> The term intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena (2015:1).

Why do Black women have children? Is the notion of motherhood central to understanding how Black women understand their identity? What social influences help inform mothering practices and ideologies of motherhood for African American women? In grappling with these questions, I was drawn to intersectional scholarship. Intersectionality has inspired a rich body of scholarship across a wide range of disciplines that has greatly improved our understanding of African American women and their lives. And yet, although motherhood has long been a significant element in scholarship on and by Black women, investigations of Black women’s reproductive lives from an intersectional perspective are still sparse, even though there has long been a recognition that class position matters for Black life (Barnes 2016; Curwood 2010; Davis 1981; hooks 2000; Pattillo-McCoy 2000; Tatum 1987). In what follows I will
discuss the concept of intersectionality more generally and then describe its utility for an analysis of Black women’s understandings of and experiences with motherhood. That is, my goal is to synthesize current scholarship on intersectionality as a theoretical paradigm. And I will show that using intersectionality to understand motherhood and mothering for African American women is useful and will provide a fruitful addition to the literature on intersectionality, motherhood, Black womanhood, and the family.

**Main Ideas of Intersectional Scholarship**

The concept of intersectionality is not new to the academy. Intersectionality as a thought and/or knowledge base has been present and discussed long before Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in 1989, but it was not until the emergence of Black feminist thought (phrase coined by Barbara Smith in 1977) that academics really began to take interest in this new way of thinking. Intersectionality was traditionally used in multicultural feminism to give us a better understanding of the lives of women of color. It has since branched off into mainstream sociology, psychology, public health, law, and anthropology, to name a few. Scholars have different ways of measuring, explaining, identifying and naming intersectionality. While intersectionality has a long history as a school of thought there still remains both ambiguity and debate around how scholars define and use it (Bliss 2016; Collins 2015; Few-Demo 2014; Nash 2014).

Intersectionality is often referred to as a matrix of domination (Andersen and Collins 2010), as race, class, gender studies (Glen 1998), as interlocking systems of oppression (Andersen and Collins 2010), and as multiple axes of inequality and/or intersections (Collins 2000). While scholars offer unique and different insights into the notion of intersectionality (Garcia 2016) they all share the assumption that we live in a social world saturated with
complexity. That is, our positions within systems of oppression affect how we organize life and navigate the world. Black feminist theories provide a rewarding entry point into the importance of intersectionality for understanding women’s (and other people’s) lives. Black feminist thought hold that Black women’s lives are shaped not only by their race, but also by their gender, class, and other major social statuses (Collins 2000). Moreover, scholars have come to realize that theories of gender and race cannot adequately address the issue of experiencing racism or sexism if used as separate theoretical paradigms (Anthias 2002). In other words, intersectional paradigms assume that race, class and gender, as well as other major social locations, cannot be examined independently of one another (Andersen and Collins 2010; Yuval-Davis 2006).

Two broad conceptualizations of intersectionality can be discerned in the literature, one subjective (individualistic) and one objective (structural). Structural intersectionality studies are prominent within the law and health policy literature (Crenshaw 1991; McCall 2005) whereas subjective intersectionality studies predominate in anthropology, psychology, and feminist analyses (Jacobs 1994; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006; Yuval-Davis 2006). Within sociology, scholars look at intersectionality through both subjective and objective lenses (Collins 2000). In what follows I discuss key differences between structural and subjective intersectionality and give examples from the literature.

Structural intersectionality looks at how our experiences within the structure of social institutions shapes our lives. Although the concept of institutions is abstract most sociologists agree that the economy, family, education, healthcare, media, education and the state can be considered social institutions. Within each social institution a system of power is fundamentally present. That is, systems of oppression, such as race, class, and gender, are deeply embedded in the structure of social institutions. The key premise of structural intersectionality is that race,
class and gender are considered the primary structural elements within the system of power but that these elements operate, and intersect, in various ways within social institutions (Collins 2000). There is by now a large literature that have used the tools of intersectionality to demonstrate how a wide range of inequalities are produced and sustain, including – to give just a few recent examples – those linked to environmental injustice (Ryder 2017), poor and elderly women (Sidloyi 2016), hijab discrimination (2016), and state policy on violence against women (Hearn et al 2016). Feminist jurisprudence is an especially good example of a field that uses structural intersectionality. Kimberle Crenshaw, a prominent intersectional theorist, describes structural intersectionality in the following way, based on a field study of battered women’s shelters:

Many women of color are burdened by poverty, childcare responsibilities and the lack of job skills. The burdens largely the consequence of gender and class oppression are compounded by racially discriminatory employment and housing practices women of color often face (Crenshaw 1991:68).

This way of conceptualizing intersections in terms of structural consequences provides a good illustration of how structural intersectionality plays out in our everyday world. Crenshaw’s analysis of battered women’s shelters sheds light on how systems of oppression intersect not only with other systems of oppression but also with features of the social institutions in which they are situated.

Subjective intersectionality, in contrast, focuses on the lived experiences of systems of oppression. We understand structurally that people are positioned within systems of power and domination and this affects life chances and/or choices. Subjective intersectionality explores how people navigate through such systems and how they come to understand themselves. For
example how does a lesbian, Latina woman understand her position in her family? How might she navigate different choices and decisions in light of her experiences within the system? In recent years, psychologists have turned to the concept of subjective intersectionality to understand how race/ethnicity, gender, social class and sexuality impact a range of individual-level outcomes, including health and well-being, personal and social identities (Coles and Green 2010). From this perspective then, the primary focus is on how notions of intersectionality can help us understand identity processes and identity politics (e.g., Carroll 2017; Nelson, Stahl, and Wallace 2015; Rogers, Scott, and Way 2015). How we study, define, and make sense of subjective intersectionality, however, is not consistent across disciplines. Some scholars suggest that this inconsistency adds to the uniqueness of this form of thought and confirms the need for a deeper exploration of the knowledge base (Collins 2000).

Generally speaking, three analytical approaches for studying intersectionality and dealing with the complexities of intersectional processes exist within the literature; they refer to anticategorical complexity, intercategorical complexity and intracategorical complexity (McCall 2005). Anticategorical complexity is known to most as a way to study intersectionality by deconstructing existing analytical categories. Researchers who use this method think people and structures are too complex and fluid to be positioned within distinct categories (Lather 2001). This method of measuring/identifying intersectionality is mainly found in the feminist literature (Yuval-Davis 2006). Although this way of thinking is dominant within gender studies it can also be found in history, anthropology and English (Davis 1981). It suggests that we move beyond thinking of categories in a narrow sense; for example, this way of thinking would challenge the idea of a gender binary. That is, the presence of categories is irrelevant because we as a people are too complex and social categories are fluid therefore analytically forcing people to fit nicely
into a particular category would be inaccurate (Collins 2004). This way of measuring intersectionality is more radical in the sense that it aims to bring about social change. We live in a world where the gender binary and/or racial categories are deeply imbedded in the very foundation of social institutions; therefore, erasing the notion of distinct categories could be considered subversive (Butler 1990). Nonetheless, this way of measuring intersectionality poses a very important question: why categorize people in the first place? Does suggesting that we are too complicated to classify erase the problem of differential access to services or disproportionate numbers of individuals affected by one illness or another? This form of measuring intersectionality is not well suited to studies of inequality. The notion of power is often dismissed, forgotten or simply not discussed as central to the approach.

The intercatogorical complexity approach is positioned on the opposite end of the spectrum from anticatorgorical. Intercatogorical complexity requires researchers to use already existing categories of classification in order to explain inequality among social groups, while at the same time understanding that current societal categories are imperfect and fluid. The goal of this approach is to chart out ever-changing relationships among social groups while also understanding that within each social grouping there is variation in terms of how individuals experience inequality. Rather than deconstructing complex categories, “the categorical approach (intercatogorical) focuses on the complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories and not on single complexities within single social groups, single categories or both” (McCall 2005, 1786). This approach does a good job of mapping out distinct categories by classifying them within our complex structure. For example, if our unit of analysis is citizenship (US Citizen and Non US Citizen) then these groups would be further organized by race (Asian US Citizen, Black US Citizen, and Asian Non US Citizen, etc.)
and then further classified by class (middle class Black US citizen and so on). This approach creates an almost overwhelming picture of complexity that may or may not solve the issues associated with the anticatogorical approach (Few-Demo 2014. In fact the same issues related to the anticatogorical approach may arise with the intercatogorical approach. With this much categorical complexity there is a risk that each miniscule category gets lost in the sea of other categories thus, in effect, mimicking the drawbacks of the deconstructed categories.

Intracatogorical is the approach that falls right in the middle of the spectrum. The intracatogorical is known for its focus on “case studies.” Intersectionality has been most frequently associated with qualitative methods because qualitative research is well suited for illustrating and explaining the complexities of social life. This approach starts with preexisting categories but often reveals new and/or forgotten social groups. The intracatogorical approach also uses preexisting categories to compare and contrast newly created categories, often using the initial group as the focus and the new group as a comparison (Glenn 1998). Intracatogorical and anticatgorical are the approaches that currently lead the field of intersectionality.

Have scholars created a clear and concise theory for understanding social life through intersectionality? Maybe not. The literature is consistent in its embrace of intersectionality as a lens for understanding social life, especially inequality. How we use this theory empirically is not necessarily clear and this may not be a bad thing. Davis (1986) points out that a successful theory should be a little hazy and slightly incoherent. A theory of this nature requires more synthesis and elaboration from scholars in the field. Incompleteness motivates academic audiences to test the theory and apply it to social life. This very notion is why intersectionality is attractive to academics. There is fertile ground around the study of intersectionality because it provides a new way of thinking of and studying social life. The realm of reproduction (which
currently is dominated by demographers and health researchers) is one area that lacks a deeper understanding and a wider research base rooted in intersectionality. The application of intersectionality to reproductive strategies and decision-making, therefore promises to greatly improve our understanding of how women approach their reproductive lives. This is so especially when it comes to African American women, who all too often are treated monolithically in social research.

*Using Intersectionality to Understand Motherhood*

When thinking about motherhood specifically, and Black women’s reproductive strategies more generally, intersectionality helps us understand the complexity of the journey Black women embark on as they make choices about family, work, and motherhood. Theories focusing on the interconnections among race, class, and gender, and how they interact to form a complex system of domination and meaning, provide a particularly useful way of conceptualizing the journey to motherhood for Black women. Several scholars have noted the need for much more scholarship on the varied experiences of Black middle class (Barnes 2016; Thomas 2015). Moreover, rather than assuming that poor Black women are defined by their poverty, we also need more scholarship on the varied experiences and strategic choices of working class and poor women. My preferred concept for examining these issues is “reproductive agency.” This concept overlaps with what Barnes (2016) calls “strategic mothering,” but is broader in the sense that it encompasses not only how Black women do mothering but also a life-long series of reproductive decisions that come to define them as Black women in their own eyes. The notion of reproductive agency treats all women as agents of their own lives who are capable of making sense of the choices they have made. In this sense, reproductive agency is more about women’s ability to make sense of their lives than it is about
women’s ability to carry out a reproductive agenda. This is not to deny the very real difficulties that some women have when it comes to carrying out such agendas, but rather to recognize that the extent to which women have a reproductive plan in the first place, and what that plan might look like, is itself entangled in their social locations.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

AIM OF THE STUDY

Most available research on motherhood and the ideology of motherhood uses qualitative research methods and, given the effectiveness of this methodology, I have chosen to continue the tradition by designing a qualitative research project using semi structured in-depth interviews as the main source of data. The aim of this project is to help us understand black women’s reproductive journeys and their engagement with ideologies of motherhood. Motherhood is the central concern of this project. However, understanding their reproductive strategies in greater detail – that is, the various dreams, choices, chances, and experience they have throughout their lives – will help paint a clearer picture of how they navigate the world around them. Hence, this is a qualitative research project designed to understand why and how black women think about, navigate ideologies of, and practice motherhood.

This study is designed to address the following research questions:

1. How do black women (re) construct motherhood ideologies?
2. How do black women make reproductive decisions?
3. How do black women’s understandings of community expectations influence how they raise their own children?

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research project uses qualitative data derived from semi structured in-depth interviews with African American women from different socioeconomic backgrounds to examine variations in women’s reproductive practices and engagement with motherhood ideologies. I used a narrative approach and rely on grounded theory to inform the research
Grounded theory is a qualitative methodological approach used to develop theory that is grounded in data (Charmaz 2012). When using grounded theory, in-depth interview data are especially suitable for this methodology as it allows the researcher to develop theory through an interactive process of data analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). That is, using a grounded theory perspective allows the researcher the freedom to study a particular phenomenon without being held to a set of solidified research questions. As the data begins to tell us a story the researcher then constructs more solidified research questions based in what the data tells us (Creswell 2013). Narrative inquiry is a methodology used to describe the personal stories of participants (Miller 2005). It is through narrative that participants are able to share their stories while the researcher helps to make sense of the stories they tell (Creswell 2013). The interviews were structured in such a way as to encourage the participants to share their personal stories while also guiding them with more structured questions. It is my hope that, as I make sense of their stories I stay true to them even as I try to make sense of them from a broader perspective than their individual lives.

I collected data from 50 women occupying a wide range of social locations. Considering the exploratory nature of the research, it was important to carefully select an interview sample that captures a range of reproductive strategies at the same time as it is theoretically strategic. I used a selection method that links women’s objective social locations in terms of race and class to more subjective communities, such as organizations and neighborhoods. Examples of such communities are neighborhood groups, church groups, student groups, and other voluntary organizations (e.g., Jack and Jill). Through organizations like these, in other words, I was able to secure a sample of women that are situated differently regarding ideas around motherhood, experiences and practices when it comes to mothering, and social statuses. I used a snowball
sample to secure participants (women already interviewed connect me with new subjects.

PARTICIPANTS

The sample is comprised of 50 women from different socio-economic locations with a range of reproductive experiences. All participants identified as African American and were between the ages of 18 - 40. The majority of the women in the sample were single at the time of the interview and thirty-seven (74%) had at least one (1) child. When asked about having children women were asked about biological children or “other”. “Other” could include “Godchildren”, nieces, nephews, adopted, and/or symbolic children etc. The women who indicated they had children included both biological and other children. The following (see below) provides an overview of the characteristics of the women in the sample. Each woman was asked to complete a pre-survey questionnaire to collect some basic information related to social standing and reproductive choices.

Age

- 1 woman, 20 -24
- 8 women, 25 - 29
- 8 women, 30 - 34
- 35 women, 35 – 40

Social Class

- 10 women in the upper class
- 15 women in middle class
- 15 women in the working class
- 10 women in the lower class

Relationship Status
• 23 single
• 16 legally married
• 2 divorced
• 9 other

What reproductive decisions have you thought about, participated in and/or wrestled with over your life course? (check all that apply)

• Contraception (50)
• Sterilization (5)
• Having Children (50)
• Abortion (23)
• ART (egg donation, surrogacy, sperm donation, IVF etc) (7)
• Adoption (9)

I used Thompson and Hickey’s (2005) academic class model to inform how social class was operationalized. Given that class membership can be defined by several factors I have decided for the purpose of this project I would use education, homeownership and occupation as measures of class location. Thompson and Hickey divides the class structure into 5 categories lower class, working class, lower middle class, upper middle class and upper class (See Appendix C). I did not ask participants for income but instead used education, homeownership and occupation to classify them into groups. For this project I combined upper middle class and lower middle class into middle class to structure four (4) separate social class statuses. The Pre-Survey simply asked them to self-identify as lower, working, middle or upper class. These options were not operationalized to the participants; therefore social class was left to their own interpretation. During the interviews, as women shared information about their life, I asked
questions related to homeownership, education and occupation if these indicators did not naturally emerge in their narratives to help me also classify women according to more objective social class criteria. In 2 cases, their self-reported class was different from the more objective assessment, but for the most part they coincided.

PROCEDURES

IRB Approved #10081202

I conducted semi-structured interviews with African American women from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Interviews took place in Cincinnati, Cleveland and Columbus Ohio. I chose to include both women who were mothers and women who were not (with or without plans to have children in the future).

Interviews were conducted face-to-face at a time and location suitable to the participants (e.g. their home, public library) and with the women’s permission were digitally recorded. All interviewees gave formal consent to being interviewed. The participants chose their own pseudonyms for identification in an effort to protect their identity.

This data was collected from 2011 to 2013. Each interview took on average about one hour to complete. Once the data was transcribed I began analyzing the interviews. Initially I did this by hand, reading each transcript line by line. The literature helped informed my decisions to use certain key words and phrases in order to identify patterns. First I used singles words as codes, and then I put these words into categories and finally created themes. The data helped shape the narrative and the overall research questions developed as I began the data analysis process.

