

Intentional Mothering: A Black Feminist-Informed Thematic Analysis of How Black Queer Mothers Engage in Motherwork, Navigate Informal Support, and Access Community Resources

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## Abstract

Recent literature suggests that LGBTQ+ women of color are more likely to raise children or have children in the home compared to White LGBTQ+ women (Gates, 2013, 2015). Most of the LGBTQ+ motherhood research has focused narrowly on one domain of queer motherhood, lesbian mothers’ experience of mothering (Bible et al., 2018) and centered on the experiences of White, middle-class, cisgender mothers (Brainer et al., 2020; Manley & Ross, 2020; Reczek, 2020). The interlocking nature of multiple marginalized identities places Black queer mothers at a unique intersection of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Exploring the complexity of lived experience among Black mothers who identify with a plurisexual identity (i.e., bi, queer, pan, or fluid; Galupo, 2018) provides family scientists and scholar-practitioners an opportunity to analyze the internal, relational, and institutional influences that reinforce or challenge racism, sexism, and homophobia. The present study sought to understand how Black queer mothers experience motherwork as queer mothers, how they build and navigate networks of support, and how they use community resources. The study was guided by intersectionality rooted within the theoretical framework of Black Feminist Thought, as well as an emphasis on motherwork as both a theoretical framework and a concept explored. Using reflexive thematic analysis, semi-structured interviews ( $M_{\text{time}} = 79.63$  minutes), photovoice submissions, and photovoice interviews ( $M_{\text{time}} = 38.32$  minutes) were conducted with 10 participants (8 of the 10 participants completed photovoice). Four key themes were identified (a) Attentiveness and Resistance to Discrimination (subtheme: Active Reflectivity in Parenting Strategies); (b) Promoting Openness of Self-Expression in Child(ren) (subtheme: Queer Identity Helps Foster Acceptance and Intentionality); (c) Negotiating Informal Support (three subthemes: Barriers to Support, Desiring Like-Minded Social Groups, and Boundaries in Close Relationships Are Critical); and (d) Emphasis on Finding the “Right” Environment to Meet Family Needs (subtheme: Utilizing Individual or Couples Therapy). Findings have implications for the family science literature by providing an in-depth, Black feminist understanding of how Black queer mothers engage in queer motherwork, navigate informal support, and strategically access community resources.

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## General Audience Abstract

Recent literature suggests that LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer) women of color are more likely to raise children or have children in the home compared to White LGBTQ+ women (Gates, 2013, 2015). Most of the LGBTQ+ motherhood research has focused narrowly on one domain of queer motherhood, lesbian mothers’ experience of mothering (Bible et al., 2018) and centered on the experiences of White, middle-class, cisgender mothers (Brainer et al., 2020; Manley & Ross, 2020; Reczek, 2020). Exploring the complexity of lived experience among Black mothers who identify with a plurisexual identity (i.e., bi, queer, pan, or fluid; Galupo, 2018) provides researchers and clinicians an opportunity to consider the internal, relational, and institutional influences that reinforce or challenge marginalization. The present study sought to understand how Black queer mothers experience motherwork (e.g., identity, survival, and power) as queer mothers, how they build and navigate networks of support, and how they use community resources. The study was guided by intersectionality rooted within the theoretical framework of Black Feminist Thought, as well as an emphasis on motherwork as both a theoretical framework and a concept explored. I analyzed data from two individual interviews (including a photo-elicited interview) with 10 participants (8 of the 10 participants completed the second interview) (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Wang & Burris, 1997). Four key themes were identified (a) Attentiveness and Resistance to Discrimination (subtheme: Active Reflectivity in Parenting Strategies); (b) Promoting Openness of Self-Expression in Child(ren) (subtheme: Queer Identity Helps Foster Acceptance and Intentionality); (c) Negotiating Informal Support (three subthemes: Barriers to Support, Desiring Like-Minded Social Groups, and Boundaries in Close Relationships Are Critical); and (d) Emphasis on Finding the “Right” Environment to Meet Family Needs (subtheme: Utilizing Individual or Couples Therapy). Findings have research and clinical implications for how Black queer mothers engage in queer motherwork, navigate informal support, and strategically access community resources.

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the Black queer mothers everywhere, with special consideration for the ten mothers in this study. Their dedication to living authentic, passionate lives inspired me in ways I did not expect. I am eternally grateful for the stories I got to hear and engage with from a Black feminist perspective. So much intention, joy, and transformation encompassed their stories of Black queer motherhood. I hope this project does their experiences justice.

And so it is.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### Background

Recent literature suggests that LGBTQ+ women of color are more likely to raise children or have children in the home compared to White LGBTQ+ women (Brainer et al., 2020; Gates, 2013, 2015). Despite the growing number of Black women identifying as bisexual (Bridges & Moore, 2019), much of the LGBTQ+ motherhood research to date has focused narrowly on lesbian mothers' experience of mothering (Bible et al., 2018). In fact, most of what we know about LGBTQ+ motherhood literature centers on the experiences of White, middle-class mothers (Brainer et al., 2020; Manley & Ross, 2020; Reczek, 2020). However, the interlocking nature of multiple marginalized identities places Black queer mothers at a unique intersection of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Exploring the complexity of lived experience among Black mothers who identify with a plurisexual identity (i.e., bi, queer, pan, or fluid; Galupo, 2018) provides family scientists and scholar-practitioners an opportunity to analyze the internal, relational, and institutional influences that reinforce or challenge racism, sexism, and homophobia. Black feminist-informed research is needed to critically examine how Black queer mothers navigate this intersection while raising children, relying on informal support, and accessing community resources. To address the gap in the current family science literature it is important to first understand the landscape of oppression that Black queer mothers live in.

The cumulative stress of discrimination uniquely shapes the parenting experience for Black LGBTQ+ people (Brainer et al., 2020). First, racial segregation in LGBTQ+ communities can create dissonance for Black queer mothers as they experience tension between their queer communities and racial and ethnic communities (Gates & Ost, 2004; Moore, 2011). This demonstrates the exclusion of Black sexual minority women and contributes to an experience of

feeling like an outsider in spaces they have cultural membership in (Cerezo et al., 2020). For plurisexual-identifying mothers, this experience of feeling invalidated is compounded by the lack of acknowledgement and support of bisexual identities within LGBTQ+ communities and racial and ethnic communities. This phenomenon is referred to as 'bierasure' (Stewart, 2021).

Bierasure plays a role in further marginalizing Black queer mothers.

Second, to emphasize the inequities Black queer mothers face, reports released within the last decade suggest that Black LGBTQ+ mothers continue to face economic and racial discrimination such as “exclusion and discrimination from community institutions (e.g., housing and employment), teachers, ministers, doctors, and extended family” (Radis & Nadan, 2020, p. 3). This disparity has implications for cycles of multigenerational poverty. Black queer women experience more financial burden while raising children compared to other racial groups (Kastanis & Gates, 2013); low wages are a pressing economic problem for Black queer women (Black Futures Lab, 2019). Black LGBTQ+ women are three times as likely to be in poverty compared to White LGBTQ+ women (Budget et al., 2020) and are more likely (20%) to be medically uninsured than Black heterosexual women (12%) (Choi et al., 2021). These findings reflect a disparate impact of structural discrimination experienced by Black queer mothers and informs the research on family formation among Black queer women.

Third, Black queer mothers may not have access to economic and social privileges (e.g., health insurance and social support) (Choi et al., 2021; Gates 2013, 2015) by engaging in romantic relationships that fall within the queer erotic margins and being outside of heteronormativity. This may help to explain the increased likelihood of Black queer women forming queer families through previous heterosexual relationships compared to White LGBTQ+ women (Moore, 2011; Radis & Nadan, 2020). In considering the relationships Black queer

mothers engage in to form families, research also indicates that relational support is vital to maintaining well-being and a sense of stability as one *does* motherhood (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013; Goldberg & Smith, 2008, 2011; Shechner et al., 2010). These networks are needed assets for Black queer families to cope with cumulative disadvantages effectively.

### **Justification**

Existing research has failed to account for within-group differences (e.g., intracategorical) (Choo & Ferree, 2010; McCall, 2005) by focusing primarily on comparative analyses between racial groups; thus, erasing the nuances that help to demonstrate the experiences of Black queer motherhood. Accounting for these nuances, in part, privileges race, class, sexuality, and age to explain divergent experiences of motherhood (Collins, 1994, 2000). Patricia Hill Collins (1994) labeled the experience of Black women engaging in motherhood as *motherwork*. In other words, motherhood is not a monolithic experience and is quite diverse and qualitatively different from that of White mothers in the United States. Black women engaging in motherhood put forth additional effort to maintain the survival of Black children and families, especially when oppressive forces such as discrimination and domination would suggest otherwise (Collins, 1994, 2000). Thus, for Black women, the decision to enter motherhood challenges the dominant discourse that privileges family formation among White, middle-class women (Davis, 1981). Therefore, “themes of survival, power, and identity” form the foundation of theorizing about motherhood (Collins, 1994, p. 49). Research has yet to explore how Black queer mothers consider race, sexuality, and gender in motherwork. Given the importance of family science scholars being culturally attentive to the critical role Black queer mothers have in raising their children (Collins, 1994, 2000), and an understanding of the ways the ways these mothers navigate informal and formal support, further inquiry is warranted.

### **Purpose of the Present Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate and describe a Black feminist-informed experience of Black queer motherhood. Given the current state of research on LGBTQ+ motherhood, this study provides a better understanding of how Black queer women engage in motherwork by examining the experiences of Black queer mothers raising at least one child, including how they build informal networks of support and access community resources. This project was guided by Black feminist theory (Collins, 2000), specifically to engage intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) in the examination of Black queer mothers' lived experience. Black feminist theory is founded on politics that juxtapose societal oppression and community activism to critically examine Black women's fundamental right to exist (Collins, 2000). Intersectionality is the vehicle through which Black feminist praxis emerges to further conceptualize the multidimensional and simultaneous impact of racism, homophobia, and sexism in creating conditions that marginalize the lives of Black queer mothers (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1993). Furthermore, the application of intersectionality, a Black feminist lens, was used as an analytic tool to explain the experience of Black queer women navigating motherhood, networks of support, and community resources. The use of semi-structured interviews and photovoice helped to broaden family science researchers' understanding of how Black queer mothers experience their social identities in conjunction with motherhood.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions in this study reflect the Black feminist view that race, sexuality, and gender intersect to influence how Black queer mothers engage and respond to common challenges (Collins, 1994, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Specific theoretically informed research questions include the following:

1. How do Black queer mothers describe the experience of queer motherwork?
2. How do Black queer mothers build and navigate networks of informal support?
3. How do Black queer mothers access community resources?

### **Other Important Terms**

Below is a list of commonly used terms within this study, to ensure understanding of language throughout.

1. **Bisexual (Bi+):** The potential to be romantically and/or sexually attracted to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree (Ochs, 2020). Bi+ is used as a shorthand term to include many different identities under the plurisexual umbrella (UC Santa Barbara, n.d.).
2. **Black or African American:** A person having any origins from the African diaspora, such as African American, Kenyan, Nigerian, or Haitian (Census, 2020).
3. **Intersectionality:** A critical framework to analyze how one's social location (i.e., race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and nation) interacts to create structural, representational, and political issues representative of the differential power one is afforded in society (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).
4. **LGBTQ+:** Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, queer, or questioning (The Center, 2021).
5. **Motherwork:** A political act that addresses oppression experienced by mothers of color in the United States, specifically involving concepts such as survival, power, and identity (Collins, 1994). Additionally, Dow (2016) introduced integrative mothering as an alternate ideology to include the influence of cultural beliefs and middle- to high-socioeconomic status among African American professional women on their expectations of motherhood and mothering.

6. **Pansexual:** Attraction to multiple genders or sexes (Belous & Bauman, 2017).
7. **Plurisexual:** Attraction to or engagement in relationships with individuals of more than one gender (Mitchell et al., 2015).
8. **Queer:** For this definition, Dilly (1991) will be used, “queer can be an adjective, a noun, or a verb. In general use, it is most commonly an adjective, meaning “not normal,” or, more specifically, not heterosexual” (p. 457). Additionally, Johnson (2001) described his variation of queer, or quare, as “one who thinks and feels and acts (and, sometimes, “acts up”); committed to struggle against all forms of oppression -- racial, sexual, gender, class, religious, etc.” (p. 2).
9. **Sexually Fluid:** Variation in sexual attraction due to situational, interpersonal, and contextual influences (Diamond et al., 2020); often reporting changes in sexual attractions and behavior over time (Diamond, 2016).

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

We currently lack empirical research on Black queer mothers. Although there is a growing body of knowledge focusing on Black LGBTQ+ families and parenting, much of the current literature remains focused on Black queer motherhood in lesbian-headed households (Moore, 2008, 2011; Radis & Nadan, 2020). This study seeks to contribute to the family science literature on LGBTQ+ families from a Black feminist perspective by using semi-structured interviews and photovoice guided by intersectionality to explore the lived experiences of Black mothers who identify as plurisexual. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to explore how Black queer mothers engage in motherwork, build networks of support, and access community resources. I will organize this chapter into two sections. First, I begin by discussing the historical and racial significance of the theoretical frameworks that guided this study by discussing Patricia Hill Collins' (1994, 2000) Black Feminist Thought, followed by a review of Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality tenets, as intersectionality is a critical extension of Black Feminist Thought. The overview of theoretical frameworks will conclude with a description of motherwork. Second, using Black Feminist Thought as a sensitizing theoretical lens, I will critique the literature on Black queer families. In the literature review, I review both the empirical and theoretical literature that contextualized and informed the study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Black Feminist Thought**

With this study, I sought to challenge the present heteropatriarchal assumptions (Lomax, 2018) that characterize motherhood in Black communities. To deviate from these assumptions and better understand the lived experiences of Black queer mothers, I utilized Black Feminist Thought, with attention to the intersectionality of identity. Black feminism considers the

intersections between multiple domains of private and public life, notably race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; hooks, 2000). As Collins (1998) suggested, “intersectional approaches view institutionalized racism, social class relations, [and] gender inequalities... as analytical constructs that explain family organization in general, and Black family organization in particular” (p. 27). Black feminism conceptualizes the nuanced experience of Black queer motherhood, including Black queer mothers’ meaning-making of their identity and role in their involvement with child-raising.

### **Theorizing Intersectionality**

The intersection of race, gender, and class further characterizes the birth of the Black feminist movement because of Black feminists privileging the entirety of one’s social location in the pursuit of a more just society (Combahee River Collective, 1977/1995). Expanding on the existing Black feminist literature, Crenshaw (1991) posited the following tenets of what she referred to as *intersectionality*: (a) structural intersectionality, (b) political intersectionality, and (c) representational intersectionality. This section will define the tenets of intersectionality and elaborate on the helpfulness of Crenshaw’s (1991) framework in providing a critical exploration into Black queer mothers’ identities and experience navigating motherwork.

First, *structural intersectionality* is defined as the convergence of “systems of race, gender, and class domination” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1246). Cho et al. (2013) cautioned scholars against framing intersectionality as “categories of identity” because this minimizes structural inequalities (p. 797). Rather, it is the structures that categorize the conditions of life. Black queer mothers, therefore, are situated within these racist, homophobic, and sexist conditions. Furthermore, Black queer families engage in a “disruptive, creative, [and] resistant” process in relation to their respective family of origin that necessitates a critical examination of ways

heteronormative values are upheld in the pursuit of “religious, social, and political access to normativity” (Young, 2016, p. 7). When confronting power, structural intersectionality portrays the “multilayered and routinized forms of domination” (Crenshaw 1991, p. 1245). Given this structural layout, the next tenant, political intersectionality, is inextricably linked to structural intersectionality.

Second, *political intersectionality* “highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas” (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1251-1252). Specifically, Black women are confronted with racialized and gendered concerns that Black men and White women seldom confront (Crenshaw, 1991). In essence, political intersectionality is distinct from structural intersectionality in the way the former reflects a “dual concern resisting the systemic forces that significantly shape the differential life chances of intersectionality’s subjects and for reshaping modes of resistance beyond allegedly universal, single-axis approaches” (Cho et al., 2013, p. 800). Meaning, political intersectionality is the bridge between Black feminism and praxis. Political intersectionality applies the insights of structural intersectionality by suggesting antiracist and feminist movements reproduce the subordination of Black women by failing to include them (Crenshaw, 1991). This negligence poses a life-threatening political dilemma for Black women. Specifically, within Black queer families, political intersectionality helps to explain how dominant social ideas of parenting and identity center on the misguided idea that heterosexual parents offer a “proper” way of protecting and caring for children (Young, 2016, p. xv). The pervasiveness of heteronormative beliefs coupled with patriarchal assumptions of parenthood suggests that the connections between motherwork, intersecting identities, and political resistance influence the

ways in which Black queer mothers' network to create a sense of belonging, and where they find it.

Third, *representational intersectionality* refers to the “cultural construction” of Black women (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). Cultural constructions of Black women are derived from popular culture, particularly how representations of Black women can “elide the particular location of women of color” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). Representational intersectionality considers how these cultural constructions inform political agendas that oppress Black women (Few-Demo, 2014). These representations, often based on cultural stereotypes, have shaped the objectification of Black women in society along the axes of race, gender, and class (Carastathis, 2014; Crenshaw, 1991). Furthermore, representational intersectionality allows us to recognize the subtle or explicit ways in which oppressive forces aid in the construction of Black queer family stereotypes, based on normative categories of identity (Young, 2016). In this sense, normative ideas of identity represent cultural expectations of behavior in order to gain acceptance by society (Russell, 2018). Black queer families, simply through existing and engaging in parenting, invest in the disruption of societal norms by challenging heteropatriarchal depictions of the family (Bassichis & Spade, 2014).

Intersectionality emphasizes how power is structurally embedded into institutions, dominant beliefs, and social practices (e.g., structural intersectionality) (Cooke & Few-Demo, 2021). The use of Crenshaw's (1991) theorization of intersectionality matters for Black queer motherhood because a core belief in Black feminism is the notion that identity is nuanced, meaning Black queer mothers are socially located in such a way that determines their privilege and oppression in society (e.g., political intersectionality). What makes the tenets of intersectionality salient to this study is the prioritization of Black women and their right to exist,

despite the heteropatriarchal scripts placed upon Black queer mothers (e.g., representational intersectionality) (Lomax, 2018). The proposed study will help to explain how Black queer mothers are redefining these predetermined scripts of motherhood, sexuality, and race as they engage in motherwork, build networks of support, and access community resources.

### **Motherwork: Expanding into Black Queer Motherhood**

The Combahee River Collective (1977/1995) argued that Black women have been the *only* ones to consistently care about the needs of other Black women. Collins (2000) supported this argument by claiming that Black women, namely mothers, are socially situated to have a vantage point that forces them to consider not only themselves and their children but the political needs of their whole community. As the statement suggests, “our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work” (Combahee River Collective, 1977/1995, p. 4). Collins (2000) named this labor of love ‘motherwork’ to describe the collective experience of Black motherhood. Motherwork is designed to instill resilient Black identities within a supportive community context that can withstand the domination of White supremacy (Collins, 2000).

To better understand motherwork, I will first provide the rationale underlying this interpretation of Black motherhood. Collins (1994) argues that the “archetypical White, middle-class nuclear family” separates family life into two categories: the “male” or public sphere where economic opportunities are sought and the “female” or private sphere where nurturing and mothering responsibilities are carried out (p. 46). This heteronormative divide assumes a male dominated experience of labor outside of the home. In contrast, women are expected to provide maternal labor within the home, knowing she can rely on her male partner’s income for family survival. This reliance is historically viewed as a controlling, heteronormative, and sexist

environment where seemingly heterosexual women *must* depend on the “superior earning power” of their male partners (Collins, 1994, p. 46). Collins (1994) asserts how socioeconomic (dis)advantages support or challenge this categorization of family life. Across time, Black women have had a social positioning that challenges a private or public dichotomy because of racial domination and labor exploitation. Therefore, the private (e.g., family) and public (e.g., work) often overlap for Black women. This study considers the *blurred* expectations of Black queer mothers by exploring the individual experience of navigating survival, power, and identity while living within a society that works tirelessly to negate their lived experience through the means of racism, homophobia, and sexism.

Motherwork includes three components: survival, power, and identity (Collins, 1994, 2000). Engaging in motherwork helps to *queer* family life because of the quest for autonomy, collective survival over individual gains, and the challenging of traditional notions of private versus public. The labor Black women engage in is seen as work benefiting the family as a whole rather than work that solely supports men and their corresponding desires. Thus, motherwork is framed in this study as a responsibility carried out on an individual level to ensure family *survival*, to make decisions that privilege one’s autonomy or *power* as a mother, and the ability to withstand oppressive discourses on sexuality and race that denigrate the *identity* of queer people of color. Furthermore, this study explores how motherwork among Black mothers is experienced within a queer context by including sexuality as a salient identity. Even though one research question explicitly addresses queer motherwork [RQ1], the remaining questions that explore the experience of informal support [RQ2] and accessing community resources [RQ3] were included to reflect the blurring of private and public life.

Motherwork also considers the utility of dominant discourses of Black motherhood (Fearon, 2020). Historically, Black women have been relegated to roles in society that force them to serve others, even at the expense of their own health (hooks, 2000; Palmer, 1989). For instance, slavery in the United States and Caribbean islands forced many Black women into roles of extreme labor by working in fields and providing domestic labor in the homes of plantation owners (Negron, 2018; Young, 2016). By analyzing the residual impact of slavery on Black women's labor, one can understand how stereotypes such as "the mammy" are perpetuated in society's interpretation of Black womanhood. The mammy is one of many racist images that depict Black mothers as maternal and nurturing, catering to the needs and demands of White families, and that they are complicit to their own subordination (Collins 2000; Grindstaff, 2022). Given this historical context, Black feminist scholars who study parenthood view Black motherhood then an act of resistance, while also being a site of empowerment internally (e.g., within the self) and externally (e.g., within the family unit) (Massaquoi, 2007; O'Reilly, 2004).

Within the past decade, family science scholars have further intellectualized a Black feminist-informed experience of Black motherhood (Few-Demo & Allen, 2020). Dow's (2016) use of *integrative mothering* added to the critique of White feminists' conceptualization of motherhood and mothering by challenging hegemonic ideologies of motherhood (e.g., assumptions of childcare and career). For instance, Dow's (2016) study found that most Black mothers viewed working as the default despite reported challenges with childcare and maintaining a career. For some Black mothers, financial security and self-reliance are inextricably linked due to the messages they received from their mothers and communities growing up (Dow, 2016). The prioritization of multiple dimensions (e.g., childcare, career, community, and independence) in integrative mothering parallels the intracategorical

interpretation that intersectionality lends itself to; however, for the purpose of this study, Collins' (2000) concept of motherwork was extended to include Black queer motherhood. The next section will expand on the experiences of Black queer motherhood by critically examining the current literature.

### **Themes in the Experiences of Black Queer Motherhood**

My sense of the literature was informed by Black feminist, intersectionality, and LGBTQ+ family scholarship across multiple social science fields published in the period 1977 through 2020. The result of this review included more than 50 publications. The following themes emerged that help to address my proposed research questions: (a) pathways into motherhood, (b) role negotiation and identity development, (c) plurisexuality, and (d) community support. These themes will be discussed as they relate to Black queer mothers' experiences of motherwork as well as limitations and future directions in exploring motherwork. After these themes are discussed, each theme will be critiqued to connect to the purpose of the proposed study. Black feminism will be used to critically examine these themes and areas of this research that are underexplored.

### **Multiple Pathways of Entering Motherhood**

In general, the statistics on raising and having children are higher for LGBTQ+ racial minorities (Brainer et al., 2020; Gates, 2013, 2015). Roughly a third of 84,000 Black LGBTQ+ couples are raising children (Lettman-Hicks, 2014). The transition into motherhood for Black LGBTQ+ cis women can take on many forms. This section will cover three common pathways of entering motherhood among plurisexual cis women: having a biological child with a previous or current partner who identifies as a cis man, fostering or adopting a child, and co-parenting a partner's child from a previous relationship (Cahill et al., 2003; Moore & Brainer, 2013).

Previous research suggests that desires for parenthood among plurisexual people are similar, if not stronger, for this group compared to heterosexual, gay, or lesbian counterparts (Paiva et al., 2003; Wells, 2011). Regarding different pathways to motherhood, Gates' (2015) analysis of the annual American Community Survey (ACS) revealed that most children (67%) living in same-gender households (married or unmarried) were conceived in a previous, heterosexual relationship. In the context of bisexual motherhood, bisexual cis women may find it "easier" to have a biological child with a partner who is a cis man because "the social environment [is] set up for that" (Delvoye & Tasker, 2016, p. 15). The difficulty with entering motherhood outside of a heterosexual partnership could be due to complex social factors such as disparities in healthcare access for LGBTQ+ individuals and anticipated or perceived discrimination from providers (Stern et al., 2002). Therefore, the pathway to motherhood may be more attainable among cis women who are able to have children biologically with partners who are cis men. Additionally, the possibility of having an unintended pregnancy is more likely among plurisexual cis women who have sexual intercourse with cis men (Everett et al., 2017). However, when the process of having biological children is unattainable, either due to infertility or partner gender, bisexual women may decide to foster or adopt (Bowling et al., 2019).

Cahill and colleagues (2003) found that Black LGBTQ+ people adopt at higher rates than their Black heterosexual counterparts. Adoption in this sense can be more informal than formal, such as raising children of relatives or neighbors (Hill, 1977; Moore, 2011). Formal pathways to fostering or adoption can be difficult to achieve because of foster care or adoption agencies upholding heteronormative expectations of gender and parenting (Ross & Dobinson, 2013). For example, Moore and Brainer (2013) identified specific barriers to Black queer women fostering or adopting, such as "prospective parents [not being] permitted to foster or adopt because of their

sexual minority status, the outcome for many Black children is continued upheaval and non-placement” (p. 135). Additionally, fostering or adopting can be relatively expensive financially, which is especially important to factor in considering the disproportionate rates of poverty experienced by marginalized communities (Family Equality, 2019). However, for plurisexual women, being able to foster or adopt children may promote a sense of solidarity with other lesbian or gay individuals and couples who have fostered or adopted because of their similar pathways to parenthood (Bowling et al., 2019).

Lastly, an understudied pathway to motherhood among plurisexual women is co-parenting a partner’s child from a previous relationship. This pathway will be referred to as being a ‘stepmom’ or ‘stepmother’ and can include married or unmarried couples (Papernow, 2018). More than four-in-ten American adults have at least one stepparent, a step or half sibling, or a stepchild (Pew Research Center, 2011). Black individuals are more likely to have step relatives compared to other racial groups (Pew Research Center, 2011). According to research using primarily lesbian and gay samples, queer stepfamilies are increasing and becoming more visible in the family science literature (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Rickards & McLeod, 2016; Tasker, 2013). Previous literature also suggests there are potential challenges associated with developing a cohesive stepfamily. For example, stepfamily dynamics can depend on the biological parent’s gatekeeping (e.g., stepmom’s emotional and physical access to stepchild) and the stepparent’s level of attachment-related anxiety or avoidance (Ganong et al., 2020). How stepmothers perceive their role in the raising of their stepchild may further impact the stepparent-stepchild involvement stepmothers have (Ganong et al., 2002). Given the increasing rate at which Black and LGBTQ+ couples form stepfamilies, these findings indicate more research is needed to

better understand the experiences of Black plurisexual stepmoms, including how they become a stepmom.

The lack of intersectional understanding of diverse family structures has many implications for family science and policy (Dang & Frazer, 2004), as researchers consider the unmet needs of this population and how scholar-practitioners can assist in managing the additional stress that comes with parenting as a Black queer woman in a heteronormative, White supremacist society. This body of research highlights potential paths to motherhood for Black queer women using previous research on LGBTQ+ family formation. One's desire to become a parent, coupled with unique social factors, can further shape one's trajectory to motherhood (Manley & Ross, 2020; Riskind & Tornello, 2017). For LGBTQ+, a variety of family planning strategies are used (Manley & Ross, 2020); specifically, bisexual mothers are more likely to become parents by having biological children (Brewster et al., 2014; Power et al., 2012). Given that many plurisexual-identified mothers birth children in a different-gender partnership (Bowling et al., 2019), this has implications for how Black queer mothers then understand their identity in the context of negotiating parenting roles and responsibilities.

### **Parenting Roles and Identity Development**

Identity within a parenting context shapes how parenting roles and responsibilities are managed (Johnson & Staples, 2005; LaSala, 2002). In considering parental decision-making, it is also important to consider the influence of partner gender. Bi+ women are more likely than other sexual minorities to have biological children with partners who are cis men (Gates, 2013). While the parental decision-making literature on bisexual women in different gender relationships is limited, the literature on parenting within a heterosexual relationship is well-documented (Bornstein, 2013). Given how children of bisexual mothers are inherently socialized within a

queer context, bisexual peoples' parenting decision-making may be supported by egalitarian values and knowledge of expansive gender identities and sexualities (Bowling et al., 2017). Specifically, the interrogation of one's own gender identity and implicit gendered beliefs inform how children are socialized within the family (Mesman & Groeneveld, 2017). For example, Flanders and colleagues (2019) found that bisexual mothers in relationships with cis men tended to provide both stereotypically gendered and gender non-conforming opportunities for their children. However, findings from this study also demonstrate a hesitation among bi+ mothers to fully embrace gender nonconformity in their child rearing practices for fear of their children being stigmatized in social settings. One's own internalized heteronormativity and fear of being further marginalized may unexpectedly influence decision-making. Black queer mothers raising children must contend with the reality of parenting within a heteronormative, anti-Black society.

According to Moore (2008), the parenting responsibilities among Black mothers in relationships with other cis women are heavily tied to one's identity as a biological mother to the children in the home, meaning that the mothers of biological children continue raising their children as if they were single mothers (e.g., deciding when and how to extend authority over their children to their partner). This finding from Moore's (2008) study maps onto Collins' (2000) discussion of motherwork as an everyday, lived experience of mothering activities that are inextricably linked to the survival of Black families. Specifically, the perceived power they have to carry out parenting decisions that honor their values and autonomy as Black queer mothers. Moore (2008, 2011) has been a leader in Black lesbian family research through her explicit investigation into lesbian relationships, identity, and motherhood among Black women. Of specific interest is the negotiation of parenting roles in Black lesbian households and how this relates to one's identity as a mother. In a sample of 32 Black lesbian blended families, the

findings revealed that the role of primary caregiver was relegated to the biological mother (Moore, 2008). In these cohabitating families, biological mothers reported having more motivation to make sure their children were adequately cared for compared to the motivation of their partner. Additionally, Moore (2008) asked participants to consider the meaning of household labor and whether one's responsibilities in the home were related to other areas of family organization. In Black lesbian families where one partner is the biological parent, chore responsibilities were viewed as a marker of control in the relationship. Additionally, in Black lesbian families with children present, both partners were equally involved in the role of decision-making regarding the allocation of funds, but the biological mother was more likely to determine the minute details in terms of daily spending (Moore, 2008). In short, Black lesbians experienced a greater return on their efforts (i.e., greater authority in decision making in other parts of their life, such as finances) when they took on more household responsibilities.

Suter and colleagues (2008) interviewed an overwhelmingly White sample of lesbian women (White,  $n = 30$ ; Black,  $n = 2$ ) in their study using a symbolic interaction framework to better understand how families use symbols and rituals to negotiate interactions with their networks of support. Suter and colleagues (2008) outline four key findings: (a) communication is central to negotiating family rituals and roles, (b) identity development is an interpersonal process, (c) family identity development is structural in nature, and (d) awareness of roles "illustrates the constitutive nature of roles, such as joint motherhood" (p. 40). These findings suggest that roles and rituals, or methods of carrying out one's identity as a parent, matter to queer mothers. Similarly, Glass (2014) was interested to discover how Black women ( $n = 22$ ) "build family identities as lesbian couples" (p. 86). Glass identified three categories that highlighted rituals as they pertained to: (a) family of origin and extended family, (b) the couple

as a unit, and (c) couples' wedding or related ceremonies. Participants' experience of these rituals affirmed different aspects of their identity by connecting a ritual to an explicit part of their identity that needed support. Participants were able to create meaning in their roles, depending on the context, despite their inability to fully be themselves. The role negotiation and identity development literature covered in this section highlights the increased attention to LGBTQ+, specifically Black, couples and families; however, there seems to be little research that exists on Black *queer* samples who characterize themselves as having the potential to be attracted, romantically and emotionally, to more than one gender.

### ***Plurisexuality, Race, and Motherhood***

Within the literature on LGBTQ+ parenting, there has not been much investigation into Black queer motherhood and how the intersection of being Black, plurisexual, and a mother influences one's lived experience. Therefore, it is important to explore how a plurisexual identity intersects with race and gender identity within the context of motherhood. Plurisexuality is an umbrella term that refers to the attraction to, or engagement in relationships with, more than one gender (Mitchell et al., 2015). Examples of plurisexual identities include, but are not limited to, bisexual, pansexual, queer, omnisexual, and other labels indicating fluidity in attraction. These identities directly challenge dominant, monosexual categories of sexuality (e.g., heterosexual, lesbian, or gay). Given that individuals experience their multiple identities simultaneously, Black queer women's experiences of discrimination cannot be viewed solely on the basis of race, gender, or sexuality alone.

Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) helps to contextualize how dominant discourses of sexuality, race, and gender work in tandem to oppress Black women who are plurisexual. Plurisexual identities, especially bisexuality, continue to be stigmatized in society

because of the characteristics people attribute to bisexuality – promiscuous, a threat to sexual safety, performative, an in-between sexual label until someone decides to openly identify as gay or lesbian (Israel & Mohr, 2004). These negative attitudes toward plurisexual identities are referred to as biphobia (Mulick & Wright, 2002; Yost & Thomas, 2012). Crenshaw's (1991) concept of *representational intersectionality* further demonstrates society's misrepresentation of Black queer women through the means of images and tropes that reinforce dominant ideologies supporting racism and biphobia. Specifically, stereotypes about Black women's sexuality harms Black queer women by supposing that their sexuality is unacceptable or "taboo" (Collins, 2000, p. 124). In addition to harmful identity-based discourses, the transition to parenthood can also threaten the salience of one's plurisexual identity (Goldberg et al., 2018a). The combination of biphobia and bierasure often lead to the invisibility of bisexual motherhood due to the misinterpretation of sexuality within the context of parenthood. For example, the tendency to feel disconnected from one's bisexuality in parenthood may have to do with partner gender and mixed orientation relationships (Goldberg et al., 2018a, 2018b).

Engaging in committed relationships with cis male-partners can create unique challenges for plurisexual cis women as they seek to oppose heteronormativity either internally (e.g., maintaining a queer identity) or externally (e.g., sharing aspects of their queerness with others) (Hartman-Linck, 2014). The emphasis on male-identifying partners is intentional given the increased rate of bisexual cis women entering parenthood with cis male partners compared to other sexual minorities (Gates, 2013). However, the dichotomous organization of sexuality based on partner gender compromises the saliency of plurisexuality among bisexual mothers due to the invisibility of bisexuality as mothers raising children with cis men (Hartman, 2013; Tasker & Delvoe, 2015). For some bisexual mothers, their plurisexual identity was "put on hold when

they were intensively caring for their young children” (Tasker & Delvoye, 2015, p. 133). The focus on being a mother first and a member of the bisexual community second can further de-emphasize queerness, especially for mothers of young children (Bowling et al., 2018; Tasker & Delvoye, 2015). This finding appears to be consistent with research on plurisexual cis women in relationships with cis women. Specifically, Goldberg and colleagues (2018b) reported that some bisexual women felt “pressure to remain silent” about their plurisexual identity in their relationships with monosexual women (p. 206). Goldberg and colleagues (2018b) stated how adoptive mothers in same-gender relationships, regardless of partner’s sexual orientation, reported higher levels of conflict and relationship maintenance. Considering bisexual motherhood, the findings combined reveal the inability to embrace a plurisexual identity within the confines of motherhood and the potential for discord in partnerships with different genders and partners who identify with a monosexual identity.

The findings mentioned were based on research studies encompassing mostly White samples; thus, the absence of racial diversity in the design and reporting of studies on bisexual parenthood leaves significant gaps in the literature. In connecting to *structural intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1991), Black queer mothers in committed relationships may have a qualitatively different experience of motherhood compared to other Black heterosexual mothers and White plurisexual mothers because they must resist heteronormativity, bierasure, and the impact of racism simultaneously. Despite navigating the impact of identity-based societal messaging, bisexual women describe positive feelings associated with their plurisexual identity (Delvoye & Tasker, 2016). Black queer mothers perceiving their sexuality in a positive light connects to the motherwork concept of *identity* in a way that has yet to be explored in the literature (Collins, 1994, 2000). Given children of bisexual mothers are part of a queer family, more research is

needed to understand how Black queer mothers instill a positive self-perception in their children. Additionally, how Black queer mothers engage in the motherwork concept of *survival* to maintain family safety has yet to be explored empirically (Collins, 1994, 2000). Lastly, albeit important, the *power* mothers have to privilege their autonomy and right to exist as part of a Black queer family highlights the need for greater plurisexual acceptance within society and within committed relationships. The oppressive social placement of Black queer cis women, supported by discourses of racism, biphobia, and sexism, influences how they engage in communities that have historically tried to silence their experience (Collins, 2000; Radis & Nadan, 2020). How Black queer mothers navigate spaces intended to provide a sense of community may depend on the type and quality of support they receive.

### **Building Community Capacity**

Given the characterization of Black queer families as possessing multidimensional, complex identities (Moore, 2011; van Eeden-Moorefield, 2018), one would be remiss to assume that ‘Black queerness’ is a siloed phenomenon. Keeping this position in mind, I introduce another major theme found in the existing literature: *building community capacity*. This theme encompasses the difficulty in wanting to have personal agency in developing a queer family, while also maintaining a healthy, close relationship with informal and formal support systems.

### ***Informal Support***

Moore (2011) suggested that the intersection between race, sexuality, and gender creates a degree of “contradiction and ambiguity” as Black queer mothers seek to maintain family ties, while at the same time openly accepting their queer identity as a Black woman in a culture that stigmatizes LGBTQ+ identities (p. 181). Specifically, cultural attitudes of sexuality being inferior to race leads to the fear of being cut-off from one’s source of refuge from racism (Herek

& Capitanio, 1995; Moore, 2011; Pastrana, 2016). For instance, Pastrana (2016) was curious to know how and to what extent family, identity, and other social markers factor into one's level of outness among Black LGBTQ+. Despite experiences of homophobia, Black queer cis women in same-gender relationships are more likely to be out to their families than their single counterparts (Pastrana, 2016). Similarly, Battle et al. (2002) found that the majority (54%) of Black LGBTQ+ people still had positive experiences with their families of origin (p. 45). What is unclear, however, is how Black queer families use this support and under what circumstances one would seek or accept support (Pastrana, 2016).

Furthermore, Cahill et al. (2003) posited that parenthood offers a pathway to Black LGBTQ+ parents fully integrating into White LGBTQ+ communities and Black heterosexual communities. However, fully integrating into these spaces poses dilemmas between one's LGBTQ+ community and their racial community (Crawford et al., 2002; Greene, 2000). This phenomenon is supported by structural and political intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Both structural and political intersectionality consider the unique social location of Black queer women, meaning these women are situated within at least three "subjugated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252). For instance, how Black queer women experience and make meaning of the emotional support they receive from their LGBTQ+ communities will look qualitatively different from how White queer women experience support from the same community. Similarly, family members may not be supportive of Black queer coupling and family formation (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013); therefore, forcing these Black queer mothers to minimize aspects of their identity (e.g., partner and mother) to receive conditional support from family. The distinct interests of each social identity group they belong to, although intersectional, can lead to tension when the wholeness of one's identity is

overlooked by one or more group(s) they belong to (Crenshaw, 1991). This is further illustrated by Black queer family's experience of stereotyping and lack of racial awareness by White LGBTQ+ communities (Hunter & Hickerson, 2003), particularly by White LGBTQ+ scholars in social science. The marginalization of Black queer mothers "prohibits a complete understanding of all possible forms of parenting" (Cahill et al., 2003, p. 86).

So, who *do* Black queer mothers turn to for informal support? Despite the evidence presented above, Glass and Few-Demo (2013) found that some Black lesbian women in romantic relationships received family social support from their mothers and other cis women they were biologically related to, as opposed to the men in their lives. Circumstances such as the incarceration of male family members and a history of divorce help to explain the lack of male-identified family social support (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013). Whether lack of familial social support is due to the stigmatization of one's sexuality or due to the absence of biological family members, Black LGBTQ+ are finding informal support through "chosen and created" kinship, including peers or community leaders (Hailey et al., 2020; Levitt et al., 2015). Several studies have identified the benefits of chosen kinship including, but not limited to, a sense of control and agency over redefining normative definitions of the family (Wong, 2013), increasing a positive view of self (Sadika et al., 2020), and subsequently creating a buffer from the negative experiences of racism (Marcellin, 2012; Tam, 2018).

### ***Formal Support***

Policy changes that affirm one's sexuality, acceptance from religion, and perceived validation from schools, workplaces, and other formal systems of support can all "strengthen LGBTQ-parent families by promoting mental health and a sense of social inclusion" (Oswald et al., 2020, p. 311). Formal systems of support also refer to institutional services, such as one

receiving help from a licensed professional (e.g., therapists, medical doctors, and other health specialists) to work on mental and physical health or utilizing child-related services such as daycare or human resource departments. There is a pervasive stigma in Black communities toward healthcare (Thompson et al., 2004; Ward et al., 2009; Wilkins et al., 2013), arguably stemming from the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments (Rusert, 2009) and other abuses and exploitation of Black communities by medical communities and universities (Schraff et al., 2010). These horrific moments in history have led to an understandable mistrust of healthcare (Terrell & Terrell, 1984). Additionally, the idea that help-seeking brings about a lot of uncertainty for one's future, especially if children are involved (Murry et al., 2011), and can prevent Black families from seeking out formal services. Unfortunately, one's motivation to seek formal support for mental health or deciding to seek support from social services does not always have autonomous underpinnings, since these services are often mandated by the courts when there is criminal justice activity and substance use involved in the family, which seems to disproportionately affect Black families (Bartholet, 2009; Miller et al., 2012).

The work of Radis and Nadan (2020) revealed the experiences of institutional racism and acts of homophobia toward Black queer mothers. Specifically, Radis and Nadan (2020) researched the risk factors that can threaten the well-being of Black queer cis women in same-gender relationships. Heterosexism is one identified risk that can create oppressive experiences when Black queer mothers are interacting with formal systems, such as an employee of an establishment or a religious leader assuming that a partnered mother is heterosexual and in a relationship with a cis man. Additionally, racism intersects with heterosexism and gender in the way that providers perpetuate the "absent Black father" stereotype through their mislabeling of one's family structure (Coles & Green, 2010). These risks highlight the importance of language

and communication in feeling validated within formal systems of support. Similarly, affirmative formal support assumes a stance of ethical curiosity (e.g., refraining from probing for information that one would not ask a heterosexual family) where a person simultaneously emphasizes the relevance of a Black queer mother's racial and sexual identity experiences as it relates to one's experience and motivation for seeking formal support (Butler, 2009).

### **Summary and Rationale**

Collins (2000) introduced a matrix of domination which suggests race, gender, and class are axes of discrimination that address the organization of oppression among Black women. Black queer women experience the simultaneous effects of being a racial, sexual, and gender minority in society (Greene, 1996; hooks, 2000). Thus, the struggle for survival is expanded to include how one's sexuality and gender are racialized. Recognizing that the "personal is political" further necessitates the need to frame this study using Black feminisms (Combahee River Collective, 1977/1995, p. 5). Black queer women face several challenges related to mothering, such as discrimination by members of one's community, for instance, teachers and healthcare providers (Radis & Nadan, 2020). As a result, inequities in access to treatment and perception of acceptance within the community further disrupts the lives of Black queer women. The salience of sexuality in shaping the racialized lives of Black queer mothers speaks to Audre Lorde's poetic words that Black LGBTQ+ women were "never meant to survive" (1978). The proposed study will attempt to honor the lives of Black women by exploring the subjugated knowledge of Black queer mothers. This Black feminist-informed study sought to uncover the distinct ways that Black queer mothers experience motherwork as queer women, navigate and build informal supports, and access community resources.

### CHAPTER III: METHODS

The current study is an exploration into the experience of Black queer mothers' engaging in motherwork, navigating informal support, and accessing community resources. This chapter details how two analytic methods, reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2022) and photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), guided by Black feminism, informed the methodological process. Through this process, I examined the following research questions:

1. How do Black queer mothers describe the experience of queer motherwork?
2. How do Black queer mothers build and navigate networks of informal support?
3. How do Black queer mothers access community resources?

#### **Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Photovoice**

A constructivist, feminist paradigm assumes that one's interpretation of reality is subjective and tied closely to personal experiences, culture, and historical context (e.g., an individual's relationship to power and interaction with others) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, researcher reflexivity is an important element in my approach to thematic analysis. For the purposes of this study, a reflexive approach to thematic analysis aims to capture and explore the perspectives and understandings of Black queer mothers' lived experience without minimizing the researcher's subjectivity in shaping analytic interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The decision to specifically use RTA was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2019) recommendation to use *reflexive* thematic analysis over other existing variations of thematic analysis because thematic analysis has evolved since its inception to be more complex yet organized (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Analysis in this study focused on theoretically informed meaning around the topic under investigation by considering the elements of motherwork (e.g., identity, survival, and power) and tenets of intersectionality (e.g., structural, representational, and political

intersectionality). Theoretically supported analysis helped to inform the development and interpretation of patterns of meaning across the qualitative data set from the semi-structured interview and follow-up photovoice interview (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The additional use of photovoice, a visual research method, complements thematic analysis in this research study because the researcher, participants, participant-generated photographs, context in which photographed images took place, and audience all play an important role in intentionally generating themes that inform, and is informed by, researchers' interpretations and participants' lived experiences (Coemans et al., 2017; Drew & Guillemin, 2014). Furthermore, participant-generated photographs have the power to shape policy, which can inspire policymakers to revise or implement programs to meet the needs of their community (Hergenrather et al., 2009).

Given that one's understanding of motherhood is largely dependent on their interpretation of the experience, a combined RTA and photovoice approach is appropriate for the topic under investigation, especially since this study is informed by Black feminisms. For instance, my research questions are rooted in Collins' (2000) three assumptions of motherwork: (a) physical survival, (b) power, and (c) identity. RTA and photovoice informed researchers' and participants' understanding of what it is like to be a Black queer mother navigating internal and interpersonal dynamics. Specifically, photovoice was used to encourage participants to collect visual data (e.g., photographs) to illuminate how one's knowledge and positionality actively contributes to the data collection and analysis of photographs (MacDonald, 2012). The application of collaborative techniques in this research study is of utmost importance to me because Black queer cis women offer a different perspective on parenthood, in general, compared to people of different genders who identify as White, heterosexual, gay, and/or

lesbian. By sharing *and* capturing their experiences, Black queer mothers were able to share a profound and multifaceted perspective of why their experience of motherhood matters.

### **Recruitment and Sampling**

#### **Recruitment**

For this study, I used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit 10 participants. Informed by Moore's (2011) research with Black lesbian mothers, flyers were shared in spaces that embrace Black queer parenthood and the broader LGBTQ+ parenting community. Flyers were posted in two local Black neighborhoods, as well as two local LGBTQ+ community centers and one mental health counseling office. Thirteen PFLAG regional directors across the United States were also contacted and encouraged to share the recruitment flyer. Consistent with Black Feminist Thought, I remained cautious of unintentionally excluding potential participants who may not have access to in-personal and virtual spaces because of the subordination one experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and class (Evans-Winters, 2019). Thus, phase two of recruitment introduced a new means of recruiting through the form of snowball sampling. New insights regarding the invisibility of and seemingly lack of proximity to Black queer mothers gave way to participants sharing the recruitment flyer with their networks of support. It must be noted that a portion of participants ( $n = 4$ ) expressed motivation to share the flyer with potentially eligible participants.

As part of gaining interest, it was important as a researcher to be transparent and intentional about how the study information was shared. For example, when I shared the recruitment flyer online, I would provide a summary of the study (see Appendix B) as well as a brief personalized statement of who I am (e.g., my racial identity and sexual orientation). Trust is required on behalf of participants to share personal details with researchers (Huang & Coker, 2007). Despite my overlapping membership in Black and queer groups, I still acknowledge my

vicinity to a predominately White research establishment. Consistent with peer-reviewed suggestions, I was cognizant of insider-outsider tensions throughout recruitment and rapport building with eligible participants. I tended to this experience by continuously recognizing my proximity to privilege which served as a mental reminder not to pathologize or stereotype participants. This process of critical reflection was also undertaken when familiarizing myself with the data, memo writing, and consulting with my advisor as a way to reflexively consider bias in recruitment, analysis, and reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Additionally, when asked by participants, I explained my motivation for pursuing this research and emphasized the importance of Black queer mothers being represented in LGBTQ+ parenting research. Although I cannot confidently say I fully understand every facet of their lived experiences, I still felt that I was able to convey an understanding of marginalization on the basis of sexuality, race, and my own socialization as a person assigned female at birth than would have been possible for a researcher who has not experienced this specific layered existence. This nuanced perspective helped to build trust and inescapably aided in participant retention between the first and second interview (Ochieng, 2010).