DATA ANALYSIS

The coding process is challenging and yet the process brings life to your data. Before I
began the formal coding process I began by pre-coding. I went through my text and identified 
words and short phrases that were interesting and thought provoking. As Lavder (1998) suggests,
never overlook the opportunity to “pre-code” (Layder, 1998). The coding process for this project 
began with pre-set codes. The codes were derived from the conceptual framework and my 
working knowledge of field. When examining the literature several key words surfaced that I 
used as initial codes. These codes are (including but not limited to):

1. Motherhood 
2. Rite of passage 
3. Choice 
4. Responsibility 
5. Community 
6. Abortion 
7. Sacrifice 
8. Power 
9. Strength 

I looked for words or phrases that encompassed the meanings of each of the codes I had 
identified. From there I entered into an open coding process where I allowed the data to guide 
my thinking. Once I searched the data for my pre-codes I began to categorize the codes. I 
separated the codes by behaviors and relationships. The categories were Doing, Meaning, and 
Decisions. Once the categories were developed I created subcategories with more specific 
meanings attached to each category. As I developed each category I asked myself question, 
made comparisons, and looked for similarities and differences within the text. The outcome of 
coding and characterization is the birth of a theme. Once the coding process was well underway I
was able to categorize each code into a particular theme. I organized the data by 25 themes finalizing 10 themes to organize my findings around. In what follows a sampling of how the codes were organized for chapter 1.

**Chapter 1 Themes and Codes:**

Theme 1: *Defining Motherhood* included the following code(s):  
**Code: Good Mothering**  
Subcode:  
- Make good  
- Good mother  
- Great  
- I want to be like  
- Model  
- Mentor  

**Code: Bad Mothering**  
Subcode:  
- Bad  
- I don’t want to be  
- Bad decisions  
- Left  
- Neglect  
- Selfish  
- Lazy  

**Code: Definition**  
Subcode:  
- Motherhood is  
- I think mother is  
- Define  
- It is  

**Code: Meaning**  
Subcode:  
- Understand  
- Think  

Theme 2: *Motherhood as Power* included the following code(s):  
**Code: Power/Strength**  
Subcode:  
- Nurture  
- Care  
- Strength  
- Power  
- Influence  
- Gift
Theme 3: *Motherhood as Sacrifice* included the following code(s):

**Code: Sacrificing**

*Subcode:*
- Drop
- Forgo
- Lose
- Offer
- Waive
- Postpone

Theme 4: *Money and Motherhood* included the following code(s):

**Code: Resource**

*Subcode:*
- Things
- Resource
- Give

**Code: Money**

*Subcode:*
- Money
- Bills
- Checks
- Provide
- Postpone

These words/subcodes capture the many ways that the women used to describe their ideologies around motherhood. I used their language to help organize text and identify patterns. I searched for codes with both my human eye and the software package NVivo. However, coding by hand was more effective for this process as I was able to delve into the data in more depth.

**RESEARCHER POSITION**

Reducing the level of researcher bias is critical to the research process, but that does not mean a futile effort to erase the positionality of the researcher. On the contrary, that positionality is critically important to the research process, especially when it comes to the collection of in-depth qualitative data. As I worked on recruitment, my status as an African American woman
gave my sufficient insider-credibility to secure a sample without too much trouble. But, as an upwardly mobile African American mother who connects deeply with this topic it was nonetheless important for me to think about how I conducted the interviews and try make sure that the women felt free to tell their stories how they saw fit. Interestingly, it was with the first few interviews that I saw the largest potential for bias as these were with women I knew personally. With middle and upper class women there were times when the conversation felt artificial as if they were telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. I had to be careful not to agree or disagree with statements, even though they no doubt still made assumptions about what they thought I would like to hear. It was also important for me to be aware of my body language as to not suggest any affirming or negating presence as a researcher.
CHAPTER IV FINDINGS: Meaning, Purpose and Thought: Understanding How African American Women Construct Motherhood and Mothering Ideologies

Girl, being a mommy is what we do. I don't have a definition it’s just what we do. It’s who I am  (Anita, 36, lower class, mother of 3)

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood as defined by scholars is historically variable and influenced by culture (Arendell 2000). The idea of the universality of motherhood has few adherents these days and the widespread position is that there is no universal definition of motherhood as previously thought (Glenn 1998). Common within western culture is what scholars refer to as “intensive” mothering. Intensive mothering is best explained by Hayes (1996), who writes that “this motherhood mandate declares that mothering is exclusive, wholly child centered, emotionally involving, and time-consuming” (Arendell 2000: 1194). Intensive mothering is clearly influenced by culture, but is also shaped by social location, such as race, class, and gender, and women’s experiences with social and political activism and community support.

Women of color share a unique story of motherhood that is shaped by cultural influences. With the concept of “motherwork” Patricia Hill Collins explains how “motherwork” is laden with notions of power, sacrifice and identity (Collins 1998; 1994). The notion of power within the ideology of motherwork suggests that women are empowered though the work they do to navigate and resist the “structures that oppress” them (Collins 1994:56). Motherwork also embodies the ideals of sacrifice by which women/mothers live lives of sacrifice in which their children’s needs come before anything else, including their own needs. Finally, an important aspect of motherwork is the work women do to foster and sustain racial identities for themselves and their children that is defined by them and negates dominant representations.
To understand motherhood fully means you must understand how motherhood is situated within the family structure and, in turn, how the family structure is situated within the culture at large (Durr and Hill 2006; Glenn, Chang, and Forcey 1994). The idea of the traditional nuclear family, for example, refers to a family structure that, if anything, characterize White, middle class, heterosexual couples with children. Because this is a family structure that all other families are measured against (Arendell 2000), it is controlling and oppressive of those whose inclinations or circumstances prevent them from living up to this family ideal (Moore 2011).

The intersections of women’s social locations influence the strategies and meanings women construct about motherhood and mothering. Black mothers have to grapple with stereotypical views of what it means to be a black mother. These racialized views date back to slavery (Sudarkasa 1996). A long history of racial oppression has helped create and maintain an ideology of black womanhood generally, and motherhood specifically, that is pathologized in various ways. Ideologies of the “mammy,” “welfare queen” and/or the “jezebel” paint negative pictures of lower class black women and mothers and suggest that these women are over-sexualized, codependent, uneducated and not authors of their own stories (Collin 2004; 1998; Edin and Kefalas 2005). Do black mothers see themselves as such? While some may have opted into the role society carved out for them, most have fought to create a different life story; but for all, their position within the system greatly affect how they see themselves as mothers.

Black motherhood is a highly complex ideology that for many develops as they interplay with various systems of oppression. How women think about mothering is very much dependent on how they themselves view the world. Social standing, such as race, class and sexual orientation shapes, how women think about and understand motherhood. Research has shown that black and white women construct motherhood differently (Edin and Kefalas 2005). Black
mothers are forced to raise children in an oppressive social structure not designed for their success. Black mothers mother in a way that centralizes the task of raising a race equipped with the tools to persevere in an oppressive environment. White women do not have this same burden of racial oppression. Although their position within a system ruled by patriarchy greatly shapes how they understand their role as mothers, race is usually not a focal point. Moreover, the significance of slavery for the development of the black family and black motherhood and their divergence from white families and white motherhood cannot be overstated. What about social class? Research suggests that race has less of an impact on shaping mothering practices and mothering for white women but class significantly shapes how women understand and define motherhood (Lareau 2002). Middle class and lower class white women parent their children differently. Middle and upper class white women generally have children who display a sense of entitlement whereas lower class and working class mothers raise children that do not express this same level of entitlement (Ibid.). Research into class differences among black women is still fairly sparse, but what we do know suggests that there are at least some differences in how black women of different class locations understand motherhood (Arendell 2000; Barnes 2016; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). That is, black women understand their motherhood through their relationship with both their race and class.

In this chapter I show how African American women construct their ideology of motherhood in ways that are influenced by their social class, their age, and the communities they are part of. Their stories reflect an understanding that mothering and motherhood are shaped by many influences. When asked to think about their ideas of motherhood the women shared stories riddled with notions of power sacrifice, identity and money. In what follows I share their stories and discuss how their social position shapes their understanding of what it means to be a (black)
mother. The women I talked to shared heartfelt stories as they tried to express and describe their definition of motherhood and what motherhood meant to them.

What does it mean to be a mother? The meaning of motherhood is obviously more complex than a simple biological connection. To be a mother is to occupy a social position that is historically specific and culturally defined. As a social position, motherhood is deeply entangled with womanhood (Donath 2015; Miller 2005) and comes with a range of expectations, proscriptions, constraints, and opportunities. And yet, motherhood is not the same for all women; it is “neither a unitary experience for individual women nor experienced similarly by all women” (Arendell 2000, pp. 1196). Instead, motherhood can only be understood through a lens that takes seriously the intersecting axes of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age and so much more.

Much has been written about the importance of motherhood to black women, and we know that motherhood means something different for white and black women (Collins 1994; Feldstein 2000; Hill 2005; Ladner 1995). For black women, mothering is central and a core element of how we think of ourselves as women. Regardless of whether or not black women have biological children of their own, they are taught to mother at a very early age, and to mother not just the children they give birth to but also mother the community (Barnes 2016). That is, motherhood is central and core to the personal identity of many African American women. However, we know much less about variations among black women.

The findings I present here confirm findings from other studies that motherhood is central to black women’s sense of self (Glenn 1998; Dow 2015b; Edin and Kefalas 2005). In what follows I discuss the four most important themes related to understanding the meaning of motherhood for African American women that emerged from the data; 1) It is what it is: Defining Motherhood; 2) Motherhood as Power; 3) Motherhood as Sacrifice; and 4) Money and
Motherhood. The first theme uncovers black women’s thinking around the meaning of motherhood in general and how they define the concept. The themes that follow delve into more specific components of motherhood. The second theme links motherhood with power and reveals how empowerment is woven into the meaning of motherhood. The third theme captures the sacrificial role women play when they mother children. The fourth theme examines how the availability of resources influences motherhood and shows how money helps shape meaning. Social class is an important factor when considering how black women make sense of motherhood. However, its influence is variable, influencing some themes more than others. In what follows I unpack each theme and address the significance of social class when appropriate.

**Theme 1: It is What it is: Defining Motherhood**

This theme seeks to capture how African American women think about and understand mothering and motherhood. Some women were ready with definitions rolling off their tongues while others seemed to grapple with the concept while sharing stories of mothering practices as examples of what motherhood meant to them. All in all, this theme uncovers the “what it is” aspect of motherhood for African American women. Later I discuss more specific components of the ideology of motherhood for African American women.

I began this chapter with a quote from Anita who sums up how she thinks of motherhood very clearly “it’s just what we do.” Scholar Judith Tucker suggests that mothers do not choose their way into the motherhood problem and they cannot choose their way out of it (Tucker, 2006: p32). For lower class women the idea of motherhood was simply a role inherent in who they were. They grappled less with the meaning, as the meaning in and of itself was simply part of them. Their choice to step into that role was less of their own making; it was like their community had planned out a trajectory for their lives which included mothering. In that sense,
motherhood was more a destiny than an option. Many of the women did not think twice about what it meant to be a mother. Motherhood to them was a sense of being.

When Joy grappled with the question of how to define motherhood she began with a long pause, suggesting that this was something she had not thought much about. As she processed her answer she still was not sure what it meant but the concept of support resonated with her.

Hmmm. That’s a hard question… hmmm I guess it’s being able to provide that emotional, physical, financial support for your kids. (Joy, 25, working class, mother of 1).

Joy suggests that motherhood encompasses an ability to provide not just financially but also emotionally and physically for our children. What is important here is not only what she actually said but also the nuances of her answer. The pause is important as this suggests that for lower/working class African American women the idea of motherhood is inherent to who they are and hence they grapple less with the role and its meanings. That is, they needed the encouragement that the interview provided to grapple with the concept because in their communities it is simply part of who they are, whether or not motherhood was something they had actively sought.

Queen of the Nile, who does not have biological children of her own but talks about how she mothers the young kids in her community, also suggests that the young women in her community may not know what motherhood means. She says:

Girl these women out here have no clue about being a mother. They out here having babies so they can get a check, it’s sad really sad. They aint trying to take care of no babies. It’s the grandmomma really taking care of the kids. They are the only ones responsible. These young girls just wild. (Queen of the Nile, 40, lower class, no children).
Here Queen of the Nile addresses a situation known all too well in impoverished African American communities: the reliance on welfare checks to get by. The notion of the welfare mother, which is a controlling image of long standing that Queen of the Nile is reinforcing, suggests that women in this community are lazy and uncaring opportunists who use the welfare system for their own benefits (Johnson 2010; Collins 2000). Although several of the lower/working class women struggled to define what motherhood meant to them, no one talked about their own experiences with motherhood in ways that gave any credence to Queen of the Nile’s criticism.

Instead, concern about being able to provide for their children was a theme expressed by women across all class locations. Notions of love, nurturing and support were frequently used by the women in the sample. Hays (1996) and Dow (2015) speak of an ideology of motherhood called “intensive mothering” which understands motherhood primarily as a commitment, including time, physical, emotional, and financial.

Roxanne, Monique and Geneva all give great examples of the supportive and committed mother. Providing support mentally, emotionally, financially and to the community contribute to the emotional labor done by black mothers in the community.

You know all mothers are supposed to provide for their kids and support their kids and love their kids but you know it doesn't always work out like that. Them crumb snatcher make you want to throw them out the window some days [laughs] now that don’t sound like love does it? [laughs] (Roxanne, 39, lower class, mother of 4)

Roxanne’s musings suggest that mothers in the black community do indeed mother – or at least aspire to mothering – in a way that points to intensive mothering as the foundation of what it means to be a mother. Hayes (1996) suggests that to be mothers according to the ideology of
intensive mothering is to be caregivers who invest great swaths of time, money, energy, and emotional labor in raising their children. Roxanne suggests that providing for and loving your children is what makes you a mother; however this ideology can be hard to live up to in disadvantaged African American community. She refers to her children as “crumb snatchers,” suggesting that raising children takes lots of effort and comes with an emotional cost, however much she joked about it. Monique too talks about love as a central component of motherhood. She says:

Being a mother is about loving your child and caring for them. (Monique, 35, lower class no children)

Monique used her aunt to illustrate what she meant:

I don’t know how my aunt did it. She had 7 kids and 3 jobs. She loved those kids to death. Not sure how she even had the time and energy for they bad asses but she did. I asked her if she had a favorite but she would always laugh and say go on somewhere you my favorite. [laughter]  (Monique, 35, lower class no children)

Motherhood is about love, it is about nurturing, and it is about providing for your children regardless of your ability to provide. Geneva adds the idea of providing protection, in addition to loving and nurturing, to the understanding of motherhood for African American women.

It’s being able to nurture your children and protect them and love them and instruct them in the right way. (Geneva, 40, working class, mother of 4)

Geneva was one of only a few lower/working class women who also spoke of the responsibility to teach children right from wrong, but this cannot be taken as evidence that poor women care less about teaching their children “the right way” than middle class women do.

In addition to the more practical, and sometimes challenging, responsibilities of
motherhood, the women also spoke of the joys and pains associated with motherhood. Ruth simply says motherhood is a conundrum that can be difficult. Her description captures both the rewards and the pain of suffering that comes with motherhood:

Motherhood is this rewarding conundrum that allows you to grow and suffer as women at the same time (Ruth, 38, upper class, mother of 3)

In contrast, Rosey (middle class) and Jean (upper class) focus more exclusively on the positive aspects of mothering. Rosey celebrates what she sees as the flexibility of deciding what motherhood means to the person, which is somewhat different from the ways that lower/working class women talked about it. Lower/working class women spoke of motherhood less as a choice than an assignment. Rosey’s account suggests that there are some basic things that a mother is supposed to do but, all in all, you make of it and understand it however you see fit.

I think motherhood is exactly who you are and whatever that means is what it means. But I do think there are some basics- You do need to provide the basis for a healthy childhood, shelter, love, and care- but how you do it is really flexible I think.“ (Rosey, 38, middle class, mother of 1)

Jean’s account provides an example of the concept of intensive mothering that suggests that mothering consists of sacrificing it all for the sake of your children. That to be a good mother we must sacrifice our own needs for the needs of our children. However, she presents this sacrifice in a very positive and affirming way as she suggests that mothers hold families together. This passage shows both the joys and the pains of motherhood experienced by African American women who occupy upper/middle class statuses.

Mothers are the glue that holds families together. We nurture not just our children, but also our family and others. Motherhood is about making sure everyone has what they
need and at times at the expense of our own needs.“ (Jean, 38, upper class, mother of 2)

Both Rosey and Jean discuss motherhood as a joyful responsibility that requires commitments of time, and emotional, physical and finical support.

The idea that motherhood has something to do with partnership was primarily expressed by the upper/middle class women. Research suggest that lower class women are less concerned with the role of their partner when understanding what motherhood means to them or when making decisions about motherhood (Johnson 2010). Some middle class women in the sample compared motherhood to fatherhood. For example Chanel says:

hmm how do you define motherhood? You know…like I view a father. And I think we let women off the hook. But I feel like we view a father like when we say it takes a real man to be a dad but anybody could be a father, and I view the same thing with mothers. You know anybody can go out here and be somebody’s mother but to actually parent is different for me and so umm that’s how I view it (Chanel, 38 middle class, mother of 1)

This reference to fatherhood is an important point that helps us understand both mothering and fathering in terms of acquired skills rather than a biologically rooted ability. Research suggest that men play secondary yet important roles in the black community when it comes to raising children (but see Coles and Green 2010); however, Chanel suggests that this role is more significant than is always realized. Grace too makes links motherhood to fatherhood.