### **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

The study had six inclusion criteria for the initial sampling phase. First, participants had to identify as Black or African American. Though there are cultural similarities among racial and ethnic minorities, Latinx mothers who did not also identify as Black or African American were excluded because they have unique experiences of discrimination to contend with compared to mothers who are not in that ethnic group (Magariño et al., 2021). Second, participants had to be between 21 and 50 years old. Mothers under the age of 21 were excluded because the average age of mothers at first birth among Black cis women is between age 20 and age 24 (Lloyd et al.,

2021). Given this study is about motherhood, it was decided to not include participants over the age of 50 due to previous research indicating how most individuals aged 50 and older transition to grandparenthood (Leopold & Skopek, 2015; Margolis, 2016). Third, participants had to identify with a plurisexual sexual orientation (e.g., experience attraction to more than one gender). The reason to exclude mothers who identify with a monosexual identity such as lesbian is because being attracted to more than one gender makes sexual orientation in the context of parenting unique (Bartelt et al., 2017; Goldberg, 2023). This includes differences in navigating informal supports (Maliepaard, 2017; Manley et al., 2018; Morris et al., 2002; Roberts et al., 2015) and accessing resources and engaging with professionals (Durso & Meyer, 2013; Eady et al., 2011; MacKay et al., 2017). Fourth, participants had to identify as a cisgender woman. The reason for excluding mothers who identify as transgender is because the study would need to address the transition process among Black individuals assuming a gender expression that aligns with one's gender identity (Trans Student Educational Resources, n.d.). Additionally, the study would need to address the intersection of expansive gender identities, sexuality, and motherhood (Radis & Nadan, 2020). Fifth, participants needed to be raising a child under eighteen years old. To stay within the scope of the study it was decided to not include participants who had children over the age of 18 because relationship dynamics may shift when a child becomes a legal adult (Johnson, n.d.).

Lastly, participants in the initial sampling phase needed to report being in a committed relationship with another cisgender woman for at least a year. The specific timeline of the committed relationship was generated to account for the time it takes for partners and children to get to know one another (Raising Children Network, 2021). Additionally, partner gender was decided to counter the focus of previous research on bisexual cis women in relationships with cis

men (Dyar et al., 2014; Morandini et al., 2018). However, when initial recruitment efforts were executed, few eligible participants were able to complete an interview ( $n = 1$ ). Additionally, it was brought to my attention during this interview that the participant's partner did not identify as a cis woman despite their response on the screening questionnaire noting otherwise. The choice presented to me at the time was whether to include this interview in analysis. This decision, coupled with an initial lack of participant interest in the study over the span of four months, necessitated a critical and reflexive re-imagining of the scope of the study. It was important to reflect on the limitations of the partner gender inclusion criterion in attempting to answer the research questions, and more importantly, to consider how this limitation could further marginalize Black queer mothers, especially if they did not see themselves reflected in the study. As a result of interrogating my subjectivity as the researcher, consulting with my committee members, and acquiring additional confirmation from Virginia Tech's Institutional Review Board (IRB), the first decision I made was to expand partner gender by including participants who were in committed relationships with trans women and non-binary partners which allowed for the first eligible participant to remain in the study. Unfortunately, recruitment efforts continued to produce low interest from eligible participants over the course of two additional months (totaling six months of recruitment). This led to the second eligibility revision: to remove being in a committed relationship as an inclusion criterion. This also changed the scope of this study by including Black queer mothers who were not in a committed relationship at the time of the study. This reflexive process of considering why persistent recruitment efforts were not yielding eligible participants gave way to the following questions: "Is it implicitly discriminatory of the bisexual-identifying researcher to limit the participation in this study, which is trying to understand the experience of being a Black queer mother, to (a) the gender of one's partner? And

(b) being in a committed relationship at all?” As a result of engaging in a reflexive critique of my inclusion choices, and consulting with my committee members, the decision was made to remove committed relationship status as an inclusion criterion. A new flyer was distributed to reflect the final eligibility criteria (see Appendix C).

Furthermore, there were language and geographical restrictions such as participants had to be English speaking American citizens currently residing in the United States. Participants were expected to complete two individual interviews online and have access to a smartphone with a functioning camera or other device that allows for digital photography. Participants were required to understand the nature of the study by completing the informed consent, with electronic signature, via Question Pro (an online survey software used by Virginia Tech researchers). The aforementioned reasons for exclusion criteria are to stay within the scope of the topic under study.

### **Sample Size**

Braun and Clarke (2022) recommend researchers provide a sample size range when initially designing the study, with the final sample size determined during data collection and after data familiarization and analysis begins. Thus, the initial sample size aimed for up to 20 participants. The final sample size was determined by following additional guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2022). This study had a specific population focus with a narrower aim which produced “thicker” or richer data from the semi-structured interviews from 10 participants and supported by follow-up photovoice interviews from 8 participants, thus requiring a smaller data set. In consultation with my advisor, I determined that the sample size of  $n = 10$  participants (with 8 of 10 participants completing the photovoice) was sufficient for answering the research questions.

## Data Collection

The aforementioned research questions were answered using a combined qualitative and participatory action research design. With this methodology, I first obtained qualitative data using a semi-structured interview guide. Then, I used photovoice to actively engage participants in the research process as co-collaborators where they were given instructions to share photographs that reflected their subjective experience. Finally, an additional semi-structured interview (see Appendix H) was conducted to further incorporate participants' "expertise and knowledge" in their interpretation of the images provided (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 369). In this way, results from photovoice help to contextualize the sample by incorporating imagery of their experience and deepening my interpretation of the data produced in the first interview.

Potential participants who were interested in the study completed an online eligibility questionnaire on QuestionPro, and 10 participants met eligibility criteria (see Appendix D). The screening questionnaire was determined by the inclusion and exclusion criteria previously mentioned. Based on the final criteria, ineligible participants were not eligible due to their geographic location in another country or identifying as transgender or non-binary. Participants who were eligible were directed to a page with instructions to enter their contact information (e.g., name and email) in order to contact them for an interview. To combat fraudulent survey responses in the questionnaire, I used Captcha capabilities. I contacted eligible participants within a week after their responses were recorded to schedule their first interview.

Participants learned about the study from a recruitment flyer, which provided information about the study, IRB number, and my contact information (see Appendix C). Participants contacted me directly via email to express their interest. These individuals were provided with a link to screening questions to ensure their eligibility (see Appendix D). Before beginning the

questionnaire, participants reviewed and signed the informed consent (see Appendix A) which included the study's purpose, participant expectations, potential benefits and risks of participating, and contact information for myself and my advisor. Participants who were not eligible to participate were directed to a page thanking them for their time and responses. All participants who participated in the entire study consented to completing the demographic survey, two interviews, and signed a photo release waiver so their images could be part of presentations and publications where the findings are disseminated. Two participants were unable to complete the photovoice portion of the study due to time constraints. The participants who only completed the first interview ( $n = 2$ ) were not given the photo release waiver to sign.

### **Qualitative Data Collection Procedure**

Once the eligibility questionnaire was complete, eligible participants were contacted using the email they provided to schedule their first interview. The semi-structured interview was held and audio recorded over Zoom. Prior to starting the recording, participants were given an additional overview of the study and then informed when the recording began. Interviews lasted between 57 and 99 minutes ( $M_{time} = 79.63$ ). Participants were compensated with a \$25 digital gift card at the end of the interview. A digital gift card was sent to the email provided by the participant. As the eligibility criteria evolved, so did the interview guide to reflect the changes (see Appendix G). For example, the questions that asked about being in a two woman-headed home and making parenting decisions with one's partner were reworded in the final interview guide to not allude to being in a relationship (e.g., "How are decisions about raising a child made? Who, if anyone, influences how parenting decisions are made? What, if anything, could help you make parenting decisions?"). Despite the change in wording, the responses between the first participant and the remaining nine participants were consistent given that participants who

were coupled mentioned the varying ways their partners influenced parenting decisions. Participants who were not in a committed relationship at the time of the interview mentioned other influences (e.g., family members or friends), which was similar to the first participant's responses when asked about informal support.

Similarly, questions that reflected a time when participants disagreed with their partner on a parenting decision were reworded to ask about anytime when participants disagreed with parenting feedback (e.g., "Tell me about a time when you received parenting feedback that you disagreed with. Who provided the feedback? What was that experience like for you? What did you decide to do?"). Again, responses from the remaining nine participants were consistent with the responses from the first participant given both interview guides generated replies that mentioned one's partner (if a participant was in a committed relationship) and/or family, friends, or acquaintances, regardless of committed relationship status. The final interview guide helped provide more nuanced perspectives of motherwork because the section that included the two revised questions mapped directly onto the research questions.

### **Participatory Data Collection Procedure**

At the end of the first interview, participants were invited to participate in a photovoice submission for additional compensation of \$25 in the form of a digital gift card. This part of the study entailed (a) approximately five minutes of training, (b) gaining additional consent to participate and to have photographs used in publications and educational presentations, (c) submitting two photos based on prompts provided, and (d) partaking in a follow-up interview to discuss participant-selected photos. Interviews lasted between 29 and 47 minutes ( $M_{time} = 38.32$ ).

Previous studies using photovoice incorporated an initial meeting between the researcher and participants, where participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and provided with

training on how to take photos (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wendel et al., 2019). For participants interested in submitting photos, the introductory photovoice meeting took place directly after the first interview. Participants were also emailed photovoice submission instructions afterward. Participants were first briefed on the purpose of using photovoice in this study (e.g., to aid in answering the research questions, to have the participants' interpretation help inform the visual data analysis, and to shape policy centering on LGBTQ+ family issues through the dissemination of the findings with community stakeholders). The training on how to take a photo with one's cellular device was brief given participants' explicit familiarity with the technique. Guided by Black feminism, it was imperative that participants were made aware of their responsibilities as a participant, including mindfulness of the people, places, or things that they photograph, and how they are represented (Crenshaw, 1991), to prevent harm to the individuals and communities depicted in their photos (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Additional precaution was taken under the guidance of Virginia Tech's IRB and my advisor. For example, images that included faces of individuals were deidentified by using a black box across the eyes, nose, and mouth. Unsurprisingly, previous research suggests that the larger the facial coverage, the less recognizable the face is (Clover, 2010). Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001) recommend that the training also center issues of power, ethics, and safety by ensuring that consent is obtained from participants before issuing instructions for the photovoice submission. However, due to participants' interest in knowing more about the photovoice process, and my desire to be transparent as a researcher, the consent form requesting written consent was shared with participants in the follow-up email with photovoice submission instructions. Participants were asked to submit a photo for each of the following prompts:

A. What does motherhood look like to you?

B. What does community mean to you as a Black queer mother?

To minimize any lack of clarity regarding this part of the study, interested participants were continuously encouraged to ask questions about the mechanics of taking photographs and to ask questions that get at the purpose of the photovoice component. If participants were to have questions about what they should photograph, I planned to instruct them back to the photovoice submission instructions. The goal was to remain as consistent as possible in the instructions given to each participant. Notably, one participant emailed me after the introductory meeting to ask if they should provide image captions or descriptions; however, none of the participants contacted me with questions regarding what to capture. The aforementioned participant was informed that their image descriptions would be discussed in the second interview. Prior to concluding the introductory meeting, the follow-up photovoice interview was scheduled. The second interview was scheduled 1 to 6 weeks after the first interview. On average, photovoice interviews took place 2.5 weeks after.

Participants were encouraged to continue developing their photography skills through an iterative process of “doing and discussing” as they begin capturing photos after the initial meeting and if a photography skill-based question were to arise before our follow-up interview (Catalini & Minkler, 2010, p. 441). Next, participants were asked to share their photographs with me via email within 24-hours of their second interview; extended submission timelines were granted to accommodate the realities of the participants (Mitchell, 2018). One participant requested an extension due to unforeseen circumstances. In preparation for the follow-up photovoice interview, I saved images on my personal password-protected laptop. In order to prioritize the participant-driven interpretations of submitted photos, I did not review the images, or draw my own assumptions based on the images, prior to the interview. Similar to the first

interview, I used Zoom to conduct and record interviews. Photovoice interview questions were borrowed from the P.H.O.T.O. mnemonic (see Appendix H), a technique that is commonly used to engage participants in a discussion about their photographs (Hergenrather et al., 2009). Participants were asked to provide all comments about the first photograph before moving to the second photograph.

### **Data Analysis**

A demographic table was created based on participant responses from the eligibility survey and interview responses (see Table 1 in Appendix M for a full table of sample demographics). The background information provides the reader with an understanding of who this analysis is about by providing participant age, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, geographic location, number of children, gender of child(ren), occupation, relationship status (including partner gender if applicable), and the participant rating for agreeing or disagreeing with the motherwork definition provided. After each interview was conducted, Zoom generated a transcript that I cleaned and analyzed. Transcript cleaning and analyzing took place as close as possible to the conclusion of each interview, which proved to be especially important to do between participants' first and second interviews. A critical and reflexive approach to familiarizing myself to the data aided triangulation by allowing me to observe similarities and inconsistencies in responses between participants and across data sets. As the primary coder, the coding of all transcripts ( $n = 18$ ) occurred within MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021). My advisor reviewed the coding periodically throughout the coding process. Analysis consisted of reviewing each transcript, from the qualitative interview and photovoice interview, to track similarities across responses, focusing on areas where content connected and looking for patterns

or themes that address the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Please see Figure 1 in Appendix M for my detailed analytic process.

### **Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

Using a reflexive approach to thematic analysis allows the researcher to *own* one's perspective throughout the research process, including being held accountable to analytic decisions. Taking responsibility for the research process necessitated a need for “prolonged and deep engagement” with the data to produce “meaningful and useful” analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 39). The RTA commitment to thoroughly engaging with the data aligns with my careful approach to research design and reporting. RTA specifically aligns with Black Feminism because of the focus on how different individuals, or groups, view reality based on their vantage point, or where one stands in society, without completely minimizing my own experience (e.g., subjectivity) as the researcher. Furthermore, considering participants within their social context allows for multiple voices, and vantage points, to be included as a form of resistance to the dominant knowledge and discourse of Black queer mothers. In RTA, this knowledge is not *discovered* in a colonizing sense, but rather knowledge is appropriately pivoted to the center (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022; Collins, 2000). Following Braun and Clarke's (2022) RTA guidelines, I (a) familiarized myself with the data, (b) coded the data, and (c) defined, named, and refined themes prior to weaving together a compelling analytic narrative. Although this is listed in a sequential format, it must be noted that the analytic process was iterative in nature to answer the research questions, and more importantly, to produce a complete understanding of Black queer mothers' lived experience given the parameters and scope of this study.

### ***Data Familiarization***

Prior to coding, I familiarized myself with the transcripts. I reviewed each transcript individually alongside the interview audio recording. I added memos to track my initial interpretations and thoughts of the data. Memo writing relied upon questions such as “What ideas does my interpretation rely on?” and “Why might I be reacting to the data in this way?” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 440). Researcher self-interrogation is strongly encouraged in RTA due to the way initial interpretations often inform the analytic process. This highlights the importance of being reflexive. Additionally, another way of familiarizing myself with the data included a reflection activity recommended by Braun and Clarke (2022). I approached this activity critically by including reflection prompts that mapped directly onto the research questions: [RQ1] What sort of assumptions about Black queer mothers raising children are being made in the transcripts? [RQ2] What ideas about building informal networks and being a Black queer mother are being drawn? [RQ3] What sort of assumptions are made about how community resources are -- or should be -- organized/made more accessible for Black queer mothers? Individual profiles for each participant were generated based on my response to these questions. Familiarizing myself with the data through memo writing and generating participant profiles aided my ability to make meaning of the data in a way that honors the intersection of my identity and motivations for pursuing this study, the data set, and ideas I was noticing in my interview data. Lastly, preliminary insights were shared and further interrogated by my advisor.

### ***Coding***

In RTA, codes form the building blocks of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Codes represent specific and conceptual significance within the data with the aim of answering the research questions. Codes capture a rich analytic idea that could range from semantic (e.g., what

was said by the participant) to latent (e.g., conceptual or abstract meaning inferred by the researcher). Each data item was read closely and carefully, and all relevant quotes that were relevant to the research questions were labeled accordingly (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Initially, multiple codes may have represented one quote because participants provided thick descriptions which led to several meanings drawn from a particular segment of data. As coding continued, I was mindful not to conflate codes with themes by carefully observing the ways certain codes differentiated or overlapped with one another. My subjectivity as the researcher was interrogated throughout the coding process because I critically considered the way my interpretations were shaping the codes.