I think the father influences motherhood too. Um, I know people that oh that’s not true- I think most definitely it’s true because that’s how you get your balance so either the father is going to take on the more feminine roles and the mother is going to take on the masculine role, it’s going to be a blend, or opposite (Grace, 40, upper class, mother of 2)

How black women define motherhood is connected to their position in society, but not
always in consistent or straight-forward ways. Not surprisingly, all the women I talked to view motherhood as an important responsibility that involves sacrifice. All women also said that joy was an important part of motherhood and they identified love and care as important aspects of what mothers do. And yet, there were some discernible differences, some of which I will develop further below and in other chapters. First, there was a clear sense among the poor and working class women that motherhood was their destiny and hence not something they had thought much about. This does not mean they had less reproductive agency than more well-off women, only that they expressed it differently. Second, while it was common for middle- and upper-class women to reference the fathers of their children as an important aspect of how they formulated their thoughts around mothering, the poor and working-class women were much less likely to do so.

Theme 2: Motherhood as Power

The novelist Toni Morrison talks extensively in her literary works about motherhood. She along with other scholars of black lives discuss the concept of motherhood as being central to African American womanhood (Collins 2000; Morrison 2004). The maternal identity, according to both Morrison and Collins, is a source of great power for African American women. It is through motherhood, in other words, that African American women have achieved power and reverence within the black community. African American women are often burdened with the responsibility of caring for children, both their own and others, and often without consistent help from fathers. Their relationships to the children of the community, serve as sources of strength and power within the community. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) details the concept of power for African American women and their children:

Such power is transformative in that Black women’s relationships with children and other
vulnerable community members is not intended to dominate and control. Rather its purpose is to bring people along to---in the words of the late nineteenth century black feminists------“uplift the race” so that vulnerable members of the community will be able to attain the self reliance and independence essential for resistance (132)

The concept of power discussed by black feminist scholars suggests that motherwork for African American women consists of not just nurturing children but also educating and strengthening the community. It is the responsibility of mothers to both educate and empower the race which means their mothering is a form of social activism. It is for this reason that O’Reilly discusses black mothers as “political mothers” and black grandmothers as “guardians of the generation” (O’reilly 2004). The responsibility given to the role of mother in the black community is also what gives it respect.

The participants in my study also emphasized the special role of mothers in the African American community. Natalie, for example, emphasizes the respect associated with motherhood:

We respected everybody's mom it was like I understood, if you know someone has kids you're supposed to be respectful (Natalie, 36, middle class, no children)

The concept of power can be seen through the stories the women told me. Regardless of social class, mothers and non-mothers alike talked about the power that comes with the role of mother. Power comes from nurturing, providing social and political awareness, love, socialization and values (Collins 2000). This is what drives the community. Mothers build the foundation of life for children in the community and that, in essence, gives them great power. The women in the study expressed ideas similar to those prevalent within the literature. For example, Rosey talked about how she felt a sense of responsibility growing up. She talks about her sense of responsibility not just to her own children but also to the young people in the community. Her
story expresses her sense of responsibility to the community as a whole:

Um although I have a biological daughter, again who’s three, I’ve always considered myself very motherly and not in name necessarily gentle, huggy, fuzzy type way but as myself I felt a huge responsibility for younger people and be it mentoring, be it listening and talking to younger people, um meaning high school and below or primary grades I guess. I always felt a huge responsibility. Rosey, 38, middle class, mother of 1)

Rosey talks about how she does not associate with the “huggy fuzzy” type of motherhood, as if to say that in order to be a powerful mother one must dispel the appearance of the nurturing aspect of motherhood and adopt a role that encompasses power.

One aspect of power, as Rosey suggests, is responsibility. Jesse also talks about responsibility, but instead of portraying it primarily as a driving force of motherhood, she thinks of it as a consequence of mothering. In taking responsibility for their children, mothers also teach themselves the responsibility required to mother the race, lead the community or both.

Um, motherhood for me was a great experience. It taught me responsibility. It taught me nurturing. (Jesse, 37, middle class, mother of 3)

Essentially, the responsibility to create productive citizens and future leaders of the race and is a source of both great pride and power for black women. Ann reflects on the importance of motherhood and what motherhood can teach society:

Mothers teach us how to negotiate with our friends; they teach us how to be empathetic of someone else. Mothering teaches us how to stand our own ground even, you know, in a way that is not aggressive. Mothering can teach us a lot of things that I feel like our culture is desperate for right now. (Ann, 40 upper class, mother of 2)

Many of the other women too talked about the empowerment associated with the work of
Porche and Zora also talk about how their mothers helped shape who they have become and who they aspire to be.

I am who I am today because of my mother. (Porsche, 25, middle class, mother of 1)

I hope I become half the woman my mother is. (Zora, 33, middle class, mother of 2)

Mothers possess a power that shapes the children they raise and the people they influence. Both Porsche and Zora recognized the significance of motherhood for not only their own sense of themselves as women, but also for the community. Motherhood in this sense reaches far beyond the successful raising of biological children and instead signals a community positioning that other women too can adopt, including especially grandmothers.

The idea of grandmothers and other elders as the “guardian[s] of the generation,” as suggested by Orielly (2004), was shared by a few of the women in the sample. As guardians, these women too are empowered. That is, as guardians, grandmothers and community elders are revered in the community, and they derive some authority and power from that elevated status.

Both Anitra and Anita talked about the reverence for grandmothers as church mothers.

My grandmother is the heart of our family. Everybody called her grandma it didn’t matter if you were hers or not she was grandma to everybody. Whenever somebody graduated, got a job or whatever Granny was taking them a card or a cake or something. I’m like ‘grandma do you even know them’ like that [laughing]? (Anitra, 38, lower class, mother of 3)

Anita spoke in similar ways about what she calls the church mothers in her community. Church mothers were revered in the community and they clearly held power. According to Anita, these community elders were “running thangs”.

motherhood.
I remember one Sunday at church they honored all the church mothers. You had to be like 90 to be a church mother [laughing]. They would come in with their big white hats like they was running thangs… I mean they were but still [laughing] (Anita, 36 lower class, mother of 3)

Othermothers are an integral part of the black community and the concept of power encompasses the role of othermother. Black women as mothers hold not just the responsibility of raising their own biological children but that of all the children within the community. The power and honor associated with this role is derived from the responsibility community mothers take for not only shaping the youth within their community but also more generally “running things.” Black women’s ideology of motherhood, regardless of class location, encompasses the idea that power is inherent in the role of mother and those who identify with the role are revered and deemed powerful.

**Theme 3: Motherhood as Sacrifice**

The idea that mothers sacrifice is prevalent across the literature (Ardenell 2000). Any understanding of motherhood must address how women think about and grapple with the sacrifice that, in their view, is part of mothering. To be a mother means you have to sacrifice—sacrifice your time, money, career, education and so much more. As I interviewed the women, the theme of sacrifice appeared consistently throughout their stories. This is how Rosey, who is 38 year old, and identifies as middle class expressed it:

I know you are going over and beyond what you could do. Regardless of your financial means, it’s an expectation that you sacrifice something, maybe all of you, I don’t know, to make sure that your child, be it biological or not, will be in a better position, will have, will get, will aspire to be better. So in that sense, in that fundamental expectation, in that
fundamental . . . um . . . need of being a mother to yours or someone else’s I think that is a perspective of all African American women. (Rosey, 38, middle class, mother of 1)

Many of the women I interviewed talked about sacrifice. Sacrifice came in many forms but the underlying theme was that to “do motherhood is to sacrifice.” We sacrifice our time, our money, and often our hopes and dreams. This for some was stifling and for others a source of strength that maps a new course of life, a new way of thinking and operating in the world. This variation can be attributed in part to the expectations set forth by the different communities that surrounded them. Access to resources, the ability to mother, and the presence/absence of a father all contribute to whether or not mothering becomes a burden or a joy. But regardless of such influences, women from all class locations linked motherhood to sacrifice. How that sacrifice manifests is dependent on the community in which you live and the influences that surround you, such as having a partner or not. Natalie’s description of motherhood as sacrifice provides a good rendition of the idea:

like they [mothers] were always tired they had things to do they got everybody ahead of themselves they were constantly making sacrifices and that’s what motherhood is, you know, constant sacrifices. – (Natalie, 36, middle class, no children)

Kacey talks about sacrificing her education for her children. She speaks of the influence her family had on her decision, but goes further by discussing even now how she planned to wait until her children were older to pursue her education. Sacrificing her education in order to mother her children was a story told by several of the participants.

I was supposed to go away for college but I got pregnant my senior year. I had a scholarship and everything but my family convinced me I needed to stay home and raise the baby. My son’s father went away to school but I ended up staying home because my
family felt it was the best thing for me and the baby so I ended up taking some classes at a community college. I never finished. I figure I will go back once my kids are a little older. (Kacey, 27, working class, mother of 2)

Regardless of social class women understood motherhood to be about sacrifice. Kacey a working class mother of 2 discussed how she sacrificed going away to college to be a mother to her child while Ruth an upper class mother of 3 talked about how motherhood prolonged her education. In both cases each mother had to give up something in the name of motherhood.

It took me forever to finish graduate school. The emotional and financial toll raising children takes on us as women is huge. I took a year off when my first was born but even trying to go back with a little one was a challenge so I only went back to school part time. I eventually finished but trying to do it with a child was almost impossible so I had to give up some things. I couldn’t graduate with my cohort. And I had to be ok with that. (Ruth, 38, upper class, mother of 3)

The idea that black motherhood does and should involve sacrifice can be viewed as a form of oppression, even though few of the women talked about their sacrifice in those terms. Although many experienced and acknowledged how oppression may have contributed to their understanding of motherhood many African American women did not see oppression as a consequence. They saw it as sacrifice, and as an unavoidable part of mothering. In that sense, the sacrifice is an element of the power, strength and reverence that is associated with African American motherhood ideology. Motherhood is what we do, it is how we become women, it is a source of pride, a struggle, and a sacrifice.

When you mother you sacrifice. bell hooks writes “that motherhood was the locus of women’s oppression. Had black women voiced their views on motherhood, it would not have
been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women. Racism, availability of jobs, lack of skills or education...would have been at the top of the list—but not motherhood” (1984: 133).

And yet, a mother is someone who sacrifices her needs and wants, in short, herself, as Carmen so clearly explains:

It’s like being able to say I can go without so my child can have and that’s not just material things. (Carmen 34, middle class, no children)

All in all motherhood for black women is about sacrifice. There was very little difference in terms of social class in how women understood motherhood and the responsibilities that demand sacrifice. The idea of sacrifice is central to understanding what it means to be a mother. Some women sacrifice in dismay while others sacrifice in honor, but all black mothers sacrifice.

**Theme 4: Money and Motherhood**

Recent literature suggests that social class is an important factor in determining when and why women have children, how women think about motherhood, and what motherhood means to them (Edmonds-Cady 2009; Ardenell 200; Dow 2015). While significant attention is focused on the notion of class it is important to recognize that while class differences separate women, their experience with racism often unites them (Edmonds-Cady 2009). The stories shared by the women in this study suggest that motherhood as it relates to social class is complex. The complexity is due to many different factors. Many of the women in this study grappled with how to define their own social class as well how to cope with a sense of betrayal if they identified as something other than what other family members had traditionally identified themselves as. In short, class is an aspect of women’s lives that has important implications for motherhood.

The concept of social class and its role in shaping how black women understand and practice mothering surfaced as the women shared their stories. Dow (2015) suggests that social
class contributes to black mothers adopting either the “strong black woman” or “welfare queen” persona. Both notions suggest a strategy that women adopt to overcome the pervasive and controlling images that black mothers encounter in white-dominated institutions (Dow 2015).

Chanel, a middle/working class mother of 1 child, recalls a time when she understood parenting as being able to afford a child:

I always go back to the Michael Jackson song “if you can’t feed a baby, then don’t have a baby.” (singing) And so I always go back to that, always go back to that because I think he’s right in that. And if I waited and I wasn’t able to have a child for whatever the case may be at least I waited and I didn’t have a child that I couldn’t take care of. (Chanel, 38 middle class, mother of 1)

Middle class women often defined themselves as mothers by their ability, or lack thereof, to care for and provide for a child in a material sense. It was not so that they equated good mothering with resources – poor women too could be good mothers in their view – but instead that their class privilege came with additional, and class specific, responsibilities. Good mothering involved sending your child to good schools, taking the children to soccer practice, and participating in the PTA. That was what mothering was all about for many of the middle class women. This was different from the lower class women, who talked more about how women raise children collectively and find gratitude in their roles as mothers. For these women, both resources and sacrifice looked very different. In short, the problem of resources looks very different for women of different social locations. And this, as the findings in this section shows, also matters for how the women think about motherhood. And yet, the idea that motherhood is in part about consumption – the things that resources can buy – was pervasive in the stories that all women told (Taylor, Layne, and Wozniak 2004).
Several of the women who grew up in lower/working class homes but are now raising their children in a middle class environment understood motherhood in a way that focuses more on how women do motherhood in relation to the resources they have (or not have) access to. Chanel, a woman who now identifies as middle/upper class, thinks back on when she had her first child:

I decided after my daughter was about 2 that I didn’t want any more children. And I think that a lot of that came from being able to provide for your children. Financially I couldn’t have another one, I could, but I wouldn’t be able to take care of them. (Chanel, 38 middle class, mother of 1)

Chanel speaks of the idea that motherhood and money go hand in hand. If she was not able to provide for her child financially then she would not be able to take care of her child the way she wanted to. Carmen too recognizes that money can determine whether or not women choose to become mothers, but she is more critical than Chanel, presumable because she is not referring to a choice she had to make herself.

Do finances matter? Yes. I really believe finances matter. And it just seems like recently I have been hearing colleagues in my age group really using equating where their finances are to you know if I have a better job that’s more money so I can have another child. And I’m like wow women are now contemplating whether or not to have another child based on how much money the household has. (Carmen 34, middle class no children)

When asked about money and its connection to mothering Rosey first hesitates to identify money as central, but later suggests that having access to money and financial resources lets women mother more effectively.
I don’t know if it defines motherhood, I think being able to provide for a child and a family is important. And I don’t want to give you the if you don’t have this amount of money, this size house, this type of car that you’re a bad mother or not a mother or substandard or anything like that. But I do think that the better position you are in financially, the better you can provide in general, less stress, less um less stress about various issues from health to heat to food- It’s just a little less stress and therefore you can fully engage with your uh with your children without worrying about that other stuff. (Rosey, 38, middle class, mother of 1)

Mia, similarly, thought that money affect women’s ability to mother. She regrets, but recognizes, that access to financial resources impacts what parents can expose their children to. From organized sports, to cultural experiences and the arts, child-rearing can be expensive.

I think to an extent it [money] does unfortunately some of the things you would like your child to be exposed to can’t be done without some type of finances. It doesn’t necessarily have to be expensive but there’s gonna be some type of financial attachment to it. (Mia II, 33, working class, no children)

In contrast to some of the other middle class women, Grace, although acknowledging that money is important, also pointed to the potential risks for mothering of being overly focused on the material aspects.

And then I’m realizing over time that my presence might be more beneficial than being able to buy my son some Jordans when he asks me for them, even though he would probably think differently about that. But um I think it plays a big a part in that sort of that security piece, like if a mother’s value or mothering value is that security piece, then that financial aspect is going to be very high up on the list of I need to be in a really good
position for that. (Grace, 40, middle class, mother of 2)

Lower class women talk about finances very differently than upper/middle class women. In their view, a lack of money was inconvenient, but not a barrier to mothering. In fact, the struggle for resources was part of how poor women thought of the sacrifice they made for their children. Melanie recalls shoe shopping with her son:

I remember one day shopping for shoes with my son and as we were picking out school shoes for him I looked down and noticed my shoes had a hole in them. It was at that moment I realized I hadn’t bought a pair of shoes in almost 10 years, but at that point it was either he got a pair of new shoes or I did. I couldn’t afford to buy two pair. (Melanie, 38, working class, mother of 1)

Roxanne talks about not needing money to raise children. Her understanding of motherhood was only minimally associated with the financial aspect of motherhood; instead mothering was more about how you raise your child, and raising a child was more than just the financial component.