Insights gleaned from coding also came about inductively (data-driven) and deductively (researcher- or theory-driven) (Braun & Clarke, 2022). For example, I approached the data inductively in the sense that I was paying close attention to the way participants discussed their perspectives in the interviews. Their descriptions of their lived experience formed the basis for coding. Furthermore, a deductive approach considered the influence of my theoretical framework which could not be regarded separately given my interview questions were guided by theory to help understand Collins' (2000) notion of motherwork and how Black mothers navigate informal support and access community resources, all of which were concepts supported by previous research (see Literature Review). Consultation meetings with my advisor also required me to detail my decision-making process and provide clear rationale for coding decisions. This helped to produce richer and more nuanced insights.

Braun and Clarke (2021, 2022) describe RTA as a systematic approach to coding given the potential to generate insightful findings by rigorous means. Analytic insights evolved overtime throughout the research process. Patience was required as I repeatedly revisited the

transcripts and codes, including stepping away from the coded data at times to allow for new spontaneous insights to arise that were then reflected on when I revisited the data. My RTA coding process was rigorous as evidenced by my insightful and systematic engagement with code labels and patterning across the data set. This approach was imperative to producing themes that recognize the “full potential” of the data in pursuit of answering the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 54). Coding concluded when the data from both interviews was fully coded and collated to reflect similarities and variations between codes and across data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

### ***Generating Themes and Subthemes***

Codes were used to support themes, or topics and ideas, that “represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). According to Braun and Clarke (2012, 2022), generating themes and subthemes is an active process, meaning I organized and reorganized multiple codes by collapsing or clustering them together to create a unified and coherent meaning of the data. Preliminary themes were developed through an iterative process of coding, re-reviewing the transcripts, reorganizing codes, and consulting with my advisor every other week as coding occurred. As themes and subthemes developed, I started to determine how they inform the experience of Black queer mothers engaging in motherwork, navigating informal networks of support, and accessing community resources (see Figure 2 in Appendix M for thematic mapping process). When I noticed that certain codes were not aligning with a particular theme or subtheme and were not substantive enough to constitute a new theme, I used the suggestion from Braun and Clarke (2022) to create a miscellaneous theme that captures codes that do not fit with the overall data. These codes were discarded or enveloped into an existing or new theme depending on their informational richness. In general, themes

generated from this study answer the research questions by illustrating the complexity and richness of the data. Please see Table 2 in Appendix M for a thematic table outlining the themes and subthemes, with relevant participant quotes.

### **Photovoice**

Photovoice is a participatory research method that encourages participants to be actively engaged in the meaning-making process of research by inviting participants to take and evaluate photographs they submit (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1997). Each individual who participates in the initial interview will be invited to participate in both the photovoice submission and the follow-up photo evaluation interview. I guided the participants through four tasks asked of them: (a) receive camera training and cover photo submission instructions in our initial meeting, (b) take photos representing what motherhood looks like to them and what community means to them as a Black queer mother, (c) select and title one photo for each prompt, and (d) participate in an individual, semi-structured interview to discuss submitted photos (Wendel et al., 2019).

### ***Photos and Co-Collaboration***

This study sequenced images alongside written text to depict a rich and nuanced experience of Black queer motherwork. Participants were instructed to submit photographs following the two prompts mentioned previously. In an effort to be consistent with existing photovoice studies informed by feminist theory, the visual analysis of images submitted were informed by the participants' image descriptions (Wang & Pies, 2004). Therefore, the transcripts from the photo-elicited interviews served as the primary source of photovoice data (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). Photovoice interviews including the following questions:

1. Describe your **P**icture.

2. What is **H**appening in your picture?
3. Why did you take a picture **O**f this?
4. What does this picture **T**ell us about your life?
5. How can this picture provide **O**pportunities for us to improve life?

Participants were asked each question associated with the P.H.O.T.O. mnemonic (Hergenrather et al., 2009) for each of their submitted photographs. Participants identified anything missing from the photo. To maintain consistency across interviews, it was important that I followed the interview protocol; however, when a participant's response was brief or did not include detailed context, I asked probing questions to help participants and myself understand the deeper meaning behind the photos. For example, Mother 1 submitted a photo of a bowl of oranges (see Figure 3 in Appendix M), so I asked additional questions that engage the participant in analyzing the shape, color, and placement of the oranges (e.g., "Does the placement of the moldy orange in this photo mean anything to you?"). Interview transcripts were coded and organized into themes using reflexive thematic analysis, described previously (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022).

There are limitations to using photovoice worth mentioning. For example, an ethical limitation of photovoice includes participants possibly feeling uncomfortable sharing photographs of their families for fear of one's sexual orientation being disclosed, which could create conditions where participants are "more vulnerable to risks and increased discrimination" (Radis & Sands, 2020, p. 220). To address this limitation in the study, participants were asked to submit photographs that do not jeopardize their reputation, personal safety, or risk harming the reputation and safety of another individual or group (Amos et al., 2012). An additional limitation is sample retention from the initial interview to the photovoice submission and interview, since

participants are compensated at each stage of the research. To remedy this concern, I scheduled the photovoice interview within 1 to 6 weeks of the first interview.

### **Data Storage and Security**

Two methods of data collection were employed – qualitative interviews and photovoice submission (including follow-up evaluation with participants to discuss their submitted photographs). A screening questionnaire administered through Question Pro was used to gather demographic information in an unobtrusive and time-efficient way to determine participant eligibility (see Appendix D). The screening questionnaire was shared via email once interested individuals contacted me personally. Upon confirmed eligibility to participate in this study, participants were initially assigned an ID number that corresponded with their Question Pro response. An ID was established solely for the purpose of confidentiality. Participants' names and ID number were stored in an encrypted document through Microsoft Office titled “Manager List” that cannot be opened or accessed without a password. The advantage of the electronic encrypted list is that there is no way to link digital files with participants identity OR informed consent documents with interviews. The informed consent documents did not have the assigned ID on them, so there is no clear way to connect an interview with the informed consent. All electronic data is stored on my password protected computer and only accessible by me. Once de-identified, only I had access to the encrypted document (e.g., Manager List) linking the participant code with the participant’s identifying information (such as name, email, etc.). Identifiable study data was retained in accordance with Virginia Tech IRB procedures. De-identified study data will be kept for the duration of my academic career.

For the qualitative interview and follow-up photovoice interview, the digital recordings and transcripts obtained through Zoom were downloaded to my password protected research

computer immediately after interviews concluded. Audio recordings and transcripts were backed up on an encrypted external hard drive that stayed in a lock box, in a secure office. The audio files and transcripts are only identifiable by the respective participant ID number on the Manager List, located on a password protected computer. The de-identified audio files and transcripts were uploaded onto my password protected computer for analysis. I listened to the audio files as I cleaned Zoom generated transcripts in password protected Word documents. Completed transcription files were stored on a password protected computer and backed up on an encrypted external hard drive. The digital audio will be erased upon the completion of the study and after all transcription and data checking are complete. Participants sent photovoice submissions (i.e., two photographs per participant) to my email that can only be accessed with a password. I secured all photovoice submissions on my password protected computer and backed up on the aforementioned encrypted external hard drive. Prior to saving, I renamed photographs with the participant ID, following a letter (“A” or “B”) to denote which photograph aligns with each photovoice submission. Upon dissemination, qualitative text and photovoice submissions will not be identifiable to any known individual. To make the reporting of the findings more relatable, participant ID was changed to “Mother [#]” starting with 1 and ending with 10.

### **Rigor and Trustworthiness**

From a Black feminist perspective, it is important to be critical in one’s pursuit of subjugated knowledge, or *experience*, of physical survival, power, and identity (Few et al., 2003). Therefore, I used two means of data collection to generate different types of data, at different time points, from interview transcripts to photographic images, allowing triangulation to occur (Flick, 2004). The aim of triangulation is to provide a more in-depth understanding of research findings and to clarify divergent results by “placing them in dialogue with one another”

(Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 75). Approaching the research questions in multiple ways allowed me to confront the pertinent social issues of participants from different angles. Through triangulation, multiple sources of data allowed me to validate my findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One reason that triangulation increases validation is because it requires the researcher to describe, in detail, how findings generated from different methods and data will be corroborated (Carter et al., 2014; Padgett, 2016). This multifaceted approach also considers how additional perspectives can be integrated that may otherwise be overlooked by a single approach (Morse, 2009).

This study used triangulation to analyze and compare qualitative interview responses and participants' commentary from the photographs they submit. The use of two research methods was chosen to assess different types of data for comparing findings across methods. For instance, a theme identified during the semi-structured interview was examined during the photovoice follow-up interview (Johnson et al., 2017). The sources of data I pulled from required an interview, which was recorded and transcribed. I used reflexive thematic analysis to generate major themes to compare data and synthesize my findings. This approach allowed me to identify and interrogate inconsistencies across data sources, which was an opportunity for more thorough insight into how Black queer mothers experience motherwork (Patton, 2015). An audit trail was used throughout data collection and analysis as another means to achieve credibility and trustworthiness by keeping records of the raw data, transcripts, and a reflexive journal (Koch, 1994; Nowell et al., 2017). Audit trails are also used so that other researchers can replicate the study by following my decision-making trail (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017). Reflexivity is an important element of the audit trail; therefore, a reflexive journal allowed me to document the procedures I follow and how I make methodological decisions. The reflexive

journal proved to be incredibly valuable as I familiarized myself with the data after each transcript was cleaned and during the coding of transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This reflexive familiarization exercise incorporated personal reflections of my values and initial interpretations of the research process (Tobin & Begley, 2004). To further enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, I engaged my dissertation chair in auditing. Auditors help by providing feedback at different time points throughout the study, specifically challenging the primary investigator to analyze the data in critical and illuminating ways (Schlosser et al., 2012). Collectively, we determined if the themes and subthemes reflect the saliency of the data in answering the research questions.

### **Statement of Reflexivity**

I am a Black biracial genderqueer person who identifies as bisexual under the queer umbrella. I started embracing my sexual minority identity in my early twenties, I am now twenty-seven years old. I remember wrestling with my sexuality in my late adolescence and feeling like an outcast because I had not hit certain “relationship milestones” with a different-gender partner. I partly attributed this to my geographic location, race, and class. Growing up in a working-class family in the South, I grappled with mixed messages about myself; in retrospect, I was experiencing internalized racism and homophobia due to the racist undertones and heteronormativity that individuals in my hometown perpetuated. It was through my master’s program that I began embracing the intersections of my racial identity, gender identity, and sexuality. I attribute this positive development to the newly formed community I was becoming involved in.

Over time, I realized that I felt secure in the ways my identities intersect; for the most part, I felt confident disclosing my sexual orientation to friends, family members, professors, my

therapist, and even strangers. When I started my doctoral program, I became even more invested in not only finding a Black queer community but also having an *impact* within my community by joining organizations that allowed me to engage others in conversations about the experiences of queer and trans people of color. This initially led me to discover how Black queer people find community. The root of this curiosity was deeper than community formation, however, as I wanted to explore how individuals make sense of their identities in the face of adversity. This curiosity was met with my interest in attending pride events and listening to Black queer podcasts, where I realized that Black queer cis women who entered motherhood had to not only contemplate their entire world shifting to accommodate their new identity, but also the negotiation that takes place when one has to “out” themselves in interactions that would not have necessitated this disclosure prior to raising children. This process can bring about emotional distress, in addition to the normative stress of becoming a parent.

As I prepared for the study, I reflected on my experiences as someone who identifies as a Black, bisexual/queer, genderqueer person. I am, however, not a mother and do not intend on entering motherhood in the foreseeable future. Currently, I do not consider myself monogamous, meaning I do not practice exclusivity in my romantic relationships. Therefore, my experience may overlap and contradict the experiences of my participants. Informed by Pike (1967), as a researcher, I am considered an outsider (etic) to this population and, therefore, need to be cautious of imposing a “settler-colonial story” on the participants being researched (emic) (Beals et al., 2020, p. 594). Similarities in shared experiences were interrogated on behalf of the researcher with the help of my advisor by differentiating my experience of a shared identity from the participants’ experience detailed in each transcript. Additionally, I made sure to check with the participant in real time as interviews took place if an assumption was being made on my part

(e.g., “Does that make sense? Does that resonate? Is that what you were saying?”). Attention to the possible exploitation of research participants aligns with my desire to have social justice at the core of my research. I can use my knowledge of power dynamics to actively *queer* heteronormative, racist ideologies. In research, I see this process play out in the context of an understudied topic: Black queer motherhood.

### **Online Pitfalls and Safety**

Barriers such as time, financial constraints, and geographical placement could make face-to-face interviews difficult to arrange and conduct (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). Given the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic, access to and emotional bandwidth of participants is especially important to consider (Vindrola-Padros et al., 2020). Fortunately, advancements in technology-mediated audio communication have created a pathway to conducting web-based interviews (e.g., videoconferencing). Conducting all interviews online via Zoom also allowed for a wider recruitment reach. For each interview, the participant was given a unique link with a waiting room feature enabled to avoid unauthorized access. The use of videoconferencing, however, does pose the concern of whether web-based interviewing is comparable to traditional, in-person interviewing. The obvious advantage to web-based interviewing is the increase in accessibility, specifically physical accessibility; including removing the time and money spent to travel to an interview location (Gray et al., 2020). Videoconferencing, when a participant’s camera is on, is comparable to the social and nonverbal cues received during in-person interviewing (Cater, 2011; Sullivan, 2012). In contrast, limitations such as lack of digital literacy, need for high-speed internet connection, and ethical considerations unique to a web-based format could have impacted the essence of the interview and quality of data collected (Deakin &

Wakefield, 2013). To maintain privacy, participants were instructed to complete the interviews alone in a private room with a closed door.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ramos (1989) outlined three types of ethical dilemmas that may arise and affect the research process: (a) researcher-participant relationship; (b) the researcher's subjective interpretations of data; and (c) research design. These ethical dilemmas will be described separately, although they may overlap.

First, it was necessary that interested participants were informed of the research purpose and design prior to consenting to participate. Participants knowing the scope of the study is an ethical decision to prevent coercion by helping to garner trust between myself and the participants. Second, incorporating a reflexive journal in my audit trail helped to keep track of any biases that could lead to a misinterpretation of sensitive data. Therefore, evaluating myself as a data collection instrument is important ethically and in regard to trustworthiness to ensure minimal bias in data analysis (Ramos, 1989). Third, the attention to *care* in the research process is at the forefront for Black feminist researchers because of the conscious effort to maintain a collaborative and empowering relationship with participants (Few et al., 2003). This study incorporated care into the research process by carefully reviewing the semi-structured qualitative interview protocol prior to starting the study to identify and remedy interview questions that could lead to psychological distress (Few et al., 2003). Furthermore, the inclusion of participants by using photovoice was an intentional decision to invite participant-led data collection and an effort to create a more balanced research relationship. As mentioned previously, participants were encouraged to be mindful of the people and places captured in their photographs. This

demonstrated my understanding and application of *justice* in research by recognizing and protecting the way vulnerable groups could be depicted in this study (Orb et al., 2001).

### **Dissemination of Findings**

I will present the results of this study at the 2023 National Council of Family Relations (NCFR) conference as this is a requirement for receiving the 2021 Jessie Bernard Outstanding Research Proposal from a Feminist Perspective. Results will also be shared within academic journals. It is important to me that the results are also shared with participants as an infographic detailing the main findings. Attempts will also be made to disseminate findings into the communities that serve Black queer mothers (e.g., healthcare providers, policymakers overseeing laws that impact Black queer mothers, and schoolteachers who educate children of Black queer mothers) so that these findings can be used as a tool to strategize effective ways of engaging with and improving the lives of this population.

## CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This chapter presents the results from eighteen individual interviews with ten participants. Eight of the ten Black queer mothers participated in both the semi-structured interview and photovoice interview. These results will answer the research questions: (1) *How do Black queer mothers describe the experience of queer motherwork?* (2) *How do Black queer mothers build and navigate networks of informal support?* And (3) *How do Black queer mothers access community resources?* This chapter will present the most salient themes of the data. Findings presented here illuminate the experience of Black queer mothers navigating internal and interpersonal dynamics of motherhood. Some themes had greater significance for some mothers than others; however, themes will be presented based on the most frequently reported experiences among the sample of mothers included in this study. The identified themes will be discussed in-depth with corresponding quotes from participants.

### Sample Demographics

In total, 54 people responded to the survey. Forty-four people became ineligible when it was determined that they took the survey multiple times in order to become eligible; thus, fraudulent or suspect responses having the same IP address were eliminated from the study to maintain the integrity of the sample. The final sample of eligible participants ( $n = 10$ ) identified with a plurisexual identity: bisexual ( $n = 5$ ), queer ( $n = 2$ ), pansexual ( $n = 2$ ), and fluid ( $n = 1$ ). Each participant was raising at least one child under eighteen years old at the time of this study. Participants were between the ages of 21 to 34 ( $n = 5$ ) and 35 to 50 ( $n = 5$ ). Racially and ethnically, participants identified with being Black or African American ( $n = 8$ ), Black and Latina ( $n = 1$ ), and Black and White ( $n = 1$ ). Half of the participants were geographically located in the Southeast ( $n = 5$ ). Other regions represented were Northeast ( $n = 3$ ) and Midwest ( $n = 2$ ).

Most participants were employed. Participant's occupations included: engineer ( $n = 1$ ), schoolteacher ( $n = 1$ ), private school employee ( $n = 1$ ), student affairs ( $n = 1$ ), molecular biologist ( $n = 1$ ), nurse ( $n = 1$ ), attorney ( $n = 1$ ), reproductive rights non-profit employee ( $n = 1$ ), academic ( $n = 1$ ), and unreported ( $n = 1$ ). Participants were provided with the following statement and asked how much it resonated with them: "Motherwork is defined as the work that you do as a mother in terms of teaching your child who she/he/they are, how much power you have on raising your child, and how you help your child to survive today's world." Participants were prompted to provide a rating on a 1 to 5 scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). On average, participants reported a rating of 4 (agree). Please see Table 1 in Appendix M for a full table of sample demographics.

### **Describing the Experience of Black Queer Motherwork**

This section addresses the first research question: *How do Black queer mothers describe the experience of queer motherwork?* To answer this question, the data is presented in terms of the most salient experiences described. The following section details answers mothers discussed during their interviews regarding the best things about being a mother, challenges associated with motherhood, influence of race and sexuality on parenting choices, how parenting choices are made, and feedback mothers disagreed with regarding parenting. My interpretation of this data was grounded and sensitized by the motherwork framework (Collins, 1994, 2000). Two main themes were generated from interviews with Black queer mothers regarding mothers' experience of motherwork included (a) an attentiveness and resistance to discrimination and (b) a desire to promote self-expression in children. The first main theme included the subtheme, active reflectivity in parenting strategies, whereas the second theme included the subtheme, queer identity helps foster acceptance and intentionality.

### **Attentiveness and Resistance to Discrimination**

Black queer mothers ( $n=10$ ) discussed being mindful of the ways in which discrimination impacted family safety and described feeling a responsibility to protect children from discrimination. Particularly salient codes to support this theme included (a) awareness of social situatedness; (b) motherwork (power); (c) motherwork (survival); (d) motherwork (identity); (e) perception of mothering; (f) being a mother is stressful; and (g) desire to protect child(ren). Consistent with motherwork (Collins, 1994, 2000), Black queer mothers mentioned having a keen awareness of social location and how social location informs survival, identity, and power. Participants spoke about an awareness of challenges they face in trying to safely move about in their communities and to protect their children due to their position in society. Mother 1 said, “being Black is hard. Being a Black woman is hard. Being a Black queer woman is harder.” Mother 8, who is married to a white cis woman, spoke about the experience of perceiving or anticipating discrimination specifically in one’s neighborhood:

There is, you know, some families in the neighborhood where the parent might make a little offhand comment about affirmative action, or something like, so certainly with the Blackness. So, I’m like, we don’t need to spend time with them. That are lots of other families here, and this was a person who would say things to my wife that he wouldn’t say in front of me. She’ll be like, “he said this.” And I’m like, “oh, I’m glad he knows he can’t say that to me.” ...but as far as which aspect of identity that that came from it was, it was largely the Blackness. But I suppose if he was talking longer, he’d say something out of pocket about queerness, too.

This example provides insight into how Black queer mothers monitored family safety by gauging the explicit or implicit biases others have toward Blackness and queerness. Partner gender was

another important safety factor to consider when engaging with others. Mother 3 mentioned, “definitely moving about in the world, you always have to sort of be ready for anyone's reaction, when you tell them you know “my wife, my wife.” For Mother 10, who is in a committed relationship with a cis man, her awareness of partner gender also played a role in considering survival. For instance, Mother 10 said, “[it] happened more than once where I'm in a situation where I need to, for my own safety, play the part of, you know, a quiet cis het woman.” In contemplating the impact of partner gender, these mothers were cognizant of how their sexuality was perceived in a society where people demonstrate a prejudice against Black or queer identities. These quotes are representative of how mothers described their experiences of consciously and cautiously engaging with others to ensure family survival.

Awareness of challenges associated with safety and being a Black queer mother connects to the power one has in raising their child. Participants were attentive to the adversity their children may face and the power they have to protect them from its impact. Most Black queer mothers discussed the way they intentionally prepare their child for bias as a member of a Black queer family by considering the narratives they are up against. For example, Mother 2 shared the following:

I mean he has two eyes and two ears, and he sees it. I just want to have a little more control over what he's exposed to, and what he learns and build up his toolbox so to speak. You know, I want him to be confident in, and comfortable with, who we are and not get earfuls of...you know, there's only so much like...I can't control anything that happens in school day to day, right. So, I think you know what we, I, can control to some extent is: I want him to feel and to know that in this community that you know there's plenty of people, if he may hear negative things from someone else, then he can look and

see, here's this group of people who love us and support us as we are. And I want that number to outweigh the other.

In this example, Mother 2 described negotiating the dual responsibility of shielding her child from harm while also promoting a strong sense of self and community to withstand oppressive messaging. For Mother 9, challenges associated with safety promoted a sense of responsibility to educate her child on what has been done to advocate for less harm and more protection:

But since all of our experience is resistance and fighting for everything that we have, it's very important, in the event that I do have a queer and Black child, but, most importantly, just a Black child in general, that he knows how we have our wins, why we have our freedoms, and how we maintain that, and how we get more of that.

The power that Black queer mothers have to prepare their children for discrimination was evident in the way participants formed supportive relationships with their children as a protective factor. For instance, photo 1.1 represented the experience of Mother 3 having her child's "back" as her child engages in "exploring the world" (see Figure 3 in Appendix M for full participant quote and corresponding photo). Mother 3 spoke about the additional ways she has intentionally affirmed and connected with her child:

Making sure that I'm responding to her as she's, you know, babbling. And looking at her, looking her in the eye I think is important. Even as a baby, to know I'm here for you, kissing her. I mean I'm sure she's gonna get tired of that sooner than later. As I kiss her, as she's falling asleep, telling her I love you, because I truly believe that even as we sleep, we're still sort of recording the things that are going on around us, and just you know... affirming her as much, as I can, every day.

This example illustrates the way Mother 3 has fostered a positive relationship with her child, specifically by instilling a positive self-esteem in her child at an early age; hopefully, a self-esteem that can withstand the prejudices of others. Mother 4 also reported a desire to have a close relationship with her child as a means of family survival. For example, photo 1.2 captured her meaning of motherhood, specifically the desire for closeness with her child (see Figure 3 in Appendix M for full participant quote and corresponding photo). Mother 4 said, “as a parent, we are our kids first relationships really. And I know what it's like to navigate the world without having that in a relationship close to me, and I think it's much better to have it.” Mothers’ investment in developing a close relationship (or bond) serves as protection of children from harm. This investment relates to the way Black queer mothers perceived their role as a parent. For instance, Mother 4 said, “the way that I show up for him. It’s very interesting to see, like I don’t know how to explain, just like a version of yourself. It's not necessarily you. It's a whole different person.” In this example, Mother 4 discussed her awareness of prioritizing her child’s survival, which includes being mindful of how she engages with him. Mother 7 also described her experience of being attentive as a parent:

You know what, it's funny, everything that I do in the back of my mind I’m thinking about the impact it’ll have on her. Not just now, but when she’s older. And it’s not lost on me the amount of responsibility that is involved in raising a child at all.

Similarly, Mother 9 discussed the complex relationship between her values as a mother, how this is demonstrated through her parenting approach, and how this will impact her child long-term:

I think, like most of the tricky and rewarding things in life, I really enjoy being able to put work into someone this way, that I don't necessarily get a real benefit from, this is blind faith work, and like trust work, and like complete selfless love. There is a chance

one day, my kid will be like “you were wrong about everything.” No contact... and for all I’ve been through, to openly, every day, choose that chance like, I wanna love you just like this. I wanna do this like just with your consent, with your input, best I can, and if I’m wrong about all this, I’m gonna take that chance cause I love this.

This example demonstrated Mother 9’s self-awareness and investment in actively considering the power she has in her role as a mother, including an understanding that her child may one day critically question her decisions. Black queer mothers being willing to consider input from their children illustrates an active resistance to parenting decisions that would intentionally or unintentionally denigrate the identity of their children (Collins, 1994, 200). For example, a few participants mentioned how they diligently evaluated the potential for harm in spaces their children occupy (e.g., school). A clear link is drawn between power, survival, and identity when Mother 5 said, “my son likes to wear dresses, I have to put him in a place that if he's running around talking about he's a princess, that they're not gonna respond to him in any old kind of way.” This Black queer mother highlighted the power she has in protecting her child from discrimination because of the way society enforces a binary understanding of gender identity. Black queer mothers’ awareness of harmful perceptions and determining their power in protecting one’s child from those encounters highlights the amount of effort they put into keeping their children safe from discrimination.

The theme discussed here illustrates the experience of Black queer mothers engaging in motherwork, specifically noting the emphasis on how they prepare their children for discrimination. Based on my Black-feminist informed interpretations, Black queer mothers diligently protect their children from harm by carefully considering their social location and responsibility as mothers and intentionally fostering a supportive, loving bond with their

children. The next section addresses the corresponding subtheme by detailing their experience navigating the parenting approaches they witnessed or learned about from other parents and how this informs their decision-making as Black queer mothers.

### *Active Reflectivity in Parenting Strategies*

Black queer mothers' ( $n = 10$ ) concerns about discrimination related to experiences of parenting they have observed or experienced. Codes supporting this subtheme included (a) navigating interpersonal influence on parenting; (b) connection to participant's childhood; and (c) motherwork inspires mothers to learn/grow. Participants described conversations they had with biological or chosen family members, partners, friends, and other parents. Connections were also made between Black queer mothers' parenting decisions and how their parents raised them. Participants discussed the opportunities they have as parents to learn and grow alongside their children as they engaged in motherwork. During the interviews, considerable attention was given to their own family dynamics, including what was modeled to them by their parents. For example, Mother 2 reported, "I was parenting like I thought family wanted to see me. And parent the way I was parented, you know, and it doesn't work that way." This participant described initially feeling compelled to follow her family of origin's approach to parenting. Mother 2 later realized this approach was not compatible with her parenting values and vision of family. For some participants, their observations of parenting as a child were complemented by their understanding of the challenges their parents and other relatives were up against:

But I'm just like, there's such great opportunity to set them up better than... our parents just didn't know. My parents had me as a teen, and they did not know what they didn't know, you know what I mean? And like, I didn't have her until I was 30, and I'm like, I'm just in a much better position to kind of provide for her. I don't even be stressing out

when she doesn't wanna do her homework. I'm like “okay, babe.” Like, you need to read it, you need to be able to read and do math, but it would have been hell for me growing up. (Mother 7)

Photo 1.3 further demonstrated the meaning Mother 7 made of her experiences as a child, specifically how her relatives were caring for her while “bearing some sort of burden that we just can't see in that moment, in that picture” (see Figure 3 in Appendix M for full participant quote and corresponding photo). Mother 10 emphasized an awareness of potential challenges in her parents' relationship dynamic in deciding “how I'm gonna structure our lives based on my experience and new understanding that I perceive that I have about their existence as parents and as people in a relationship.” As an adult reflecting on family dynamics in childhood, Black queer mothers were mindful not to repeat patterns that create unintended harm. Instead, mothers actively constructed intentional approaches to parenting. Mother 8 says:

With my parents, it was just like “because I said so.” Sometimes it's because I said so with her, but then I'll explain why I'm saying so. As a kid growing up, I didn't get the explanation. It was just because I said so, and you be quiet for what it's worth. But, you know, the idea of power, and raising our kids... like my wife and I, we both come to parenting at a place with what we have from our own childhood, and saying, “well, this part worked, this part didn't work. We want to try, you know, approach it this way.”

In this example, Mother 8 demonstrated a dual awareness of her perception of parenting strengths and weaknesses she observed growing up, and the autonomy she has in deciding what to implement and what to discard. Mother 10 provided a response that further contemplated the influence of childhood on present day parenting choices:

Parenting decisions that I don't agree with, those are things that have happened in the past with either my own upbringing or my husband's upbringing in ways that have affected us through adulthood. Do you know what I mean? Like, "oh, that's a pattern that I don't want to perpetuate. How do we not have this thing happening in the family anymore?" So, like those generational, cyclical things that come up in families that you want to do your best not to repeat and reify those.

Similarly, for some Black queer mothers the parenting choices they described also considered their version of an inner child who needed stability and a voice. For example, Mother 6 says:

As adults, we all just have a child inside of us who's emotionally uncontrolled or isn't in the right headspace, for the most part, so, we react to things in a way where, like as children, we were just told, "shut up and sit down." Or "go to your room."

Black queer mothers' appreciation of their inner child helped mothers to actively construct a parenting framework that allowed them to "live out my childhood dreams of the things that I like wanted to do. The things that I kind of wanted as a child myself" says Mother 5. For some mothers, the emphasis on autonomy in parenting decisions came up when engaging with explicit feedback from partners, family members, other parents, or friends.

Black queer moms not only buffer their children from the impact of discrimination by adopting meaningful parenting approaches, but they also discussed promoting stability and family cohesion by carefully navigating the parenting perspectives of people they have encountered. Most mothers mentioned how they consider at least one other person's opinion (e.g., a partner and/or a biological or chosen family member) to make decisions. Most mothers were parenting with either their current or previous partner. Many Black queer mothers discussed

the experience of balancing perspectives when making parenting decisions with a current or previous partner. Mother 3 spoke to this experience by saying:

So, there are definitely times where I sort of let [my partner] take the lead because I'm like, I'm thinking, you know worst case scenario, and she's just like no, you know, let's be in present time, and you know the here and now, and not even think those types of things. So, depending on the situation, I sort of let her take the lead, but I feel like we have a good balance. I'm definitely more of a nurturer than she is, and so it's... the two of us, I think, taking the lead where we have our strong, where we have our strengths, if you will.

Black queer mothers spoke about how they “don’t always get it right” but they actively tried to maintain an openness of communication in order to effectively combine their perspectives.

Mother 4 described the ongoing effort in trying to promote family cohesion with her ex-partner:

I think that is something that we work on a lot, his dad and I. We do communicate well on that area. And most times it’s just a matter of speaking to them. I'm very... I like to research a lot. So, I like to just really look into things before I try to make decisions for my son. And most times, when I bring it to his dad's attention, it isn't met with much reservation.

Mother 5 discussed the “deliberation” that is often required to make parenting decisions with her partner by saying:

There’s a super general topic area, and then I will do like a ton of research about it and then I will go to my partner. We have like weekly meetings, and I'll go to my partner, and be like “okay, this is the thing we have to decide.” You know, like, how we're gonna approach this, or how we're gonna do whatever this is, what I've read. These are the different things we can be connected to or not connected to, and that's kind of really the

cycle. Or he'll bring something up and then I'll be like, "okay" and then I go off into a deep end of research, and then come back and be like, "these are the these are all the things that I found, that we can choose from" so like that is typically the cycle, over and over again.

This example highlights the influence of others on the parenting decisions Black queer mothers make. Strategizing and collaborating to find a solution to a parenting question, or having another person validate your idea, can help move a decision from contemplation to action. Mother 6 referenced the time when she and her partner thoroughly considered the decision to raise their child with a non-binary gender identity:

We talked about it for months but then we were like you know what, we're gonna do what we want to do with our kids as parents and we think this is the best step that we can take because this isn't the only way, like one of the only ways we know to show them, aside from being gentle parents, which is another thing we decided right after as well. Just... I think this will really be useful for their emotional development.

The time and effort required to make careful parenting decisions is evident in the way Black queer mothers described their experience of motherwork. Photo 1.4 from Mother 5 depicted this experience of thoroughly contemplating a parenting decision as part of her "mental load" as a mother (see Figure 3 in Appendix M for full participant quote and corresponding photo).

Mental energy is also exerted when mothers considered conflicting parenting advice. Many mothers recounted instances where they disagreed with suggestions provided to them. For example, Mother 2 says, "I love my mama, but she's 82. And she raised three boys...she's the default of, you know, "did you whoop him!" I'm like, no, that's not how it goes." Mother 7 also mentioned a time when her parenting was challenged by a family member:

Well, as a Black woman, and first-generation Black woman in America, I have chosen to not hit my child. So, there's no corporal punishment over here, and my family is like “spare the rod, spoil the child.” So, I’ve gotten some feedback around that. My mom at one point was like, “you talk to her way too much.” And I’m like, well, I probably do but this is how I’m choosing to do this, so yeah.