Yea I mean you need money to feed children and stuff but you don’t need a whole lot of money to raise them. We didn’t have no money growing up and we came out just fine. (Roxanne, 39, lower class, mother of 4)

Shelly a mother of three shares a story of growing up poor. Her mother and father were married but her father traveled for work and was rarely home so she felt as though she was raised by her mother in a single family home. It wasn't until later in life that she realized her family was poor. Growing up she said she never felt like her family was poor and she didn’t really realize the absence of her father in her day to day life. She says

You see my mother had 7 brothers and sisters and her mother had 8 so when it came to raising us kids we had more than our share of momma’s and grand mamma’s. We didn’t
need a whole lot of money. (Shelly, 39, lower class, mother of 3)

Not surprisingly, the women who occupied lower socioeconomic positions clearly de-emphasized money as a key element of mothering and motherhood. Women in these positions often lacked anything but the most basic financially resources and hence could not use the money they were willing to spend as an indicator of their commitment to motherhood. Instead they used other markers, including their ability to mother effectively with few resources, to describe good mothering. Sure, working/lower class women recognize that providing for their children financially is an important aspect of motherhood but for them it became less of a focus than for upper/middle class women, who expressed more resource-related concerns associated with raising their children.

**DISCUSSION**

When I first began this project I expected to see vast differences by social class in how women think about motherhood, but the stories the women told me showed more similarities than I had originally anticipated. Women talked about motherhood in very similar ways. It was clear that social class shaped their understanding of motherhood and identity but it did not shape it as markedly as I thought.

The main difference centered on the importance of resources for good mothering. Upper class women used money and access to resources to help define what it meant to be a good mother while lower and working class women looked at the lack of finances as a minor barrier that they needed to adapt to but that was not a determining factor of what it meant to be a (good) mother. All women thought that more money would make mothering a little easier but agreed that was only part of the story as there were so many other factors that impacted what mothering and motherhood meant to them.
Understanding how black women conceptualize and make sense of motherhood is critically important for a more general sociological understanding of black women’s varied lives. Social class shapes how black women understand and practice motherhood in many ways. Although black women share some unique experiences and challenges as black women, their class locations nonetheless matter for understanding how they respond to and navigate those challenges, including especially motherhood. While black women’s race location clearly shapes their ideology of motherhood, it does not determine it. As a few other studies have shown as well, an intersectional analysis of black women’s motherwork forces us to abandon an essentialist understanding of black mothering even as we recognize the importance a shared heritage of slavery and widespread oppression.

The notion that motherhood is a source of pride while at the same time being a source of discontent has shaped African American women’s lives in a profound way. Mothering has long been a central theme in shaping black women’s identity. It has been well documented that a traditional Eurocentric view on mothering neither applies to nor resonates with African American women (Collins 1999; Dow 2015; Wilkens 2012). The question of how and why the intersections of class, race, and gender matter for women’s ideas about motherhood is often overlooked. Mothering is something that many African American women aspire to do, regardless of their access to resources (Dow 2015; Collins 2000; Wharten and Throne 1997). In the African American community mothers are revered for their strength and power. Historically, black women grew up under circumstances where achieving status and power, either outside or inside their own communities, was near impossible. Hence motherhood often became the only option for women to achieve status in their community (Collins 2000). The choice of mothering came with a price, however. Many women felt as though mothering stifled their creativity, limited
their ability to achieve success in other areas even if they wanted too, and contributed to oppressive behavior that contradicted the role of the concept of status and power within their community. Defining motherhood for African American women is complicated and has everything to do with a woman's social position within her community.
CHAPTER V FINDINGS: Managing Reproduction

I had an abortion when I was 21. It was horrible. My boyfriend at the time forced me to have one. He was abusive so I didn’t feel like I had a say so I went through with it. If my mom ever found out [about the abortion] she would kill me. (Crystal 31, working class mother of 1)

INTRODUCTION

Motherhood is at the center of many choices women make throughout their lives. Deciding when, if and how to mother is a journey laced with hills and valleys. For African American women this journey is influenced by many social factors; however, the idea of motherhood always seems to be the focal point of their journey (Collins 2000; Collins 2005; Martinot 2007; Sewell 2013). As black women grapple with their decisions to mother or not, they inadvertently reinforce the assumption that motherhood remains a powerful source of identity for African American women. The reconciliation of community expectations of mothering and personal aspirations regarding mothering and other aspects of their lives, presents an interesting conundrum for African American women. In navigating the world of reproduction, African American women struggle with the expectations and obligations of motherhood that both constrain and help guide the choices they make (Barnes 2016). How they navigate this conundrum is what makes their stories interesting, unique, and revealing.

Research suggests that, historically, motherhood was not always an individual choice for African American women (Davis-Sowers 2012). African American women mothered because it was their obligation and responsibility to mother the race. While historical studies suggest that American women in general did not look at mothering as a choice, evidence from population studies that identify birth rate patterns suggest that women have long exercised some form of
control over their own reproduction (Kricheli-Katz, 2012).

Contemporary women make many reproductive choices, including when to have children, how many children to have, under what circumstances to have children, and how to combine motherhood with work. The age at first birth for all women regardless of race has increased over the years, which is in part due to the fact that women choose their careers before or instead of motherhood (Finer and Zolna 2011; CDC 2014). The postponement of childbearing is especially pronounced among white women. The average age at first birth for white women was 25 in 2000 and increased to 27 in 2014 (CDC 2014). The average age at first birth for black women in 2000 was 22 and increased to 24 in 2014. (CDC 2014). The fact that black women are still younger than white women when they have children suggests that the reason why they postpone (or not) might be slightly different. Women of all racial/ethnic backgrounds are choosing to postpone childbearing and marriage for various reasons, including especially for educational and career considerations (Barnes 2016). However, black women do not typically postpone childbearing for the same reasons. For example, choosing either motherhood or career is not pervasive in the black community (Barnes 2016). Rather, black women expect, of themselves as well as of others, that they will mother and work. This is in contrast to white women who have often had to gain “permission” to engage in both motherhood and work (Barnes 2016). Hence, choosing to delay motherhood by way of birth control or other reproductive preventive measures for the sake of career or financial security is something African American women struggle with. And yet they somehow manage to make sense of their reproductive decisions while still centering motherhood (Collins 2005; Kricheli-Katz, 2012).

There is a growing body of research focusing on how women navigate the journey to or away from motherhood and how their social positions influence the process (Kelly 2009;
Lundquist et. al 2006; Wilson 2014). The stories from the women who participated in my study contribute to our understanding of the process whereby African American women navigate their reproductive paths and what factors influence the choices they make along the way. Findings suggest that, not surprisingly class location plays a significant role in shaping a woman’s decision to become a mother (or not) (Wharton and Thorn 1997). But social class alone cannot account for the women’s choices or how they navigate the ideology of motherhood (Weininger and Lareau 2009). Rather, it is at the intersection of class, race, and gender that women’s experiences of and stories about motherhood start taking shape.

Black feminist thought leads us to an understanding of motherhood that is all encompassing. Regardless of women’s parental status the ideology of motherhood plays a central and powerful role in the black community. Collins (1998) suggests that as black women understand their identity, race, class, gender and motherhood work together – simultaneously – to help them formulate a sense of who they are. That is, we cannot simply understand motherhood and womanhood through either a class lens or a race lens, but instead need an intersectional paradigm to understand how black women make reproductive decisions and think about motherhood. Class matters. Gender matters. Race matters. When black women are faced with the prospect of motherhood their experiences with race, class and gender shape not only the decisions they make but also how they make sense of them. Moreover, the larger sociopolitical context in which women make reproductive decisions does not exert a uniform influence on all women, but instead works through race, class, and gender in such a way that constraints and opportunities have different effects on different women. Of particular importance for African American women is the persistent attacks throughout history on their reproductive lives and their ability to determine when and how to mother (Roberts 1997). Historically, black women have
fought to maintain reproductive freedom in a system not designed for them, either when it comes to facilitating their mothering or making it possible for them to postpone/prevent mothering. In short, where women are situated within systems of oppression affects how and why women make different reproductive choices (Roberts 1997; Collins 2005).

Examining the different choices black women make is important to help us better understand their varied experiences with motherhood. I asked the women about the reproductive choices that they had made and about anticipated future choices. And I also asked how they felt about their choices, what they struggled with, and whether or not they were happy with their choices. Three broad themes emerged from the coding process related to the women’s reproductive choices: 1) My Life, My Choice: Reproductive Agency; 2) To Be or Not to Be: Messages Along the Way; and 3) Between Two Worlds: Motherhood and Work. The first theme, My Life, My Choice: Reproductive Agency, captures the vast array of choices women make related to reproduction, from using birth control to having abortions to having babies. Their stories show us that social class, the community, family and societal expectations greatly influenced the choices they made, but their stories also reveal their agency in relation to reproduction. The places they occupy at the intersections of race, class and gender inform how they see and think about agency in relation to motherhood. The second theme, To Be or Not to Be: Messages along the Way, focuses on how the women arrive at, and keep arriving at, the decisions to become mothers (or not). This importance of this theme is that it recognizes reproductive agency as an ongoing and dynamic feature of black women’s lives that combines long-term planning with chance and shifting circumstances. Between Two Worlds: Motherhood and Work, the third theme, captures how women navigate the dual roles of mother and worker and how they balance the competing responsibilities of each role. Many women did not see this
as a choice as forgoing motherhood for work has never been an option for poor and working class women. But other women did, thus revealing the influence of social class on black women’s motherhood negotiations.

The women’s stories help us better understand how African American women navigate their motherhood paths and what factors influence the choices they make and the experiences they have along the way. Findings suggest that the intersections of race, class, and gender influence how black women conceptualize their reproductive agency. That is, their reproductive agency is influenced by their position within a system of oppression that treat women differently, but that also consistently has denigrated black women’s motherhood. Hence, their stories show us how their social positions matter for how they exercise their reproductive agency, but they also show us that, regardless of class position, they all approach mothering as black women.

Theme 1: My Life, My Choice: Reproductive Agency

Women’s reproductive journeys involve both choices and chances. Their journeys are not always clear, especially not when looking forward. But most women weave together the pieces of their lives in such a way that their reproductive journeys, in retrospect, look fairly coherent and sensible, as if guided by some sort of life plan. This does not mean that their journeys have always been easy, or quite like they once imagined them, but they clearly experience them as their own: that is, they own the choices they have made and continue to make regarding reproduction and motherhood. Some women view motherhood as a deliberate choice to be made at opportune times as they navigate through life, while others look at motherhood as an inevitable part of life, whenever it comes to them. The choices they make can give them peace and joy at the same time as they sometimes feel burdened by obligations. Not all roads lead to motherhood and the turns women decide to take are shaped in large part by their experiences,
which in part are linked to their social locations. Viewing black women’s lives through an intersectional lens is advantageous when it comes to understanding how their reproductive journeys are shaped.

Research has shown that African American women who have pursued higher education and subsequently position themselves as middle to upper class are more likely to delay childbirth and also to not have children at all (Lundquist et. al 2006). This does not mean, of course, that the decisions of middle class women are made more easily than those of poorer women. And, in fact, all the women in my study grappled with their reproductive decisions, albeit in somewhat different ways. Some of the women used their educational and/or middle class privileges to plan out their reproductive lives, with varying success, whereas other women struggled with the idea that motherhood is a matter of choice and convenience.

The influence of social class was especially clear when the women talked about their decisions regarding the prevention and/or disruption of pregnancies. Chanel’s thoughts about and experiences with motherhood are centered in the abortions she once had. Chanel, a middle class mother of 1, talks about her decision to have an abortion as one that would allow her to finish school. At the time, she determined that becoming a mother would hinder her educational aspirations and hence was the right thing to do. Her story also sheds light on the complexities of reproductive agency. It was clearly her own decision not to have children at the time, but such decisions are always embedded in a context filled with external forces that in various ways constrain our options. Her immediate plan was to finish school and having a child would interfere with that plan, so she chose abortion when pregnancy threatened her life plan. But as she tells the story, the complexities of a seemingly straightforward answer becomes evident.

In college I had 2 abortions and I had them not because I didn’t want to be a mother but
because I wasn’t ready. I wanted to finish school and I just felt like I was too young and I just didn’t want to do that right then and I was just enjoying life too much. And umm my mother really stayed on me about not having kids and I saw what it was like for her to have kids at such a young age as to be unmarried that I never wanted to do that. That I just I was never—it was the one thing that I said that I never wanted to do. So umm I made the decision to have 2 abortions umm and those haunt me to this day. So the question asked about haunt me, not haunt me like I really… but I find myself asking God to forgive me for that probably more than anything else in my life. (Chanel, 38, middle class, mother of 1)

Chanel’s story helps us to understand the many factors that influence women’s decisions to become, or not become, mothers. While in college, Chanel chose to wait but it was a decision clearly influenced by the world around her. For example, she talks of the perception that women should finish school and, perhaps, get married, before they have children. She describes her mother’s struggles as a young woman raising children as a single parent and knew that was not the life she wanted. Chanel used what she saw in the world from her particular vantage point to make a choice to wait. A choice she felt was her own, and taken both for her own sake and for the sake of the unborn child – she was too young, not ready, and she enjoying life too much. And yet, although she subsequently had a wanted and planned child, she still struggles with the abortion decisions she made so many years ago.

Mia’s story brings financial constraints to the forefront of reproductive decision making. She had made the choice to use birth control because, for her, birth control was cheaper than raising a child.

Kids are expensive. Umm. It’s cheaper to take birth control then have the kid.
[laughter] so umm yea I’ll just keep taking birth control until I hit the lottery. – (Mia, 33, middle class, no children.)

While said as a joke, Mia’s sentiments are similar to many of the other women’s stories. Waiting for financial stability, finishing their education, establishing their careers, and, in some cases, waiting for marriage, were the reasons why many of the women chose to wait. Victoria thinks about motherhood as being “hard” and had difficulties imagining herself going to school and being a mother at the same time. Hence she chose to use birth control. It was her own decision and she was proud of it. As she explains, becoming a mother was not something she felt she could handle while also pursuing her education so she made the decision to take birth control, a decision she felt positive about in the long run.

Being a mother is hard. I’m glad I waited until I was in my 30’s. If I had a kid in my 20’s it would have been all the way bad. I took birth control faithfully in college….well maybe not faithfully [laughter] but I was not trying to get caught up for sure (Victoria, 37, middle class, mother of 1).

Jenny too deliberately postponed having children until she finished college. That decision led to an abortion that she has not regretted because, even though she wanted to be a mother, she knew it was not the right time to have a child.

I waited to have children until I graduated from college. You know… I got pregnant while I was in college and was like ah hell no this is not going to work right now so I got an abortion. I wanted to be a mother… I think… just not right then... I needed to finish school first. (Jenny, 37, middle class, mother of 2)

Jenny wanted to be a mother some time in the future but at the moment she became pregnant, the idea of having a child seemed completely impossible given her determination to finish school. So
she chose to have an abortion.

The importance of choice was expressed by many of the participants, but how they articulated and applied choice varied by social class. It is clear that the middle class women we have just heard from viewed motherhood as a choice and they took active measures – birth control and abortion – to ensure that they themselves were in control over when they became mothers. The reasons they articulate for waiting – some having to do with maturity and readiness, others with their ability to materially provide for a child – are clearly linked to their class status, but also express a widespread cultural narrative of appropriate motherhood that historically has not been available to black women.

The pervasive ideology in the black community is that women, that is, mothers, do not choose between motherhood and career, motherhood and education, or motherhood and anything else, and that is because women are expected to mother regardless of other circumstances (Barnes 2016). And yet it is evident that many women do choose, even though it is especially those in the middle and upper classes who link their choices to a larger life plan. In other words, middle class women appeared to be clear about both their life path and their ability to navigate it according to plan. Working/lower class women did not talk about choice in that light at all. It was as if motherhood, for the poor women, was an inevitable destination that required little thought or planning - it was what it was. This does not mean that the poor and working class participants had never taken measures to prevent pregnancies – most had, as their limited number of children points to – but instead that they do so less deliberately and consistently. And, more importantly, they talk about motherhood in different ways. Kim, for example, talks about her experience with birth control when she was younger, but it is clear from her comments that taking birth control was much less about controlling her own reproduction than it was pleasing
her mother. That is, she was not taking birth control to prevent pregnancy but because her mother suggested she needed birth control to control her periods.

I take birth control every now and then. When I was younger my mom put me on it and said it was for my periods. (Kim 23, working class, mother of 1)

Shelly too describes an approach to birth control that seems less determined when it comes to preventing pregnancies.

We used condoms sometimes and he pulled out but you see how that worked [laughter].

But my mom never really had the sex talk with us I didn’t really think about that until I got older. But when I got pregnant I didn’t really think about getting an abortion or anything. (Shelly, 39, lower class, mother of 3)

Shelly’s experience with birth control was clearly less calculated than that of the middle class women. She spoke of using condoms and birth control but laughingly acknowledged that the half-hearted methods she had used did not really work. The fact that she did use some form of birth control, however, is not insignificant and again points to the complex nature of reproductive agency. In general, Shelly’s approach to birth control suggests that, perhaps, preventing pregnancy was not as high on her radar as it was for other women. Shelly comes from a large family and she viewed having children as an inevitable aspect of womanhood. But she also lived her life in a larger community refused to think of motherhood in terms of convenience.