Black queer mothers who found themselves in this position of being challenged on their parenting decisions mentioned the inherent tension in choosing to do something that opposes the perspectives of their family members. For example, Mother 8 says:

Our pediatrician was like, try as you may not to have the baby being introduced to many people until they’re vaccinated. And my parents took great offense to that, but I held my ground and like y’all are in Florida anyway, like, why are you? It was a big argument. It was like one of the biggest arguments we ever had via text.

Navigating parenting perspectives that Black queer mothers agreed or disagreed with was an ongoing, active experience that helped to explain motherwork among Black queer cis women.

In sum, interactions with others have the ability to impact personal experiences and decision-making. For Black queer mothers, their observations or experience of other’s parenting approaches led them to actively make decisions that privilege their values and autonomy. Based on participants’ accounts, it would be counterintuitive to make decisions that would undermine their Blackness and their queerness. The next section addresses the second theme to explain Black queer mothers’ motherwork by detailing the importance participants placed on encouraging their children to freely express themselves.

### **Promoting Openness of Self-Expression in Child(ren)**

Black queer mothers ( $n = 8$ ) reported a sense of responsibility to encourage their children to express themselves freely and proudly. Codes to support this theme included (a) promoting self-agency in child and (b) consideration of child's mental health (re: emotions). Participants emphasized a desire to not restrict the way their children understood their identity and processed their emotions. Mother 6 mentioned the importance of letting her infant child claim their gender identity as they develop rather than having gender assigned on the basis of the child's assigned sex at birth because "they can have some autonomy in how they decide who they are as they get older, and choices that they make in that way." Despite there being only one mother in the sample who was raising a non-binary child, most mothers supported the notion that their children have autonomy in their self-expression. Mother 7 said, "I just want to give her everything, but I also want her to be who she is, and not have her live up to whatever ideas I have of who she should be." Some mothers described a feeling of joy in watching their children develop into autonomous beings. Mother 8 reported:

... seeing our oldest grow and develop and become more of herself. Or to see some of the ways where she was always who she was. It was like, oh, she was the same way, even when she was a baby, and to see it now as a 6-year-old, just seeing a person form. It's such a really great experience.

Mother 9 also described the experience of promoting self-agency by connecting it explicitly to her parenting. Mother 9 illustrated the care and effort in raising an independent child:

He definitely gets to have full range and autonomy over his expression of gender in a way that we don't allow our boys to. Like, in a way we don't allow who we decide is cis to even be cis because we don't let them express their true expression of that gender, so

letting my baby pick out his nail polish at Walmart, making nail appointments for him to get his nails, making sure he cares about his hair, and feelings. I'm teaching him how to do his hair as we go. All the little things, and making sure he eats, let him pick out his teas, teaching him just about the beauty on the inside as well as outside, and like just nourishing him in a way that we sort of evade, or have historically evaded.

Mother 9 described having an understanding of gender stereotypes and how restricting one's gender expression can reinforce harmful social attitudes of gender, especially at the intersection of race. Notably, Mother 9's power to safeguard her child from binary assumptions of gender demonstrated a capacity among Black queer mothers to subvert expectations of raising Black and Brown cis boys (Collins, 1994, 2000). Mother 9 highlighted how, historically, these expectations are outdated and do not align with how she would like to parent.

Self-expression was not limited to gender expression among this sample of Black queer mothers. Mother 10 related to the experience of having very few expectations for her child by saying, "I hope that when she's ready to start actually making her own decisions, that she feels like I never forced decisions on her where it wasn't necessary." Another area that participants allowed their children to have freedom of expression was in the way their children expressed their emotions. Mother 1 mentioned:

[I'm] trying to teach them about their emotions and mental health. I feel like in my generation mental health is being made more visible, like, it's okay. I previously grew up with "people don't go to therapy." So, we do a lot of talking about emotions and feelings. And [child's name] himself has had a lot of trauma. So, I try to let him know like it's okay feel this way, it's okay to talk about these things, you don't have to be disrespected.

In this example, Mother 1 described the experience of enjoying teaching her child about mental health, specifically educating him on effective ways to process and articulate his emotions.

Mother 1's effort to promote a healthy expression of emotion is supported by pivotal shifts in perceptions of mental health in Black communities (described in detail in a later section). Mother 6 also acknowledged the way she helped her children understand emotions and emotion regulation by stating, "[I'm] just trying to be mindful of how children are acting out based on how they're feeling, and trying to help them adjust, so that they know how to do that as adults." Mother 2 spoke to the experience of not only understanding her child's emotional reactions but also how she supported her child in developing emotional intelligence. Mother 2 reported:

We learned a lot about him. So now we know it's not the end of the world if he has a bad day at school. We just try to kind of get back to the basics of things – connection – trying to help him talk through his problems.

These examples display the importance of mental health as a conduit to self-expression because the social experiences that children have inevitably shape one's sense of self and confidence to show up authentically in spaces where that might be difficult to do. In discussing Photo 1.5, Mother 2 further elaborated on her desire to see her child "be comfortable being inquisitive... I just want him to find his comfort in his niche, and what he's good at, and help him grow in that way" (see Figure 3 in Appendix M for full participant quote and corresponding photo). Mother 8 also mentioned her experience of creating space to check in with her child, specifically to hear what her child may be going through or what she is up against:

But part of school is acclimating to, you know, as she gets older, as we get older, the world gets bigger. You're learning for better or for worse from others. So, we try to just be mindful of... and stay engaged and try to keep her talking about what she's

experiencing and what she's going through. And so, she's 6. She still has a lot to say about things, some kids don't. But we call her the reporter so, she's good about sharing.

And we, I think, are good about listening, and I think we try to strike a good balance.

Black queer mothers in this study represented a wide variety of lived experiences; however, one commonality among these mothers was the desire to allow their children to openly express themselves. This theme demonstrates the way participants liberate their children from rigid ways of perceiving themselves, including the way they encourage their children to understand and manage their emotions. However, responses from Mothers 3 and 4 were not supported by the codes. I hypothesize that their lack of responses related to this theme may be attributed to the age of the children. Thus, I believe that opportunities had not yet been presented to these mothers that would activate self-agency and help their children process to their emotions. Participants reported raising an infant and toddler, respectively.

Parenting children who are free to proudly express themselves aligned with Black queer mothers' own self-expression and self-acceptance as queer identifying people. This experience is demonstrated further in the subtheme addressed in the next section.

### ***Queer Identity Helps Foster Acceptance and Intentionality***

Black queer women experience a complex perspective as mothers given their queerness is inextricably linked to their desire to not restrict or impede their children's self-expression. Participants ( $n = 10$ ) discussed how their perspective as queer mothers influenced their desire to foster acceptance and intentionality in their parenting decisions. Black queer mothers also expressed a desire to introduce their children to different perspectives or ways of identifying as a way to instill in their children a level of respect and care for diverse social identities and experiences. Codes to support this subtheme included (a) influence of queer identity on parenting

and (b) exposing and teaching child about respecting other identities. For Mother 3, awareness of her queerness was highlighted in the way she decided who had access to her daughter by being “hyper aware” of what others do and say around her child. This demonstrated the intentionality on behalf of Mother 3 because she was adamant that her child be in the company of people she had “vetted” and deemed supportive of her queer family. Identifying as queer may necessitate unique safety precautions, but being a queer parent also invited a fluid parenting perspective.

Mother 7 said:

I'm not saying that like being queer makes me inquisitive, but I am saying that being queer definitely makes me more aware of the fact that there's many more ways than one to live. So, I feel like that understanding, and just recognizing that there are so many different ways to be, has been invaluable. It helps me be flexible when I when I'm not feeling flexible, it helps remind me, like, hey, there are more options out there.

Mother 7 illustrated the ability to engage in perspective-taking as a Black queer mother, which supported her parenting decisions when applied. Queerness paving the way to acceptance and intentionality as a parent has led Mother 2 to “overcompensate a little bit” because she places importance on wanting her child to see “that I'm comfortable as who I am... I don't want him to ever think that there's anything wrong with who I, we, are. What his family is.” For Black queer mothers in committed relationships with cis men, the impact of queerness in fostering acceptance and intentionality was just as significant. Mother 5 mentions:

On the outside I look, we look very hetero, right? For me, her understanding that families and different relationships and different people may look a certain way, but you don't really know, and there is space for all of these different things.

Consistent with previous research, for plurisexual cis women in committed relationships with femme presenting partners, their queerness might be more visible than for queer cis women in relationships with seemingly masculine presenting partners (Lingel, 2009; Weier, 2020). This is a harmful dichotomy that can lead to the erasure of fluid identities and the families that assume those identities. In reflecting on binary assumptions specific to gender, Mother 6 reported:

I think maybe my queerness was the major component here in raising [child] with not using their pronouns... I think that's one of the biggest things, especially that's coming to mind right now. It's just trying to navigate the world when people are like "oh, boy or girl?" in like random places. And I'm like, "oh, we're not sure yet, they'll let us know." And they look at you funny, right. But I guess I'm used to people looking at me funny so it's fine.

This example from Mother 6 described an interesting interplay between her own experience of people perceiving her with judgment as a Black queer woman and how that perception is seemingly similar to the judgement or curiosity that others may have about her inclusive parenting choices. Again, queer identity or queerness was at the forefront of intentional decision-making among Black queer mothers.

The influence of queerness on Black queer mothers' acceptance and intentionality was also supported by the way they described a concerted effort to instill in their children an appreciation of diverse identities and family structures given their own membership in a queer family. For example, Mother 1 mentioned:

I just feel like everyone, every parent, should try to ingrain respect like, just because a person is different from us, or they are different skin tone, or they wear glasses or have a

physical disability or things that are visible, or also invisible, basically, just because someone is different you don't belittle them.

In the interview, Mother 1 also discussed an experience at a Pride Parade where her child was confused by the gender presentation of some attendees. She went on to say, "I kind of just pulled him to the side... answer his question because I know it also comes from like a place of curiosity... I've been talking with my partner more... about things like, we should find." For many Black queer mothers, the motivation to have their children in spaces that promote diversity and inclusion was an important way they ensured the messaging their children received outside of the home was consistent with what is shared within the home. For example, Mother 3 said:

I love the fact that her, the infant room at her daycare, there is a Black teacher, a European teacher, an Indian teacher, and a White teacher, like it's truly diverse, and I like the fact that they're all female.

Mothers 6 and 8 explicitly mentioned enrolling their children in similar learning programs mentioned by Mother 3 (e.g., daycares and K-12 schools) comprised of diverse leadership with inclusive principles. Mother 6 mentioned how the school her oldest daughter attends is "all about community and its community centric. So, there's a lot of talk about empathy and all different kinds of people. So, I think we try to do that." For Mother 8, it was important that her children be enrolled "in a school that had a lot of diversity... run by women, by women of color, we wanted our daughters to be in an environment where women of color are in positions of authority."

These examples demonstrated how Black queer mothers make intentional decisions that supported their emphasis on acceptance as a Black queer family. Similarly, Mother 7 mentioned:

For me, it's really important that I introduce her to as many different types of people because what I want her to know is, you can connect with everybody on some level, you

truly can. And there are so many different types of ways to be Black and queer, so just like when I meet people, if I feel like [participant's child] could really benefit from hanging with them, with me obviously, for a little bit, then I'll be like, "would you be interested in hanging with my daughter?" So, we recently went to hang out with one of my physician friends, and she had a blast. She's like, "y'all are boring. You wanna talk about adult things. This is so boring." But then when we left, she was like, "your friend M. was really kind. He showed me how to do this." They were talking about different Asian spices, or whatever. And she was just like, "I learned about this spice that I never heard of." Just things like that, I love that for her.

This example from Mother 7 illustrated the way she seeks out and seizes opportunities to expose her child to diverse experiences. The desire for these unique experiences appeared to be driven by the notion that Blackness and queerness do not assume a monolithic understanding – there is no one size fits all approach. For instance, in describing Photo 1.6, Mother 1 advised other parents and their children to "know that it's okay to do something new... it's okay to experience a new thing" (see Figure 3 in Appendix M for full participant quote and corresponding photo). Curiosity and lived experience combined informed acceptance and intentionality among Black queer mothers.

The two themes and subthemes discussed here, with chosen examples from the semi-structured interview and photovoice, addressed the first research question of how Black queer mothers experience queer motherwork. By engaging in motherwork, Black queer mothers navigated the demands of being an attentive parent in a way that was empowering, ensured family survival, tended to their children's emotions, and cultivated a meaningful identity in their children, including providing new experiences to shape the reality of their children in a positive

way. The next session will detail how Black queer mothers build and navigate informal networks of support. For queer mothers rewriting the narrative of parenting based on their experiences and observations of parenting, the ability to rely on informal support is important.

### **Describing the Experience of Building and Navigating Networks of Informal Support**

This section addresses the second research question: *How do Black queer mothers build and navigate networks of informal support?* To answer this question, the data is presented in terms of the most salient experiences described. The following section details answers mothers discussed during their interviews regarding the individuals who form their support network (e.g., biological or chosen family, friends, and other parents), how they decide who to bring around their child(ren), how people support them as mothers, and what is most and least helpful types of support. One main theme and three subthemes were generated regarding mothers' experience of building and navigating informal support. The main theme, negotiating informal support, included the following subthemes (a) barriers to support; (b) desiring like-minded social groups; and (c) boundaries in close relationships are critical.

### **Negotiating Informal Support**

Black queer mothers ( $n = 10$ ) emphasized acceptance and support from people who want to be in their lives, and who complement their own individual perspectives and family values. Codes to support this theme included (a) support from others; (b) parent-specific support; (c) web-based support; (d) informal support network; and (e) who is considered family. Participants described the importance of building and maintaining relationships with people who uplift, appreciate, and offer support when it is needed. Support persons can take the form of related kin, chosen family, friends, or other parents within one's neighborhood or virtually. Barriers to building or maintaining support posed specific challenges among Black queer mothers.

Consistent with previous research, chosen family is essential to queer survival (Dewaele et al., 2009; Jackson Levin et al., 2020). Connections are drawn between support for *self* and support for *children*, and the function of chosen family when one identifies as a queer parent.

For many participants, informal support networks were initially built within their families of origin. When asked to describe who they consider family, many participants named their parents or stepparents, siblings, and extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. The families' Black queer mothers have created within or outside of a committed relationship was also a significant step in building primary support. For some participants, their primary supports were built as the result of "sustained time and pressure" as Mother 9 recalled her experience of building a chosen family:

They chose me. I have a lot of mental health issues. I have a lot of life issues that never stop. And it sometimes costs me friends or has removed me from friends, or just, you know, my life is tricky, we don't get to pick. And through so many transitions these people continue to show up for me and want to be in my life.

Building an informal support network as a parent required Black queer mothers to deeply connect and receive support that they so rightly deserved, especially if one had experienced a lot of life transitions. For Mother 7, the act of relying on others helped her to challenge narratives of being a "burden" for asking for help:

I'm Black and queer, so, community is everything... our set up is me and her, the two of us... I think that has really taught me that I have to lean in and rely on people around me and I'm not great at this yet, but kind of changing that narrative about being a burden. Because everybody wants to help, and everybody's been like really great about helping her, and me.

Mother 7 illustrated how primary parenting responsibilities were allocated to her, which required her to rely on her support network. Mother 7 further depicted this experience of relying on support in photo 1.7 and described the “joy” she experienced as a result (see Figure 3 in Appendix M for full participant quote and corresponding photo).

Similarly, Mother 3 spoke about living far away from her family of origin which meant she relied on “family” because “my friends are truly like family to me because I don't have anyone here.” Mother 4 described how maintaining an informal support network through sustained contact provides a sense of closeness:

I literally have a group chat called Girlfriends. I want to say maybe like a year and a half, almost 2 years ago, I threw a tea party at my house. And I just invited a bunch of women, and luckily all of us have like stayed very close... we do events like literally all the time.

For Mother 4, and many others, the combined emotional support and quality time was an important function of informal support and helped to maintain supportive relationships. Mother 1 described her experience of emotional support:

We all need positivity. We all need something to look forward to. There is some things that I can like go without. But it's like if I have someone that I can speak with about this issue, and they can be a listening ear or understanding... like that goes further than most things financial, unless it's an emergency. So, I have to say my big thing will be emotional support.

For some Black queer mothers, there were obstacles to overcome because of constraints such as time, geographic distance from others, lack of transportation, and a general lack of knowledge of who in their local and surrounding neighborhoods are queer or part of a queer family. Thus, reliance on web-based support was an accessible alternative.