The idea that motherhood is a deliberate choice, in contrast, was very clear in the stories of upper and middle class women. They see the management of their reproductive lives as something that they have control over. In planning their reproductive lives and preventing pregnancies when the time was wrong, the middle and upper class women were no less committed to motherhood than their poorer counterparts. On the contrary, they planned and
delayed motherhood precisely so that they could be good mothers once the time and circumstances were right. In this way, they planned motherhood to more effectively mother, their own children as well as the race (Martinot 2006).

Theme 2: To Be or Not to Be: Messages along the Way

Women were asked questions about motherhood, their experiences with mothering, and their future plans or aspirations linked to motherhood. The vast majority of the women desired to have children and wanted to become mothers, and only a few did not have mothering as a priority in their lives. Motherhood, however, remained a focal point in every story the women shared. The discussion above focused on the many choices African American women make as they grapple with their reproductive lives. The women talked about how they managed the ever-present prospect or risk of getting pregnant. Some, especially the women in the middle and upper classes, deliberately delayed having children and took measures to ensure they did not become mothers at a time that felt wrong to them. Others, especially the poor and working class women, were less determined when it came to preventing pregnancies and also less devastated when they became pregnant. The decisions women made regarding pregnancy and childbirth were obviously not limited to their firstborns, but also affected their thinking around subsequent children, both in terms of how many to have and when to have them.

This section addresses the messages they receive, and who they receive them from, as they navigate their reproductive journeys. The messages they receive along the way shape each new decision in unique ways. As suggested earlier, the positions they occupy within the larger system of oppression greatly affect how they think about motherhood, but the more or less explicit messages they received from their communities also greatly shaped and influenced their reproductive decisions.
Research has shown that social class, education and age all matter for understanding how women make decisions about motherhood (Kelly 2009). But research has also shown that such influences work somewhat differently for black women (Barnes 2016). Natalie’s story is unique only in the strength of her determination to not get pregnant at a young age. It was so strong that refrained from having sex at all until well into her college years.

I guess in particular I grew up thinking that the last thing you wanted to do is get pregnant, especially as like a teen, so for a while I was just extremely averse to the whole idea of sex in general, to the point where I didn’t lose my virginity till my third year in college. (Natalie 36, middle class no children,).

Natalie grew up in a middle class home, but her extended family was working class. She spoke of the expectations placed on her and her brother that they would not turn out like other family members. According to Natalie, many of those family members were single parents who relied on the welfare system to get by and who had no plans of attending college. This prospect so frightened her, especially since it was counter to everything her parents wished for her, that she avoided everything that could lead in that direction. In Natalie’s case, then, it was not simply the clear message she received from her immediate family that guided her decision to delay sex, but instead a combination of contradictory signals regarding motherhood that, in effect, immobilized her. It is as if the life path she had rejected but saw frequent examples of in her extended family – young mothers, single mothers, and poor mothers – was just one pregnancy away.

Although Mia too had deliberately chosen to not have children while she was young, the experiences that led her to that decision were very different. In contrast to Natalie, whose immediate family encouraged her to delay childbearing, Mia felt pressures from her surroundings to have children. But Mia wanted to wait, stating that she had things she wanted to
accomplish before she had children.

[Laughter] I hate thanksgiving…. The topic of conversation is always centered around my eggs [ovaries]…. My mom especially is always like, ‘when are you going to give me some grandbabies?’ They didn’t bother me so much when I was in college but now that I’m finished they think I’m just supposed to be popping kids out. I’m like naw I still have stuff I want to accomplish then I will have some kids. (Mia, 33, no children, middle class)

Even with pressure from her family to have children Mia chose to wait and was very comfortable with waiting. Both Natalie and Mia received messages from their family. Natalie followed her family’s advice while Mia chose a different path. Their stories are similar and yet quite different. The difference? For one, Natalie grew up middle class and Mia grow up working/lower class but has since entered the middle class. And yet, neither woman lives in a completely middle class environment in the sense that both have many family members who are much less privileged than they are. Moreover, both responded to a larger community expectation that black women have children, even if that influence was more negative in Natalie’s case. Their decisions to delay childbearing to the point that, now in their thirties, both still do not have any children, make them unusual among the participants in this study. But their stories are important in so far as they vividly illustrate the complex ways that black women’s experiences impact their thoughts and decisions regarding motherhood. Class location clearly matters, but as Natalie and Mia remind us, not in a straightforward way. The messages they receive from their families and communities shift as their own social locations change.

Families are clearly important sources of influence on women as they make decisions regarding motherhood. But they are not the only influence. Both Mia and Natalie alluded to a community expectation when it comes to motherhood, whereas Jennifer refers to a more
confined professional community that she refers to as “they” in her acknowledgement of the influences. Jennifer, an upper-class mother of two, reports being influenced by a widespread assumption in higher education that during graduate school was a better time to have a baby that either before or after.

They say the best time to have a baby is in grad school so I waited. (Jennifer, 40, upper class mother of 2)

If most of the middle and upper class women talked about influences that encouraged them to wait with children until they were ready (however defined), the poor and working class women, in contrast, told stories about all the ways in which they were influenced to have children early, or at least not to worry too much about getting pregnant. Both Joy and Anita talk about the pattern of motherhood they both found normal, describing how their mothers got pregnant at young ages and how those around them, including themselves, assumed they would follow in their mothers’ footsteps. For Joy and Anita, then, the messages they received come less from direct instructions and more from their observations of mothers in their communities. Joy talks about the shock associated with NOT having children by a certain age:

My mom had me when she was 16 so when I turned 18 and didn’t have any kids people were shocked. I guess I was kinda shocked too. Thought something might have been wrong with me. (Joy, 25, working class, mother of 1).

Joy herself was so surprised at not being pregnant before the age of 18 that she thought that maybe something was wrong with her. Anita’s story too points to an almost taken-for-granted expectation that women become mothers in their teens. She herself was pregnant at the age of 17 and remembers her experience of having a child at that age as no big deal.

My grandma had my mom when she was 15, my mom had me when she was 16 so when
I got pregnant at 17 it wasn’t really a big deal. I think people just figured that’s when I would get pregnant. (Anita 36, lower class mother of 3,).

Roxanne’s experiences were also similar to those of Joy and Anita:

We didn’t really talk about sex so when I got pregnant at 17 nobody really cared.. like they cared but not in a bad way.. it just wasn’t a big deal I don’t think. (Roxanne mother of 4 lower class).

Despite an overall emphasis on the naturalness of motherhood, some of the poor women also talked about their experiences with abortion. For some of the women, the choice to have an abortion did not feel like their own. In fact, some talked about overt pressures to get an abortion. In Jazmine’s case, it was her mother who made her do it.

I got pregnant in high school. I didn’t wanted to get an abortion but my mother made me.

I don’t think I really knew what was going on or why she was making me [get an abortion] we never really talked about it. (Jazmine 35, lower class, mother of 3).

And in Crystal’s case it was an abusive boyfriend who forced her to have an abortion.

I had an abortion when I was 21. It was horrible. My boyfriend at the time forced me to have one. He was abusive so I didn’t feel like I had a say so I went through with it. If my mom ever found out [about the abortion] she would kill me. (Crystal 31, mother of 1, working class).

Neither woman expressed a strong will or desire to have an abortion; rather, they were pressured by people around them to end their pregnancies. It is not so that they directly regret the abortions they had, but it is evident that they still ponder the decision, however powerless they felt at the time to choose something else. Since abortion was not a primary focus of this study, I did not press them further on this, but perhaps the community expectation to mother mixed with their
loved ones expectations caused a conundrum for these women. It is also possible, that they responded to the interview situation by providing answers that serve to reinforce the primacy black women places, or should place, on motherhood.

Given what we (think we) know about motherhood and poor women the idea of mothers and grandmothers suggesting abortion as an option is instructive. As in so many other aspects of mothering in the black community, the ways in which women respond to motherhood expectations are considerably more complex than the motherhood ideology suggests. That is, a strong emphasis on motherhood does not mean that having a baby is always the right decision. In Jazmine’s case, her mother essentially forced her to have an abortion, which indicates that her mother wanted Jazmine to finish high school. This echoes Edin and Kefalas (2005) findings that women who live in poor communities are encouraged to finish their basic education and then have babies. Jazmine had not finished high school and thus was encouraged to have an abortion. However, Crystal was 21 and presumably finished with high school but her partner pressured her to have an abortion for reasons we do not know. It is noteworthy, though, that Crystal assumes her mother would strongly disapprove of the abortion despite the fact that Crystal’s boyfriend was abusive.

Even when it comes to abortion, the working class women did not present the option as a real choice that they had control over. In fact, they clearly emphasized that they were pressured into having an abortion. Much of the literature around black women’s agency suggests that black women do indeed exercise agency in many of the choices they make, including reproductive choices. While many of the women generally felt they had reproductive agency, lower class women, especially with regards to abortion, did not think of it in terms of a real choice that they made for themselves. But it would be a mistake to therefore conclude that, overall, poor women
had less agency over their reproductive lives. They were more likely to talk about their reproductive lives as governed by chance rather than a plan, but what that should alert us to is not a lack of agency but instead a set of larger circumstances that make life unpredictable and hence strongly discourage the kind of long-term planning that is more likely characterizes how middle- and upper-class women approach their lives, including if and when to become mothers.

**Theme 3: Between Two Worlds: Motherhood and Work**

One of the recurrent themes in the stories the women shared was the question of how to manage the tension between motherhood and work. Barnes (2016) studied black women who once served a primary role in the workforce but then decided to stay at home to raise their children. Her work challenges stereotypical images of the mammy and matriarch and opens up a new dialogue around motherhood and careers with a specific focus on elite women. For theoretical reasons, Barnes’ research focused on black women who deliberately chose – and who had the resources to choose – motherhood over work. A more common trajectory, however, is for black women to mother while working. That is, due to persistent inequality, poverty, and racism, black women, to a much greater extent than white women, have had little choice but to work in order to support their families (Durr and Hill 2006; Mullings 1997). It is for this reason, that motherhood and work are less oppositional in black motherhood ideology than in dominant ideologies of motherhood. Black women, in other word, have long been expected to both mother and work. Still, as Barnes (2016) work shows, women’s class positions matter for how they negotiate the expectations of motherhood and work.

Many of the middle-class participants in my study talked about how they tried to reconcile the conflicting demands of career and motherhood, thus indicating that their ideas of both work and motherhood were shaped by their class location. Rosey, for example, grappled with how
motherhood would effect her chosen career. The message she received as a middle-class woman was that being both a mother and having a career was somehow not attainable. Rosey had always thought of herself a career woman who did not prioritize motherhood, and it was not until she got married that she started considering motherhood. But that also meant that she began grappling with the question of how to manage being both a mother and a career woman.

Having children, not actually getting married, was not necessarily the center of my life and why I made decisions as an adult and a young adult. However, it was welcome but not necessarily planned to get married or have children necessarily. So, I think I mean I dated my partner for almost ten years, yes a decade, before we decided to get married. And around that time, I was kind of ambivalent but okay if I had children. I’ve always considered myself a career woman and that is a challenge in understanding what does it mean to be a mother and a woman who has decided to be a career woman. (Rosey, 38, middle class, mother of 1)

Andrea never really considered staying home to take care of her child. But in the wealthy and mostly white community where she lives, her decision to keep working was unusual.

I’m atypical in my community, a working mother, is atypical. Um, at my daughter’s school most mothers, I would say ninety percent of them stay home. (Andrea, 39, upper class, mother of 1)

Wendy’s story, too, reveals the tension between motherhood and work that the more privileged women experienced. What is especially significant in Wendy’s case is not so much that she has deliberately chosen to not have children, but instead that she never experienced any real pressure from her surroundings to choose differently. This is very different from how most of the women, but especially those of the working class, about motherhood and community expectation.
I choose my career over having children. I don’t think anyone every really expected me to have children. The pressure was never there. Maybe if it was there things might be different but I doubt it. (Wendy, 37, Upper Class, no children)

May, similarly, had prioritized career over children, but in her case there was more family pressure on her to have children, and now in her late 30’s she too is considering motherhood. I have been on birth control since I was 16. I would like to start trying to have children in the next 2 years. My husband and I just got married so we want some time to be just us. You know we both have had a good life and successful careers its time to refocus… and my momma has been asking for grandbabies for a while maybe now she will leave me alone [laughter]. (May, 39, upper class, no children)

The struggle evident in the choice between motherhood and career was unique to the middle class/upper class women. Although most of the poor and working class women did work, whether stably or intermittently, they never talked of work and motherhood as somehow irreconcilable. But then the working class women thought of their work as simply that, work. That is, work was something they had to do, not something they chose to do. The middle- and upper- class women, in contrast, thought of work in terms of careers that competed with motherhood rather than facilitated motherhood.

DISCUSSION

Owning the choice to mother was not as central to the lower class women as it was to the middle and upper class women. For the lower class women, motherhood was not really a choice at all, even though all obviously made decisions to prevent, interrupt, or pursue particular pregnancies. Motherhood was what everything else was measured against. Mothering and motherhood was what women do and hence they saw it more as inevitable, and as a taken-for-
granted responsibility than a choice. But as a responsibility it also affords women with one of the few meaningful opportunities that are available to them. These women understood motherhood as a natural part of the journey of life. The trajectory they were on did not include waiting for a career, marriage, and/or financial stability before taking on motherhood. In fact, for many motherhood was the most significant part of their life journey. These women often spoke about following in the footsteps of their own mothers and other women in the community when it came to motherhood.

Most of the women in this study wanted to have children. Only a few expressed a strong desire to never have children, but the vast majority, regardless of whether they had children or not, desired children and talked about their journeys to motherhood. For some middle/upper class women, delaying motherhood was the expected thing to do. Finances, education, and maturity, and sometimes marriage, were the most common reasons the women invoked when they explained why they chose to delay or pursue motherhood. In short, the middle class women talked about their reproductive decisions as part of a larger life plan that they were the authors of. In contrast, the lower class women typically referred to motherhood and mothering as being natural, innate and central to their lives as women. Middle class women, in other words, were more likely to feel as though the choice to have children, and when to have them, was available to them, whereas lower class women were less inclined to plan motherhood and for several of them the choice not to have children was simply incomprehensible. The poor women viewed motherhood as a status symbol, when few other symbols of power and prestige were available to them. The middleclass women, in contrast, considered child-bearing a potential competition to their careers.

Thinking about these findings in terms of reproductive agency, it is clear that the more
privileged women had the resources and class-based expectations required to think of their lives – whether in terms of work or child-bearing – as something they could, and should, control. In that sense, they had a much greater opportunity than the less privileged women to carefully plan out their lives and make decisions along the way that fit an overall plan. This does not mean that chance never interfered in the lives of middle-class women – it clearly did – but instead that they felt in control over their own futures. In many ways, of course, the poor and working-class women had fewer of the options that require resources to take advantage of, but that does not mean they lacked reproductive agency. On the contrary, they used that agency every time they chose to have a child, or to take care of someone else’s child, no matter how complicated their lives would become with that child.
CHAPTER VI FINDINGS: The Expectation of Motherhood: Community Mothers and Leaders Raising the Race

But for motherhood there are some challenges expressing love because you want to make them tough and ready for what the world may do to them. And I think - I don’t want to say - That’s not bad but I think we as a group, as culture, as a race need to find more ways to express love, physical and verbal um- But again it’s not bad, it’s just understanding the historical perspective of many families - (Rosey, 38, middle class, 1 child)

INTRODUCTION
The hegemonic ideology of Black motherhood is shaped by community and political expectations. The Black community teaches us that, as mothers, women must be self-sacrificing, nurturing, and provide unconditional love to not only their own children, but also the children of the community at large. The political system, however, teaches Black women that they are expected to mother this way in a system that is not designed for them to be successful (Barnes 2016). That is, controlling images of Black mothers are pervasive in the community and force Black women to grapple with the contradictory messages related to mothering they receive from their own community, society, and the political system that devices policies that impact their ability to mother (Collins 2005; Barnes 2016; Dow 2015; Moller 2006).

Such influences on how women think about and practice motherhood are not always direct and, as has been emphasized both in this study and in other research, do not always produce monolithic responses. On the contrary, women respond to the circumstances of their lives with creativity and ingenuity. In short, they are in command of the reproductive lives they narrate, even when motherhood comes to them unbidden, and the stories they tell are uniquely their own. Nonetheless, the women evidently filter both their own experiences and those of other women through the dictates of recognizable motherhood ideologies (Glenn, Chang, and
As already discussed, such ideologies have developed somewhat differently in Black and white communities (Christopher 2013; Collins 1994; Feldstein 2000). As it originates in the dominant group, white motherhood ideologies have always affected Black women in so far as they have been used to evaluate Black women as mothers and women, a process that almost invariably have deemed Black women deviant and less worthy (Collins 2000; Engram 1982; Franklin 1997; Heiss 1975). Black motherhood ideology, in contrast, is more likely to accept, if not always celebrate and praise, that which white motherhood ideologies frown upon, including especially unmarried women who raise children on their own and the community they rely on to make it work (Jarrett 1994). This is not to say that Black fathers are unimportant, only that Black women traditionally have not been nearly as vilified in the Black community as they have been in the white community for managing to raise children mostly on their own (Collins 1994). However, the fact that Black motherhood ideology, at least in part, originates in the Black community does not make it any less controlling (Collins 2000).

In this chapter I explore how women think of their roles as mothers in relation to the community. Recent studies have shown that especially middle class Black women struggle with how to think about and respond to what many articulate as their responsibilities towards the Black community (Barnes 2016, 2016b). Moreover, there is at least some evidence that Black mothers for a variety of reasons currently rely somewhat less on the community and extended kin networks (Brewster and Padavic 2006) than they used to (Jeffers 1967; Stack 1976). Hence it is important to revisit the question of how differently situated Black women think of the role of the community, however defined, in their own motherhood practices and aspirations.

In what follows I first revisit the notion of motherhood ideology and then briefly discuss the idea of community mothering that has long been used to characterize the African American
Intensive vs. Extensive Mothering

Sharon Hays (1996), in an influential study on the cultural contradictions of motherhood, describes the contemporary ideology of motherhood as “intensive mothering.” She describes this as “a gendered ideology that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children” (p. x). What makes this ideology contradictory, according to Hays, is not only that it collides with women’s increasing participation in the work force but also that it seems to run counter to other ideologies that push them in the direction of “self-interested gain” (Ibid.). In an elaboration of the notion of “intensive mothering,” Karen Christopher (2012) has coined the term “extensive mothering” to capture the motherhood experiences of women who work outside the home and hence can provide only limited time to their children. “Extensive mothering” is described by Christopher as a way of mothering where basic day-to-day childcare responsibilities are delegated to others. This way of mothering rests in the assumption that good mothering is being “in charge” of the work associated with mothering, not necessarily doing the work.

While both Hays and Christopher relied on a diverse sample of women (in terms of race and class), neither study was designed to understand Black women in particular. Rather, even though both noted variations among the women they interviewed, the studies were essentially designed to capture ideas of motherhood that travels across race and class. In a later study, however, Christopher conducts an intersectional analysis of the “mothering scripts” used by African American and Latina mothers in different class locations (Christopher 2013). She finds that Black mothers, who typically draw on the extensive mothering script, are more similar across class locations than Latina mothers are.

These findings simultaneously supports and rejects prior research on mothering by Black
women. It captures an understanding of Black women’s mothering that is characterized by self-sacrifice but not defined by a rejection of paid labor. And yet, while there has long been a strong communal element in Black women’s mothering, which has made their paid labor possible, the entanglement of extensive mothering with women’s self-interests strains the idea of ideal Black motherhood. Black women are taught to express love for their children and prioritize the children’s needs above their own. But the messages they receive, from both inside and outside the community, are often contradictory and thus force Black women to grapple with the meaning of motherhood as they navigate a treacherous territory of contradictory signals. Moreover, the pervasive and often distorted images of Black mothers as “strong Black women” who are fearless and tireless champions of their children, not only naturalize their sacrifice but also deny them a full range of emotional expressions (Collins 2000). This makes it all the more important, as Christopher points out, to “ask mothers themselves to talk about their actual and ideal experiences of motherhood” (2013:187). The purpose of this chapter is precisely to better understand how women make sense of and respond to the contradictory demand of motherhood as they relate to the larger Black community. In other words, this research helps shed light on how the community shapes Black women’s understandings of good mothering, whether intensive, extensive, or something else. This means an examination of how the women themselves articulate not only the community’s influence on their ideas of mothering but also their own responsibilities, as mothers, vis-à-vis the community.

In what follows I present the findings pertaining to the third research question: How do Black women’s understandings of community expectations influence how they raise their own children? The discussion is organized around three major themes: 1) Learning from Within: Good Mothers and Bad Mothers; 2) Community Mothering; and 3) Scripting Leaders: Middle
Class Mothers Creating Leaders. Taken together, these themes point to both continuities and divergences in relation to traditional Black motherhood ideologies.

**MOTHERING THE COMMUNITY, RAISING THE RACE**

*Theme 1: Learning from Within: Good Mothers and Bad Mothers*

The idea that mothers should be nurturing and unselfish is pervasive. When coupled with the cultural expectations on Black women, including the ideal of the strong Black mother, the ideology of good mothering is unrealistic and hence difficult to achieve (Elliott et. al. 2015). Previous scholarship has documented that social class shapes how Black women do motherhood in unique ways (Barnes 2016; Tatum 1987). That is, while Black women in each class position share some experiences with other similarly situated women, their position as Black women makes both their experiences and their interpretations of them unique. Moreover, many Black women are forced to navigate a system of mothering that does not support them as mothers in the first place. To the greater (white) community being Black and poor has historically been associated with bad mothering, while being Black and rich has been associated with tolerated mothering (Elliott et. al. 2015).

As already discussed, idealized good mothers have long been those who mother full-time and who sacrifice their own interests for the good of their children, that is, women who mother *intensively* (Hays 1996). For professional, middle-class women this is not possible and, hence, they have developed a more managed form of mothering that depends on resources to be carried out; these mothers mother *extensively* (Christopher 2012). Making sense of what it means to be a good mother is not easy, but the women I interviewed worked through the concept the best they could. What emerged is a colorful picture of meanings and ideas, many of which align with traditional ideas about motherhood. But the women also described mothering as a creative
project where the lines between good and bad mothering are distinctly blurred.

Ann, an upper class mother of 2, expresses the idea of extensive mothering, but she does not embrace it uncritically.

I think the women now, too, were raised to be business women and not to be mothers, and so what has occurred to me is this question about what happens to a culture that has been managed instead of mothered, because we mother like business women, we manage, we don’t mother. (Ann, 40, Upper Class, Mother of 2)

According to Ann, this new form of mothering – managed mothering – is contrary to, not an elaboration of, the more nurturing aspects of mothering that, in her mind, is characteristic of good Black mothering. Many of the women talked of managing children, but usually not, like Ann, as an aspect of motherhood that stands in opposition to nurturing. Instead, they mostly thought of managing as a form of nurturing, albeit not without tension. Jean recalled her thinking when she sent her son to basketball camp:

I sent my son to basketball camp. He’s not coordinated at all AND he hated it but damn it I needed something for him to do away from me. I felt like a terrible mom. (Jean, 38 Upper class, mother of 2)

Many mothers would view sending their children to camp as part of the normal everyday process of mothering, but Jean still felt guilty. She was not troubled by the fact that she paid someone else to care for her child, and she was not overly concerned with the fact that her son did not like it. Rather, she felt guilty because she needed time away.

The literature suggests that extensive mothering has become normative for middle to upper class women (Christopher 2012), but this does not mean that the idea of all-consuming intensive mothering has lost its grip on middle class women, as Jean’s story above points to.
Moreover, where women are located at the intersection of race and class will always impact how they view good mothering. Chanel, a middle-class mother of 1, articulated a view of good mothering that rests on women’s efforts to mother well:

I think that the mothers that are really trying... the best that they can with what they have, with the knowledge that they have, with the schema that they have, with the funds that they have. That they are all doing the best that they can with what they have, that’s a good mother. (Chanel, 38, middle class, mother of 1)

For Chanel, it is not what you have that makes you a good mother, it is what you do with what you have. Chanel mentions resources as a significant factor in women’s ability to be good mothers, but not in the sense that more resources is always better. Grace followed the same line of thinking when she pointed to the ability to provide for children as an indicator of being a good mother.

Are you at least providing security for your child? Like a home, food, and making sure that they’re not in harm’s way, that would be like my surface answer. (Grace, 40, upper class, mother of 2)

As other studies have also found, there is a basic assumption among the participants that economic stability is an important aspect of effective and/or “good” mothering (Dalla 2004). The importance of resources is noted especially by the upper-class women, but also some of the middle-class women, particularly the well-educated ones. And yet, it is also clear that good mothering is so much more than simply providing for a child. A good mother, according to Rosey, must not only provide basic material support but also provide social-emotional support to her children. And she clearly rejects the idea that good mothering is about spending money:

I mean some parents really get involved with the ‘she has to have this type of clothes’
whatever the case may be. It’s not just about providing that part but it’s about providing making sure that something is clean and ready to go. It’s about giving them self-esteem and confidence, being able to provide all of those things for your children. So, those are steps that I’ve learned. As far as activities, that’s not even a question. It’s the basics that are important. (Rosey, 38, middle class, mother of 1 child)

That is, to be a good mother you have to have access to and understand how to utilize resources but also be able to manage and nourish social-emotional development. Jesse, a mother of 3, talks about the importance of social-emotional development. The nurturing ideology suggested by the concept of intensive mothering is reflected in Jesse’s thoughts on good mothering (Elliott et. al. 2015).

I think a good mother is someone who’s with her children, who can communicate with her children. Someone who can let their kids know that they can come to them and speak about issues, voice their opinion, listen to what they’re saying, um never belittle their kids, be very supportive to their kids. I think good mother is someone who . . . at any age, the child [can] come to you and talk to you if there’s something going on or if they have issues. Not even issues, someone who will just call you up and wish you a good day or how’s things going. Um, I don’t think there’s a bad mother. I just think that there’s misdirected mothers. I just think there’s uneducated mothers, unloved mothers. – (Jesse, 37, middle class mother of 3 children)

Here Jesse describes mothering less as an activity aimed at providing for children, although she thinks that is important too, and more as an emotional and relational activity. She also clarifies that general education and access to good information, not just financial resources, impact women’s ability to mother well. She is also careful not to blame woman for what she sees as
poor parenting; instead she tries to put their experiences in a larger context of poverty and neglect. She continued:

[I] don’t think there’s, per se, someone who out right wants to be a bad mother but I just think in today’s society, a lot of things that happen to children are because they just—Their parents weren’t taught. Their parents weren’t nurtured. Their parents weren’t um educated, you know, um spiritually, morally, you know, um with family. I think a lot of problems are- There’s a nonfamily atmosphere. With mothers- some mothers today, single mothers um- A lot of it’s- I think a lot of, you know, they’re poverty level, they’re educational level, um you know, the attitudes - I think that’s what makes a bad mom but I don’t think there’s a person who truly grows up and wants to be a bad mom. You know, I just think that society helps- (Jesse, 37, middle class, mother of 3 children)

Jesse’s thinking captures a complex web of individual, social, cultural, and communal elements that impact women’s ability to mother well. Her reluctance to blame women who struggle with motherhood and her awareness of the importance of external influences, in other words, align well with the more communal approach that scholars have linked to African American mothering practices. But there are also hints of the longstanding moral ambitions of middle class Black women to help uplift the race.

In addition to pondering the importance of education and resources, many of the women talked about the ability to nurture their children and take care of the emotional health of their children as important aspects of good mothering. Women in both the middle and working classes often mentioned emotional support as an indicator of good mothering. If your mother was strong, and cared for you physically, financially, and emotionally then she was a good mother. But the emphasis on strength also comes with a price, as Ann tried to articulate:
as African American women, we’ve gotten so used to being able to take a punch. Whether it’s physically, emotionally or whatever, and so we brace ourselves for it. And that bracing ourselves for it cuts us off from the feminine, and so often that piece of mothering we don’t have access to because we have that wall built up so we don’t have that to give to our children because we’re waiting for the other shoe to drop instead of sitting into our softness (Ann, 40, Upper Class, Mother of 2).

Natalie, a middle class college educated Black women with no children, talks about the importance of both financial resources and emotional support.

I think it does vary and I think it varies one, by class because you have more afforded to you than different class levels, and I also think it varies by experience. I don't think not having money or being in what is perceived to be a lower class makes you any worse of a mom. I think most moms wanna be good moms. I think what's different is what is a good mom for where you are. You could be an excellent mom, working class mom, you know dropping your kids off at day care, picking them up making sure they did all their like homework checking things over with them, cooking them dinner, I mean just really locking up the bolts and I mean that's an excellent mom. But if you compare that to you know a mother in a higher class who has like a nanny who can work on a different language with your child while you are away at some function, you come back and maybe someone else is reading them a story, to you that's a good mom as well and you have like this opportune experience to do different things but I don't think it makes the other mom who doesn't have all of that any less of a mom. I would say, umm, I would say sometimes just the access to opportunity . . . [and] access to assistance and help is what really makes the difference. (Natalie, 36, middle class, no children)
Natalie’s perceptions reinforce the observation that not all women can do the kinds of things that are captured by the notion of extensive mothering but, in her view, that does not mean that women with fewer resources are worse mothers. On the contrary, as several of the other participants also emphasized, it is what you do with what you have that determines whether or not you are a good mother. Natalie continued:

I think the things that make women good as mothers of all classes are things that we rarely talk about and those things I think are too universal. You know the working mom in a higher class who comes home; it’s her thing that she sits down and reads to her kids, looks at what they have coming up for the next week when she's gonna be gone so that her kids can engage with them. Or just like we should talk about a working class mom who may be working two jobs and makes sure she makes a cupcake for her child because it’s his favorite thing. (Natalie 36, middle class, no children)

Natalie’s thoughts here transcend the distinction between extensive and intensive mothering. It is not only what you do with your children, although that matters too, but also how you adjust your life around your children that make you a good mother. Regardless of social class, then, any woman can be a good mother because any woman can give of herself for the benefit of her children.

How do Black women reconcile the various pressures and sometimes contradictory signals they receive regarding how to mother effectively? Although many of the participants mentioned the importance of basic provisions as a necessary component of good mothering, most still emphasized the emotional and self-sacrificing work of mothers as the most important part of ideal motherhood. This resembles intensive mothering, especially the all-consuming part, but few of the participants would fault mothers for failing to live up to the formal requirements of
motherhood, provided they had the right intentions and did the best they could. Motherhood to most of my participants, then, was less a deliberate plan, with checks and balances, and more of an approach, or a positioning in relation to children. This positioning could take many forms and was not contingent upon resources in an absolute sense, but it was nonetheless entangled in resources in such a way that if women squandered resources, they were subject to criticism, by others as well as themselves. In other words, even though the women were flexible in evaluations of motherhood, no woman was ever completely beyond reproach. That means that if you come up short in your mothering ambitions, which most mothers do, you risk being labeled, by yourself or others, a bad mother. This is, of course, a familiar theme in the literature (Eliott et. al 2015; Hays 1996).

Working and lower class women share some understandings of what it means to be a good mother with the better off women, but when they talked about resources, they were more likely to think in terms of time than money. Financial resources are important too, but their stories suggest that because they have less access to financial resources they find other ways to practice, and evaluate, good motherhood. Q talks about simply being there for her kids.

You gotta be there for your kids. That’s a good mother. You know not in the club all night [laughter] (Q, 26, lower class, mother of 2)

The ‘doing’ aspect of mothering is what Q focused on when formulating her ideas of good mothering. Q suggests as long as you are “there” for your kids, you are a good mother. In some ways, simply “being there” sets a very low bar for mothering, but given that time is an increasingly scarce resource for many women, it is far from insignificant. Moreover, although Q in this example pits “being there” against spending all night in a club, it is not farfetched to think that she might say something similar about being at work all the time. Other studies have found that marginalized mothers sometimes resist the pressures to emulate the dominant classes by
criticizing the ambitions of privileged women rather than regretting their own failures to meet them (Hryciuk 2010; Shea, Bryan and Wendt 2016; Talukdar and Linders 2013; Weingarten et al 1998). Scholarship on Black mothering, more specifically, have identified the communal aspects of mothering in the Black community as a form of resistance (Abdullah 2012; Blum and Deussen 1996). But in so far as the poor and working class women I talked to described examples of bad mothers, they typically stuck with particularly egregious examples of what they saw as failing mothers. Lisa, for example, referred to a friend of hers, who she thought had too many children to take care of properly:

You know . . . she just keeps having babies. Ain’t no way she can keep up with all them babies. One day I dropped something off to her before I went to work and I swear when I came back to pick it up that night [her baby] was still in the same diaper. Now I aint saying she a bad mother but ummmmmmm how you gone not change the baby diaper?

(Lisa, 38, lower class no children)

Melanie, similarly, tells a story of a young mother who is not putting her child first as an example of what bad mothering looks like. What this mother did was so outrageous that she had no trouble referring to her as a bad mother:

Remember that girl who left her baby at home because she thought her boyfriend was cheating on her? Yea she dumb. That’s a bad mom for sure. You are supposed to put your kids first not some man. (Melanie, 38, working class, mother of 1)

Rosey too shares an outrageous hearsay story to illustrate bad mothering:

I think when you are harming a child you’re automatically a bad mother. Um, I had someone tell me a story about her mother [who] didn’t let her sister eat for like three days because she wouldn’t pray over her food. To me that’s cookoo (Rosey, 38, middle class,
1 child).

Taken together, the women’s ideas about good and bad mothering are at least in part aligned with the notions of intensive (poor and working class) and extensive (middle and upper class) mothering, but to ignore the ways in which they do not align would mean to strip the women’s engagement with motherhood of their grounding in African American culture, to be discussed below. That is, the intersections of class, race, and gender greatly influence how women think about and practice motherhood even though there is overlap in how they idealize motherhood.

**Theme 2: Community Mothering**

The literature is filled with historical examples of Black women’s community mothering (Gilkes 1986; Collins 2000, Dalla 2004; Gibson 2005). Research on community mothering helps us understand the ways in which Black women have always mothered not just their own children but also the race. The concept of community mothering captures the many different roles that women adopt as they mother the children of the community. Church mothers, othermothers, community mothers, community activists, and middle- and upper-class, club women all play significant roles in the mothering of Black children (Edwards 2000, Collins 2000; Gilkes 1994).

As I show in this section, many of the women I interviewed, regardless of class location, invoked and were influenced by the idea of community mothering. It was from the community that they derived their ideas about motherhood and it was, at least in part, in the community that they raised their children. This is not to suggest that they all participated in communal mothering – most did not, although many still referenced such practices – but instead to emphasize the importance to the women of an ideology that links women’s work as mothers to the larger Black community. In a normative sense, then, the community serves as an extension of motherhood.
Particularly important here is the role played by the older women in the community. These are the revered “big mommas,” that is, the women who care for and keep watch over the community.

Several of the participants reminisced about such community mothers. Rashida, for example, talks about her experience growing up and how the older women in the community helped to raise the children.

Man when I was growing up we were always on our best behavior when we walked past Ms. May’s house. She would sit on her rocking chair with a wooden spoon and we knew she was going to get us. I don’t think she every really got any of us but everyone was scared of her. (Rashida, 38, working class, no children)

Rashida’s fond memories of “big momma” is a good example of the practice of other-mothering, which is a particular form of extensive mothering unique to African American communities. Ms. May had taken it upon herself to be responsible for the management of the children in the community. She was the keeper of children and monitored their behavior. In this instance the delegation of childcare responsibilities was shared in the community. As an adult, Rashida looked back at this arrangement as a lesson in effective communal mothering. Rosey, similarly, talks about a tradition of other-mothering in the African American community:

I think African American women has the strong sense to give back and the strong sense of connecting with other African American women . . . Motherhood especially, and even if it’s not your child- I mean you hear stories during, um, Africans coming to America, I mean they mother everyone’s children (Rosey, 38, middle class, mother of 1 child)

Ann also invoked history when she tried to articulate what was unique about Black motherhood:

I think one of the things that affect how we see mothering is the legacy of slavery. And
part of it is because we are protective of our children in a different way, and we don’t always even know that that is what we are doing. We don’t always know we are making choices from that place around mothering. But I think it affects how we mother (Ann, 40, Upper Class, Mother of 2).

The delegation of mothering responsibilities within the Black community is one that has specific parameters of what is accepted as a proper extension of the familiar responsibilities. The community of grandmothers, aunties and other older women serve as an extension of mothering within the community, as several participants noted and had experiences with. Geneva talks about her grandmother raising her:

My momma would work late and my grandmother would watch me at night. I feel like I spent like more time with her than I did my mother. Her and her friends like ran our neighborhood. It was like they were some sort of granny gang [laughing] (Geneva, 40, lower class mother of 4)

Dee, similarly, shares the story of why her grandmother had raised her:

My mother was an addict so my granny raised me and hell now I feel like I’m raising my grandkids. Shit I am. Who am I kidding; my kids aint on drugs though they jus lazy. I guess what they say is true it takes a village cause Lord knows what would happened to my grandbabies if I wasn’t there. These kids just hard headed these days. (Dee 40, working class mother of 2)

And Aleah remembers how the women of her family and community would always be on her case to make her behave:

On Sundays everyone would come to my momma’s house after church. It was like thanksgiving dinner every week. It was the place and the time where if you had business everybody would know about your business. And if you was on some crazy stuff
everybody at the dinner table would know so I tried to be good. You know I tried to act half right cause I didn’t want to get called out in front of everybody. My momma, and aunties would get on me and even my granny’s best friend Ms. Johnson would give you an ear full too. I was scared to death of them so I followed the rules. My brother now he was hardheaded. He was always in trouble. (Aleah, 40, working class, mother 3)

This emphasis on community mothering is especially prevalent in lower class African American communities where, regardless of biological connection, it is the responsibility of the women in the community to raise the children. Women who hold this status in African American communities are often identified as women of wisdom and as leaders in the community. This type of community mothering was seen in the stories of lower/class working class mothers more often than in the stories of the upper class women. As we have seen, working class and lower class women often mentioned aunts, cousins and grandparents as sharing in the responsibilities of mothering. Nancy’s recollection of an early abortion experience can serve as a final example of the prevalence of communal mothering, even though in this case Nancy tried to evade the influence. She told me the decision to have an abortion was her own, and that she never discussed it with any of the women in her family because she was convinced they would seriously disapprove:

Awww they [mother, aunties and grandmothers] would kill me if they knew I had an abortion. I still have a hard time with it. Sometimes I think God is punishing me and that’s why I can’t have children. (Nancy 38, working class, no children)

The point she was making here was not that the women in her family were particularly anti-abortion. Rather, it was a rejection of the idea that a woman would not be ready and able, with the help of the community, to mother if she got pregnant. They fact that Nancy is still struggling
with her decision, is a strong indication that she too has absorbed this message about motherhood.

The purpose of this section has been to show how African American women still think of mothering in unique ways. Although there are class differences among the women, traditional ideas of motherhood as a communal enterprise still in many ways guide how they think about motherhood, even though it is only the poor and working class women who live lives where mothering is routinely done in the community and in extended kin-networks. One reason why class differences are less pronounced among Black women than other groups of women is because upward class mobility is still precarious and many middle class African Americans not only grew up in poverty but are still part of extended family networks in which poverty remains a reality (Hattery and Smith 2012).

In the next section, which addresses women as community leaders, I focus on upper- and middle-class mothers and show that the traditional ambitions of middle-class Black women to help raise the race are still present, but now take somewhat different forms than they used to when the Black community was more thoroughly segregated.

**Theme 3: Scripting Leaders: Upper/Middle Class Mothers Creating Leaders**

Cultural scripts are guidelines that help us understand how to operate in society. Motherhood is no exception. Motherhood scripts are derived from cultural expectations related to gender, family, childhood, community, and work. This section focuses on how Black women articulate their responsibilities when it comes to leadership of the Black community, whether they think of themselves as leaders or if they focus on creating leaders for the future. The findings show that, for middle and upper class women, this responsibility is linked to their work as mothers and is organized as an effort to combat the continued marginalization of the Black
According to Edward (2000), Black women’s clubs are especially significant for understanding how middle class women mother. Clubwomen are professional, middle-class women who serve as political, economic and/or social resources. Black women’s organizations have long played an important role in African American communities (McKinley-Floyd 1998; Reagon 1990; Scott 1990; White 1999). Emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these clubs, organizations, and associations had a variety of purposes – political, civic, philanthropic, social, literary – but most were committed to the general goal of serving, advancing, and uplifting “the race,” that is, the Black community (Knupfer 1996, 2006; Neverdon-Morton 1997). The ways in which these clubs sought to achieve their goals were varied, ranging from service provision to political activism, but whatever else they did, they emphasized respectability, both in terms of their own behavior and in what they taught those they tried to help (Neverdon-Morton 1997; Thompson 2009).

Several women in the sample brought up their experiences with social clubs without being directly asked about it. This was so especially among upper class women who made references to clubs designed specifically for African American women and described how these clubs not only served as networks for advancement but also helped set standards for how to behave and how to do good mothering. Wendy, for example, spoke of her experiences as a member of Jack and Jill:

I did Jack and Jill when I was younger. I hated it. I felt like I was in a room of uppity Black women. And they were talking crazy like cross your legs under the table and in bed [laughter]. And it was like a gazillion people all in your business and my mother loved it. These women sounded like robots. It didn’t matter whose mom you were talking
to they all sounded the same. I was so over it! (Wendy, 37, upper class, no children)

Wendy’s recollections of her Jack and Jill experiences emphasize what she thought of as “uppity” training in manners and propriety. Natasha and Mia, too, recall the emphasis on proper behavior in Black women’s organizations:

We were supposed to act a certain way… like be all dignified and shit (Natasha, 31, middle class, no children)

It wasn’t Jack and Jill it was something else but I remember going to tea parties. Yes tea parties. They taught us etiquette, it was cool. I would probably be a hoe had they not occupied my time so much [laughter] – (Mia, 33, middle class, no children)

These descriptions do not capture the political overtones of much of Black women’s historical organizing, but instead pick up on the more domestic concerns of these organizations. I have no way of knowing if the organizations that Wendy, Natasha, and Mia referred to were also engaged in more political endeavors or if manners were their main concern. But it seems clear that at least some of the activities of these organizations were geared towards grooming young Black women for future leadership positions. Jennifer, for example, remembers how her mother forced her to give a speech to a Black women’s organization:

My mom made me go give a speech, we had to be members of some fancy group. I forgot what it was called, toast something. I hated it but she made me. Like three of her friends had kids who did it before, my mom was an older mom so most of her friend’s kids were a lot older than me. She didn’t even really like them but it was like whatever these women said was gold. (Jennifer 40, upper class, mother of 2)

But Jennifer too recognized the potential benefits of that exclusive membership:
I did get a scholarship when I was young. I don’t remember for what but I got one so I guess being a member had it perks. (Jennifer, 40, upper class, mother of 2)

These examples, in different ways, help us to understand the ways in which Black women’s organizations taught women how to be and how to act in the world. Although they did not specifically reference motherhood, beyond observing that their mothers made them participate, it is nonetheless evident that these organizations played a role in making them the women they are today. That is, whether they enjoyed the experience or not, many of the women talked about learning how to be women from the organizations their mothers introduced them to. From sororities to clubs, these organizations also played a big role in the development of their ideology of motherhood. These organizations not only taught African American women to be leaders but also to live their lives better and help others do the same. They created a space to network and a space to grow. Most women/mothers who had experiences with these organizations were college educated and expected their children to be as well. In the community these young women had continued in their mothers’ footsteps by going to college and, as adults, serving in various leadership roles. The responsibility they felt to help raise the race and serve the community required access to the leadership resources that these organizations provided. In this sense, they used these organizations as a form of extensive mothering. They were taught to be mothers who lead.

The importance and relevance of these organizations have shifted a bit since the pre-civil rights days when they were clearly an important and respected force in the Black community. As opportunities for women of color to gain access to leadership positions have increased, the role of these organizations have diminished somewhat. And yet, the women in the sample talked about their significance as a staple to Black womanhood and motherhood. Moreover, while more
contemporary Black women’s activism takes many different forms, it still in many ways connects to the club women of the past (Springer 1999).

DISCUSSION

Motherhood has long been and continues to be a central role for African American women to play. The literature suggests that how Black women play this role differs from that of their white counterpart (Collins 2000, Glikes 1983). In general, Black women do not subscribe to the traditional Eurocentric ideology of motherhood, which suggests a dependence on men and a separation from the community. That is, Black mothers place less of a significance on the role of men in their mothering practices and accept a sense of responsibility in raising the community. While this is true by and large, mothers of the middle class place are more reliant on men than poor and working class women, as I have already discussed in a previous chapter.

Women from all class locations thought that good mothers sacrifice and lay the foundation for a good live for their children. Exactly how they do it depends on the resources available to them, but almost all agreed that good mothering involved some sacrifice. Most of the women also placed mothering in the context of a larger African American community. Many had been the recipients of community mothering, others engaged in it, and yet others felt a responsibility towards the greater Black community.

The messages we receive throughout life shape who we are. There is no doubt that mothers in the Black community are revered regardless of what social class they occupy. As women journey to and/or away from motherhood, they navigate the sometimes contradictory messages they receive from the different communities they are a part of. Regardless of women’s choices when it comes to having children, the idea of motherhood penetrates Black women deeply. Therefore it is not surprising that, for Black women, motherhood spans the entire life course rather than just the child bearing years. How women think of themselves as mothers is
greatly informed by the community; that is, the community shapes how women think about motherhood and what role it plays in their development of self. The women who shared their stories talked about the influence the community had on how they viewed motherhood. However, the messages were not always consistent. But, taken together, the stories shed light on the significance of community and its influence on informing the ideology of motherhood for Black women.
CHAPTER VII: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

There was something so valuable about what happened when one became a mother. For me it was the most liberating thing that ever happened to me. Liberating because the demands that children make are not the demands of a normal ‘other.’ The children’s demands on me were things that nobody ever asked me to do. To be a good manager. To have a sense of humor. To deliver something that somebody could use. And they were not interested in all the things that other people were interested in, like what I was wearing or if I were sensual. Somehow all of the baggage that I had accumulated as a person about what was valuable just fell away. I could not only be me—whatever that was—but somebody actually needed me to be that. If you listen to [your children], somehow you are able to free yourself from baggage and vanity and all sorts of things, and deliver a better self, one that you like. The person that was in me that I liked best was the one my children seemed to want.

-From Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart

When I began this research I found myself enthralled by the particular attention scholars gave to what they thought of as pathological versions of motherhood. Much of their ideas about motherhood and mothering seemed to pathologize Black mothers and treat them as either hopelessly ensnared in conditions they have no control over or as super-women who can bear any burden and fight any obstacle. I was curious if this was in deed their story, our story. It did not seem quite like my own story but I was new at this – both motherhood and scholarship. maybe it would be my story at some point in my journey. As a new single mother trying to figure out what to do, I found myself grappling with the very notion of motherhood and began to wonder how other women constructed and understood our roles as Black women and Black mothers. In my quest for answers I was drawn to the scholarship that focused on the perils and
uncertainty of motherhood and family life and to scholarship that could help me understand the varying dreams, hopes, plans, and life circumstances that characterize the reproductive practices of Black women. Even today there is a tendency to pathologize Black mothers and for this reason it was important for me to seek answers the question of how African American women actually think about and practice motherhood.

This project has important theoretical implications and contributes to our understanding of how differently situated Black women understand and grapple with motherhood and womanhood. Given what we know, the overall problem this dissertation deals with is why and how Black women decide to become mothers (or not) and how, more generally, they make sense of their reproductive journeys. In turn, this dissertation focuses on Black women’s own ideas about reproduction and motherhood and is grounded in the assumption that, despite all the well documented obstacles they face, Black women are agents of their own lives; that is, they actively exercise reproductive agency in their lives. Exactly how they do that, however, is the empirical question I sought out to address. We already know that motherhood ideologies are an important component of the African American community, but we know less about how differently situated women respond to, navigate, and (re)construct their ideologies of motherhood as they go about their own lives.

My assumption was that women’s social positions within society – especially race, class, and gender – greatly influence their understandings of motherhood. The concept of reproductive agency is under-explored in the literature (de Bessa 2006; Raspberry and Skinner 2011; Reed, Miller, and Timm 2011), but this study has shown that the notion of reproductive agency, when embedded in an intersectional analysis, can help us better understand how differently situated African American women think about and practice motherhood. Why a woman chooses to
become a mother (or not) is shaped by the circumstances of her life and the experiences she has with the groups to which she belongs (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Hill 2005; Reed, Miller, and Timm 2011). Therefore African American women develop notions of mothering that are unique and that in various ways both reinforce and challenge traditional Euro-centric thinking around motherhood.

The literature on motherhood has shown that a woman’s position at the intersections of race, class and gender matters for how she approaches motherhood and mothering. In order to gain insights into Black women’s reproductive agency, it was necessary to approach their experiences and thoughts about motherhood from a perspective that not only prioritized their own voices (Vakalahi and Starks 2010) but also took seriously the different opportunities, constraints, assumptions, and practices that differently situated women are exposed to and engage with.

Each findings chapter was organized to address a specific research question. The first findings chapter, *Meaning, Purpose and Thought: Understanding How African American Women Construct Motherhood and Mothering Ideologies*, was organized to address the question of how Black women (re) construct motherhood ideologies. How women think about mothering is very much dependent on how they themselves view the world, and how they view the world is in turn influenced by the communities they live their lives in. In this chapter I showed how African American women construct their ideology of motherhood in ways that are influenced by their social class, their age, and the communities they are part of. When asked to think about their ideas of motherhood the women shared stories that emphasized notions of power, sacrifice, and money.

My findings demonstrate that class matters for how Black women define motherhood,
even though there are also important commonalities in how the more and less privileged women think about motherhood. The most pronounced differences between rich and poor women refer to the question of whether motherhood is a matter of choice. All women value motherhood, and all but 2 are or would like to become mothers, but they differ when it comes to articulating how motherhood fits into their lives. For the poor and lower class women, the idea of motherhood was deeply ingrained in who they are as women; that is, they thought of motherhood as a destiny rather than an option. In contrast, the upper- and middle-class women, even as they thought of motherhood as an important part of who they were, grappled much more with the mechanics – the hows and whens and with whom – of how to insert motherhood into their lives. Thus, although almost all women thought motherhood was important to who they are, their social locations clearly influenced how they articulated their understandings of motherhood. These findings do not suggest that the poor and working class women have less reproductive agency than more well-off women, only that they express and exercise it differently.

Beyond the basic difference of motherhood as a destiny or a choice, the aspects of motherhood that the women talked about – power, sacrifice, and money – were less clear as class markers than I had anticipated. Regardless of social class, mothers and non-mothers alike talked about the power that comes with the role of mother. Power comes from nurturing, providing social and political awareness, love, socialization and values (Collins 2000). The maternal identity, according to both Morrison and Collins, is a source of great power for African American women. It is through motherhood, in other words, that African American women have achieved power and reverence within the Black community (Collins 2000; Morrison 2004). Black motherhood ideology, in other words, encompasses the idea that power is inherent in the role of mother and those who identify with the role are revered and deemed powerful in their
communities. This element of Black motherhood ideology was pervasive in the stories the women told me about motherhood in the Black community more generally and their own experiences with mothering more specifically. Although this finding is not new it nonetheless helps us contextualize Black women’s engagement with the concept of motherhood. Motherhood as power is a significant aspect of a Black women’s journey to (or away from) motherhood.

Another common idea the women grappled with was the notion of sacrifice. The expectation that Black motherhood does and should involve sacrifice can be viewed as a form of oppression, even though few of the women talked about their sacrifice in those terms. Instead, they all talked of sacrifice as a normal aspect of motherhood. Although there were few class differences when it comes to the idea of sacrifice, rich and poor women still described motherhood sacrifice in somewhat different terms. Moreover, given that many of the women found motherhood empowering, both for themselves and for the community, they chose to think of sacrifice as an inevitable rather than negotiable aspect of motherhood.

Although Black women share some unique experiences and challenges as Black women, their class locations nonetheless matter for understanding how they respond to and navigate the challenges of motherhood. While Black women’s race location clearly shapes their ideology of motherhood, it does not determine it. Middle class women often defined themselves as mothers by their ability, or lack thereof, to care for and provide for a child in a material sense. It was not so that they equated good mothering with resources – poor women too could be good mothers in their view – but instead that their class privilege came with additional, and class specific, responsibilities. This was different from the lower class women, who were much less likely to link motherhood to parental resources. Motherhood to them was a central aspect of womanhood, something they were naturally equipped to do, regardless of resources. In short, the problem of
resources looks very different for women of different social locations. And this matters because it effects how women think about motherhood. The idea that motherhood is in part about consumption – the things that resources can buy – was pervasive in the stories that all women told (Taylor, Layne, and Wozniak 2004), but the kinds of resources they women deemed important varied quite a bit, ranging from providing basic provisions to class-based mobility opportunities for their children. When I first began this project I expected to see vast differences by social class in how women thought about motherhood, but the stories the women told me showed more similarities than I had originally anticipated.

The second findings chapter, Managing Reproduction, was organized to address the question of how Black women make reproductive decisions. In this chapter I showed how women in different class positions exercised reproductive agency and described how the women themselves made sense of the different and sometimes contradictory messages they received regarding motherhood. For African American women, their life journeys are influenced by many social factors; however, the idea of motherhood almost always one of the focal points of their journeys (Collins 2000; Collins 2005; Martinot 2007; Sewell 2013). When navigating the world of reproduction, African American women struggle with the expectations and obligations of motherhood that both constrain and help guide the choices they make (Barnes 2016).

My findings here demonstrate that social class, the community, family and societal expectations greatly influenced the choices they made related to reproduction, and their agency in relation to reproduction. The intersections of race, class, and gender influence how black women conceptualize their reproductive agency. That is, their reproductive agency is influenced by their position within a system of oppression that treat women differently, but that also consistently criticizes black women’s motherhood. Hence, their stories show us how their social
positions matter for how they exercise their reproductive agency, but they also show us that, regardless of class position, they all approach mothering as black women. The influence of social class is especially clear when the women talked about their decisions regarding the prevention and/or disruption of pregnancies. The idea that motherhood is a deliberate choice was very clear in the stories of upper and middle class women. They see the management of their reproductive lives as something that they have control over. In planning their reproductive lives and preventing pregnancies when the time was wrong, the middle and upper class women were no less committed to motherhood than their poorer counterparts. On the contrary, they planned and delayed motherhood precisely so that they could be good mothers once the time and circumstances were right.

The messages black women receive as they exercise their reproductive agency shape each decision/choice they make in unique ways. The messages they receive, and who they receive them from, help shape their choices. The positions they occupy within the larger system of oppression greatly affect how they think about motherhood, but the more or less explicit messages they received from their communities also greatly shaped and influence their reproductive decisions. The poor and working class women were more likely to talk about their reproductive lives as governed by chance rather than a plan, but what that should alert us to is not a lack of agency but instead a set of larger circumstances that make life unpredictable and hence strongly discourage the kind of long-term planning that is more likely to characterize how middle- and upper-class women approach their lives, including if and when to become mothers. When examining their stories around abortion, working class women heard messages that did not present abortion as a real option or a preferable solution to a pregnancy. In fact, many women clearly emphasized that they were pressured into having an abortion. Much of the literature
around black women’s agency suggests that black women do indeed exercise agency in many of the choices they make, including reproductive choices such as abortion.

The literature suggests that choosing to delay motherhood by way of birth control or other reproductive preventive measures for the sake of career or financial security is something African American women struggle with. And yet they somehow manage to make sense of their reproductive decisions while still centering motherhood (Collins 2005; Kricheli-Katz, 2012).

Many of the middle-class participants in my study talked about how they tried to reconcile the conflicting demands of career and motherhood, thus indicating that their ideas of both work and motherhood were shaped by their class location. The messages they received as a middle-class woman was that being both a mother and having a career was somehow not attainable. The struggle evident in the choice between motherhood and career was unique to the middle class/upper class women. Although most of the poor and working class women did work, whether stably or intermittently, they never talked of work and motherhood as somehow irreconcilable. The working class women thought of their work as simply that, work. That is, work was something they had to do, not something they chose to do. The middle- and upper-class women, in contrast, thought of work in terms of careers that competed with motherhood rather than facilitated motherhood.

The stories the women shared vividly illustrated the complex ways that black women’s experiences impact their thoughts and decisions regarding motherhood. Owning the choice to mother was not as central to the lower class women as it was to the middle and upper class women. Thinking about these findings in terms of reproductive agency, it is clear that the more privileged women had the resources and class-based expectations required to control their reproductive lives. In that sense, they had a much greater opportunity than the less privileged
women to carefully plan out their lives and make decisions along the way that fit an overall plan.

The last findings chapter, *The Expectation of Motherhood: Community Mothers and Leaders, Raising*, was organized to address the question of how Black women’s understandings of community expectations influence how they raise their own children. Recent studies have shown that especially middle class Black women struggle with how to think about and respond to what many articulate as their responsibilities towards the Black community (Barnes 2016; 2016b). Moreover, there is at least some evidence that Black women mothers for a variety of reasons currently rely somewhat less on the community and extended kin networks (Brewster and Padavic 2006) than they used to (Jeffers 1967; Stack 1976). Hence it was important to revisit the question of how differently situated Black women think of the role of the Black community, however defined, in their own motherhood practices and aspirations.

The women engaged with the idea of community in many different ways; it was what they drew on to describe what they meant by good and bad mothering, it was what they were thinking of as they mothered, and it was a responsibility they shared as Black women. Although all the women could distinguish good and bad motherhood practices, taken together the women described mothering as a creative project where the lines between good and bad mothering are distinctly blurred. Essentially they concluded that as long as women do the best they can with the resources they have available to them, they engage in good mothering.

It was from the community that Black women derived their ideas about motherhood and it was, at least in part, in the community that they raised their children. This is not to suggest that they all participated in communal mothering – most did not, although many still referenced such practices – but instead to emphasize the importance to the women of an ideology that links women’s work as mothers to the larger Black community. In a normative sense, then, the
community serves as an extension of motherhood. The delegation of mothering responsibilities within the Black community has long historical roots and is also an important aspect of Black motherhood ideology. And yet, the practice of community mothering was more prevalent in the stories of lower/class working class mothers than in the stories of the upper/middle class women. And yet, traditional ideas of motherhood as a communal enterprise still in many ways guided how the more privileged women thought about motherhood, even though it is only the poor and working class women who live lives where mothering is routinely done in the community and in extended kin-networks.

If the poor women were more likely to rely on the community as a resource of mothering, the more privileged women were more concerned with how they could contribute to that community more generally. In this way, they continued the traditional ambitions of middle-class Black women to help raise the race. Today these ambitions take on a somewhat different form than they used to when the Black community was more thoroughly segregated, but Black women’s organizations still play a role, both as communal resources and as spaces where Black women can exercise leadership and garner political influence. As opportunities for women of color to gain access to leadership positions have increased, the role of these organizations has diminished somewhat. And yet, the women in the study talked about their significance as a staple to Black womanhood and motherhood.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Given the goal of understanding what motherhood means for Black women, the biggest limitation of this study is that I focused on women’s ideas of mothering rather than on their practices. Although it is important to learn that Black women regardless of class location talk about motherhood in similar, albeit not identical, terms, I cannot conclude with confidence that
they do motherhood differently, although there are hints in the data that they do. What I am thinking of here is both the many material differences between rich and poor mothers—where and how they live, what they give their children to eat, what their children wear, where they go to school, who their friends are and what they do with their friends, what kinds of extracurricular activities they are exposed to, what kinds of vacations they take, their access to books, television, and other media and, more generally, what their daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly lives look like—and the different engagements they have with the Black community—do they live in Black or white neighborhoods, send their children to Black or white schools, go to Black or white churches, and, more generally, live their lives in Black communities.

Another limitation is that I focused on heterosexual women who had fairly typical relationships with the fathers of their children, whether or not those fathers were actively present in the lives of their children. But these are not the only women who become mothers. Given the entanglement of motherhood with traditional notions of heterosexual and white womanhood, it is clear, as Mignon Moore (2011) has demonstrated, that Black women who do not identify as straight face many additional challenges when it comes to family formation and motherhood.

Yet another limitation refers to the fairly limited age range of the participants—most were in their 30s. It made sense when I began the project to focus on women who were still in their childbearing years, but that decision means that I can say little about how older women think about not only their own trajectories as mothers but also about the roles that still may play as community mothers. Several of the women refer to the importance of grandmothers in the community, but with only a few women in the sample with grandchildren, I do not have enough evidence to contribute knowledge here. I also didn’t have any teenagers among the participants, although a few women spoke of teenage pregnancies they experienced, which means I cannot
explore how young mothers navigate motherhood.

Finally, this study has deliberately focused on African American women. While this was the best choice for this project, as part of my aim was to give voice to Black women, I am not able to directly compare and contrast my findings with women from different racial/ethnic locations. The literature makes fairly general comparisons possible, but given the potential importance of both theoretical aims and empirical contingencies, it is always difficult to compare findings across studies. With a more racially diverse sample, in other words, I could have shed additional light on how women’s positions at the intersections of race, class, and gender impact their motherhood ideologies and mothering practices.

The contributions of this particular study are important to make note of as they point to some interesting possibilities for new opportunities and future research. This work most significantly teaches us that class matters and shapes how black women make sense of motherhood. Black women who occupy lower socioeconomic positions de-emphasize money as a key element of mothering and motherhood. Instead they used other markers, including their ability to mother effectively with few resources, to describe good mothering. While upper/middle class women did not identify good mothering with access to resources, they did express more resource-related concerns associated with raising their children. This contributes an important part of the story of Black women that has not yet been fully explored in the scholarly literature. This research sheds light on the question of “how” Black women make sense of their reproductive decisions and provides a look inside Black women’s lives while still taking into account the systems of oppression that greatly influence how they navigate and see the world around them. In addition, this research also sheds light on the notion of a motherhood trajectory for black women. Choosing to become or mother, postponing or deciding to mother and/or birth
a child is not a singular and isolated decision that women make at certain points in their lives; rather, the decisions they make around mothering fall on an ever-unfolding trajectory. This trajectory consists of their experiences with the world around them, that is, their community, their family, and the social structures in which they operate within, all of which shape their trajectories. Much of the literature discusses reproduction as the decisions women make and my research shows a more detailed and in-depth picture of the trajectories black women create along their journeys to womanhood.

Race is fundamental to understanding the lives of black women, but class provides a more nuanced description of their racial lives. When examining their reproductive agency it is clear that class matters in how they express and think about the constraints and opportunities that shape their reproductive lives. Upper/class women clearly used the language of choice and were clear about how they exercised it while lower class women grappled less with questions of choice. This does not mean that lower class women do not exercise reproductive agency; rather, it simple means they understand and exercise it in different ways and how they do this is shaped by their social class. All in all I think this project has accomplished what I set out to accomplish by giving voice to a population often silenced by oppressive systems.
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Appendix
Appendix A: Interview Guide

Personal Reproductive History and Plans
Decisions about having (or not) children
Why did you decide to become (or not) a mother?
Over the years what factors influenced your decision to mother a child (or not)?
Type of reproductive decision you have made in the past
Mothers feelings and perceptions around reproduction

Partner Related Issues
Partner views about reproduction
Your views about significance of partner participation and/or involvement in reproductive decisions

Reproductive Constraints
Finances
Maturity
What circumstances cause a mother to be a good or bad mother?
What do you define as a reproductive constraint?
How important is financial security?

Motherhood Ideologies in General
What does it mean to be a mother?
What can be defined as a good mother?
List pro/cons of being a mother?
How do you define motherhood?
What influences your decision to mother a child (or not)
What is your perception of raising children?
What messages do you hear from your community about motherhood?
What messages do you hear from your family about motherhood?
Can your circumstances influence the type of mother you become? If so, how?

If not apparent by the end of interview
Age range (i.e., 20’s, 30’s, 40’s, etc…)
Race
Relationship status
Education
Number of children
Homeownership
Class
Work status
Appendix B: Pre Questionnaire

Alias Name (do NOT put your real name here): _______________________________

Relationship Status:
- Single
- Married
- Divorced
- Legally Separated
- Widowed
- Domestic Partnership/Civil Union
- In a relationship/partnered

Ethnicity:
- Hispanic or Latino
- Non-Hispanic or Latino

Race: (check all that apply)
- Black or African-American
- Other

How many children do you have: ___________ (biological) _________ (other)

If you had to choose, how would you describe your socioeconomic status (optional)?
- _____ lower class _____ working class _____ middle class _____ upper class

Age: ________________________

What reproductive decisions have you thought about, participated in and/or wrestled with over your life course? (check all that apply)
- Contraception
- Sterilization
- Having Children
- Abortion
- ART (egg donation, surrogacy, sperm donation, IVF etc)
- Adoption
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Typical characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upper class (1%)</td>
<td>Top-level executives, celebrities, heirs; income of $500,000+ common. Ivy league education common.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper middle class (15%)</td>
<td>Highly educated (often with graduate degrees) professionals &amp; managers with household incomes varying from the high 5-figure range to commonly above $100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower middle class (32%)</td>
<td>Semi-professionals and craftsman with some work autonomy; household incomes commonly range from $35,000 to $75,000. Typically, some college education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working class (32%)</td>
<td>Clerical, pink and blue collar workers with often low job security; common household incomes range from $16,000 to $30,000. High school education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower class (ca. 14% - 20%)</td>
<td>Those who occupy poorly-paid positions or rely on government transfers. Some high school education.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D: Participant Overview

Upper Class (10)
1. Jean – 38, mother 2
2. Ann – 40, mother 2
3. Wendy – 37 no children
4. Ruth – 38 mother of 3
5. Dana 38 mother of 1
6. Heather – 38 mother 1
7. Grace – 40 mother of 2
8. May – 39 no children
9. Andrea – 39 mother of 1
10. Jennifer – 40 mother of 2

Middle Class (15)
1. Chanel – 38 mother of 1
2. Jesse – 37 mother of 3 children
3. Mia – 33, no children
4. Carmen – 34, no children
5. Rosey 38 mother of 1
6. Natalie, 36 no children
7. Porsche 25 mother of 1
8. Angie – 34, no children
10. Stella – 36 mother of 4
11. Zora – 33 mother of 2
12. Sasha 28 mother of 1
13. Victoria - 37, mother of 1
14. Rosey – 38 1 child
15. Jenny – 37 mother of 2

Working Class (15)
1. Rashida – 38, no children
2. Chris – 30 mother of 2
3. Crystal – 31 mother of 1
4. Angel – 34 mother of 3
5. Kacey – 27 mother of 2
6. Aleah – 40 mother 3
7. Joy – 25 mother of 1
8. Melissa – 27, no children
9. Nancy – 38 no children
10. Melanie – 38 mother of 1
11. Rockstar – 29, no children
12. Kim – 23 mother of 1
13. Dee – 40 mother of 2
14. Mia II – no children
15. Missing

Lower Class (10)
1. Anita – 36 mother of 3
2. Roxanne – 39 mother of 4
4. Lisa – 38 no children
5. Geneva – 40 mother of 4
6. Q – 26 mother of 2
7. Queen of the Nile – 40 no children
8. Monique – 35 no children
9. Anitra – 35 mother of 3