Utilizing platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, informative blogs, and TikTok offered web-based support to Black queer mothers in a way that was accessible and easier to maintain than in-person support. Mother 8 mentioned the helpfulness of being a Facebook user and utilizing Facebook's group feature:

On Facebook there are other parenting groups that we're a part of where people, you know, there's that online community aspect where people will talk about things that they're going through with their families. And seeing what other people are going through and hearing their advice. And we'll post questions, too, of things we could use some outside perspective on.

This example from Mother 8 illustrated the way she and many other participants fellowshipped with other parents online because of the accessibility it provided. Consistent with previous research, COVID-19 necessitated a swift global transition to internet supported platforms as a means of engaging with others (Gioia et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2020). Participants demonstrated how the autonomy to choose how and when one engages with others online can be liberating and tailored to specific types of support wanted. For example, Mother 10 said, "Instagram, Tiktok, you know, those kinds of places where you know you can choose whose feeds you want to see and respond to." Function and choice were key elements to building and maintaining informal supportive networks. Other purposes of informal networks included physical support, financial support, and religious or spiritual support.

For Black queer mothers, negotiating informal support involved identifying the networks of support they relied on regularly or felt the most benefitted by. Participants shared experiences of maintaining relationships with people who uplifted them and their children. The next section addresses the subtheme that represented barriers to Black queer mothers receiving support.

### *Barriers to Support*

Barriers to receiving different types of support often made the experience of building informal support difficult to do. This subtheme was supported by the code ‘barriers to support.’ Given the significance and distinction of types of barriers, it became evident that this idea represented both a code and a subtheme through the iterative process of coding and generating themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Barriers experienced by Black queer mothers ( $n = 10$ ) were supported by various disadvantages such as discrimination for being openly queer, feeling isolated in one’s neighborhood, or feeling removed from other like-minded parents.

Mother 3 recalled her experience trying to navigate close relationships with other parents:

[In] trying to connect with other mothers at my baby's daycare, my wife said, “well, they might not like the fact that we're a same sex couple.” So just sort of always kind of keeping that in the back of my mind to know that that's a very real possibility. And you know not everyone's going to be okay with it. Just those aren't your people, if you will.

Mother 3 demonstrated the critical thought process she engaged in to discern whether another parent will be accepting of her queerness. She elaborates by saying, “... just having to have that pause to see like you know... so many people are very accepting, but even just the unknown of what anyone is going to think or how they're going to react is just kind of unfair.” Mother 10 also spoke to unfairness but related it to being “count out of stuff” by people local to her who did not have children, which led to her feeling isolated:

Here's the thing, when you have a kid, and a lot of people that you hang out around don't have kids, you automatically get count out of stuff. So, I work in a place with a lot of art people, and sometimes they'll be like, “oh, well, we've just decided that we're going to go to a show tonight. Do you want to come?” It's like, “no, it's in 4 hours, I can't get a sitter

in that time. No, I'm not coming.” You know what I mean. So, people end up being acquaintances because, not like they don't like you, or whatever, you don't like them, it's just that the shape of your lives are so different that it's just really hard to build that friendship.

This example illustrated the lack in overlap between shared experiences and how this can lead to feeling removed from others. In describing Photo 1.8, Mother 1 discussed feeling removed from informal support, such as the LGBTQ+ community, due to being “an invisible queer.” She furthered explained, “... there's so many basic perceptions of what that means and no one person fits into a box – I definitely don't – But sometimes I just feel invisible within community” (see Figure 3 in Appendix M for full participant quote and corresponding photo). Feeling isolated and invisible oftentimes necessitated a need for Black queer mothers to be self-reliant or venture to online communal spaces to receive support.

The barriers described here demonstrate the perceived obstacles that Black queer mothers experienced in being able to receive informal support. Based on my interpretation of their descriptions, these barriers led to anticipated discrimination from others or feelings of isolation due to the lack of support they received. The next section addresses the subtheme related to participants' desire to be a part of a supportive network with other people who share their perspectives or their lived experiences as Black queer mothers.

### ***Desiring Like-Minded Social Groups***

Many Black queer mothers ( $n = 10$ ) described having limited proximity to other queer parents of color despite their desire to have a connection, especially with other Black queer mothers. Codes to support this subtheme included (a) desire to belong/be accepted and (b) support received from other Black queer mothers. Consistent with previous research, a shared

identity helps to promote acceptance and trust in a friendship (Ma et al., 2019). For example, the ability to "...be able to talk about what's going on with the kids and what's going on in life in general with them. That might be helpful to mentally decompress in that way" reported Mother 6. Lack of proximity to like-minded individuals was not the only obstacle, Mother 3 described how demands of adulthood can also complicate this experience:

So, I don't have any friends who are Black queer moms. Or any relatives. It's, I think, you know, adulthood. It's a little more challenging to make friends, to find people. Especially now with a child because it's going back to what you asked earlier. Feeling like people, safe with people being around your child. But I certainly welcome, you know, I have a friend whose sister is a Black queer mom. She and her wife, and I've wanted to sort of reach out, but I'm kind of like weird, like how it's... I don't know. It's interesting in adulthood, like trying to make friends and connections with people so I hope that I can, you know, meet other Black queer mothers, and build relationships.

Mother 3's desire illustrated how perceived support by a community of like-minded parents could contribute to the safety and stability Black queer mothers described creating for themselves and their children. Mother 5 mentioned how support from like-minded people, specifically with similar textured hair as her child, can be as practical as sharing hair styling tips:

The thing that I miss is community. I feel like something as simple as my youngest daughter has a very soft curl texture. I have a very 4c, coarse, big type of hair texture. Something as simple as I don't really know what to do with that, I wish I had this community to just be like "hey, super random..." And I feel like in some ways I do. But it's not in the way, I guess, that I would want it to be in my head.

Mother 5 described how online support from other Black parents was helpful in answering such questions; however, she described these relationships as "... not a close thing. Those are just random people that I ask, "does anybody know a hair braider" and they're like "we got you." But there's nothing like, kind of deeper than that." Even though Mother 5 received the answers she needed, she remained disconnected from the person who provided the help. Mother 10 described her experience navigating close relationships with like-minded people online while also reporting a desire to have more local friendships who experienced similar challenges or issues because, "just knowing that there are other people out there, and once we get more settled, it would be helpful for me to begin to actively cultivate more of those relationships in real life, too." Most Black queer mothers also desired the perceived advantages of having queer parents as friends. Mother 7 described her experience of desiring this informal support:

I don't have a lot of queer friends that are parents, so it might be interesting to like, see what another queer parent's experience is like, just to kind of gauge what I'm doing, not saying that I'm measuring myself up, but just to observe how other people move and, you know, bounce ideas off of each other I think that would be really cool because like I said, none of my friends have kids. I'm the only one, for now.

Mother 9 discussed being in community with other like-minded Black queer mothers and how it expanded the appreciation and understanding she had of her own mothering experience:

A lot of us have an innate reaction because we have an experience with micro dosing motherhood. Motherhood thus, is so important to our community because *we mother ourselves, we mother each other*. Our trans elders, who are oftentimes only like in their thirties, because we don't get to live that long. Or our mothers. Like, mothering in the

queer community is a little broader than it is just to be a parent. As queers we use mother as mecca for everything colloquially.

These examples demonstrated the experience of Black queer mothers wanting more connection to other individuals who are like-minded or share their cultural experiences. In discussing photo 1.9, Mother 4 described positive experiences within her friend group while also reporting a desire to have opportunities to connect with other Black queer mothers (see Figure 3 in Appendix M for full participant quote and corresponding photo). Having more opportunities to connect with other Black queer mothers would potentially provide an additional way of receiving emotional support and helpful parenting advice.

This subtheme highlighted the desire among Black queer mothers to engage with others who share similar values, including shared cultural experiences. As stated previously, overlaps in shared experiences may promote trust and acceptance (Ma et al., 2019). However, navigating a relationship with a complex history required putting limits in place that protected the well-being of Black queer mothers and their children. This led to the creation of a subtheme that described the experience of Black queer mothers enforcing boundaries with family and friends.

### ***Boundaries in Close Relationships Are Critical***

Black queer mothers ( $n = 10$ ) described the experience of establishing and enforcing boundaries as a means of advocating for self and family, protecting their own capacity to engage in harmful family of origin dynamics, and to filter messages between others and their children. Participants in the photovoice interview did not make references to this subtheme; thus, the findings are based on the semi-structured interviews. Codes to support this subtheme included (a) boundaries with family/friends and (b) who is not considered family. Black queer mothers were led to create boundaries in relationships with family members or friends as a means of defining

the “expectations and needs” to feel “safe and comfortable” in these relationships (Tawwab, 2021, p. 5). In describing their relationships, Black queer mothers clearly delineated whether they felt supported by, and safe with, others.

Many mothers described the importance of boundary setting as a means of defending their decisions, including the decision to proudly accept their queerness. For example, Mother 3 shared her experience advocating for her queer family in a conversation with her mom: “I told my mom, you know, you don't even have to say it. I know that this isn't what you want for my life. But it's my life, and I'm going to do as I choose.” This example demonstrated how Black queer mothers used boundaries to defend and validate their queer existence when others implicitly or overtly disapproved. Mother 6 also described this experience when considering her and her partner’s decision to raise their infant child as a “theybe.” Mother 6 mentioned:

I started to think a lot about my relationships with my stepmom and my dad and how that would relate to them. Because they’re pretty religious. And they already had what they consider an issue with my lifestyle. So, the next thing was trying to explain to them how we’re raising [participant’s child], my youngest. And that didn’t go very well. So, it was like a mourning of a relationship because I feel like our kids will not really have them around as grandparents.

For this participant, and most other Black queer mothers, discriminatory beliefs necessitated boundary setting. Participants also described the experience of limited contact with certain family members as a way to maintain boundaries. Mother 1 said, “as far as family, there are some people that I wouldn't bring around because they can be abrasive or disrespectful or confrontational.” Mother 10 further elaborated on the critical decision to restrict or cease contact by describing her experience of being around her father-in-law’s friend:

Before my husband's dad died, he had a friend that we really did not like very much, and she came around a lot, and it was just everything we could do to just try and avoid when she would be around. Just because she just made us really uncomfortable. Yeah, so, sometimes it's harder than other times to not have your child associating with people that you really don't want them to be associating with. But the thing that makes it relatively easy is that at this stage in her life they're people that you don't want to associate with either.

This example illustrated how in deciding who to bring around her children, Black queer mothers had to also gauge their own capacity to engage with certain people. Interactions that left participants feeling uncomfortable were avoided or minimized moving forward. In determining what interactions they wanted to be a part of, Black queer mothers described filtering out information or experiences that could harm their child. Mother 8 recounts her perception of her father-in-law; she contemplated the decision whether to have her child around him:

I'd only feel a little odd about my daughter spending too much time with him. But it's more about the Blackness, not the queerness. I mean, I have to parse it... like, I'm sure he, I don't know, before my wife came out to them, I don't know what he may or may not have said about queer people to her, to my wife while she was growing up. But, like I know for a fact he doesn't know other Black people, right. So, it's the whole package. I don't know if I would have identified or voiced it as because I'm Black and queer I would have her avoid him, that's all part of it... it absolutely is.

This example highlighted the connection between participants' positionality and the boundaries they set with others. Deciding who is "in" and who is "out" were crucial choices to make.

The theme and subthemes discussed here helped answer the second research question of how Black queer mothers build and navigate networks of informal support. Despite the perceived barriers Black queer mothers were up against regarding informal support, they described having autonomy in determining who became involved in their lives and, to some extent, how support was received given the boundaries they set. Desiring support from people who are queer affirming and like-minded was also apparent in the way participants utilized resources in their respective communities. The next session will detail how Black queer mothers access community resources.

### **Describing the Experience of Accessing Community Resources**

This section addresses the third research question: *How do Black queer mothers access community resources?* The data will be presented in terms of the most salient experiences described. The following section will detail answers mothers discussed during their interviews regarding how they seek out community resources, challenges to locating community resources, and the most helpful types of community resources. Despite participant's reference to community resources in their photovoice interviews, their photo interpretations did not directly address the research question; thus, this section will only include examples from the semi-structured interview. The main theme, emphasis on finding the "right" environment to meet family needs, included the subtheme, utilizing individual or couples therapy.

### **Finding the "Right" Environment to Meet Family Needs**

Black queer mothers' ( $n = 10$ ) accessing community resources involved strategically assessing how community resource providers understood, validated, and respected their lived experience. Codes supporting this theme included (a) accessing community resources; (b) seeking community resources; and (c) hard to access information/resources. Participants

considered their previous experiences of seeking and accessing resources within their communities, including the challenges associated with locating information or resources they were seeking. For most, their previous experience of perceived discrimination led to an anticipation of continued discrimination. Institutions that provide community resources should be mindful of the ways their policies and procedures further oppress Black queer mothers. For example, Mother 1 discussed her experience engaging with institutions (e.g., schools and healthcare providers) as a Black queer woman in a relationship with a Black non-binary partner. Mother 1 reported, “in the school district, there’s been comments made. Going to a health provider recently, there was a comment made. And it’s like come on, you know it’s 2022, like be a little professional at least.” This example highlighted how Black mothers in queer families experienced inequities in treatment when accessing resources to meet their needs even though these resources are essential for their survival. Mother 9 discussed how her previous experience of discrimination created a complex decision-making process when accessing healthcare resources:

Even with all the recommendations in the world, it’s hard to believe or trust that a doctor will care for you the way that you want to be cared for or believe you about your pain or about your needs [and] will be good to your kid. I literally, I have insurance, and I still don’t get the care I need, because I’m just scared.

The emphasis on finding the “right” community resources was apparent because of the potentially harmful encounters they could have. As a result, Black queer mothers were diligent in their pursuit of finding resource providers who understood their experiences and could validate their concerns or desires.

Furthermore, Black queer mothers discussed the importance of seeking out resource providers who shared similar identities as part of finding the “right” environment. Mother 8 described her experience of seeking out healthcare providers:

I didn't realize this until now, but like, when we seek out providers, we try, you know, like my gynecologist is also a woman of color. I try to like, find other women of color where I can, in the profession... like for those different resources. That's actually always sort of been a factor in how we try to relate to the world. So, that's certainly the Blackness aspect.

This example highlighted how for some Black queer mothers, engaging with resource provider who had a similar lived experience provided a sense of “relief.” However, for some participants, the inability to attain this experience led them to abandon their desires. For instance, Mother 7 mentioned her challenge with finding the “right” providers for her and her daughter:

I really wanted a Black pediatrician for my daughter, and I couldn't find one. And I just was like, if I can't find a Black pediatrician, how am I gonna find a Black queer one? So, I just kind of aborted that vision.

These examples highlighted the significance of Black queer mothers being able to relate to a professional based on shared social experiences, such as seeking out a provider who identifies as a person of color, a woman, or queer.

In another example, a Black queer mother discussed the value in being able to trust that the environments she entered would be affirming. Mother 2 recounted her experience of choosing a progressive, queer affirming school for her Black son when he was younger, but due to him displaying emotional “outbursts,” the school requested he be removed from their program:

Ultimately, they ask us to take him out of the school. It was actually a blessing. It was actually good, and then we, and in that moment when we... so in that school he was the only Black student. Yeah, it's a small school, but you know definitely, you know, at that point you know what led me to want to go there is because I felt like the parents were super progressive, and you know being a queer family. I thought that was better, and again love the parents. We're all still friends.

Mother 2 demonstrated the complexity of wanting to place her child in an environment that affirmed her family's queerness by saying, "The decision to go... was driven by this hope and desire to be accepted for all our otherness... that first initial, you know, choice was really trying to look for acceptance, and it wasn't necessarily the best choice for us." Mother 2 said that she had to consider how well the environment would "fit" her child. The recommendation to pull him from the program necessitated a move to a "regular" daycare, which included other children who "looked like him." For many Black queer mothers, the experience of seeking the "right" environment for their children included recommendations shared by "word of mouth." Recommendations from other parents were a helpful way to gain knowledge and determine which spaces to access. Mother 7 described the helpfulness of people in her community who provided input:

I would say the referrals that I've gotten have always been pretty good. So, if I reach out to community, and ask, "hey, does anybody recommend a dentist for kids," or whatever, I feel like I've gotten really good recommendations from people that way... I will just say in general, people tend to know what type of experience I'm looking for, and they tend to give me recommendations that align with what I'm looking for.

This example illustrated how Black queer mothers' support system aided in the access participants reported having to local resources they trusted. Mother 7 relied on the benefit of others' knowing her perspective of what a "right" environment would look like for her.

In sum, Black queer mothers were seeking and accessing resources that provided affirming care for themselves and their families even when challenges were presented such as perceived or anticipated discrimination and lack of representation. The assistance from participants' support system minimized the challenges they faced in seeking community resources. Broadly speaking, the challenges Black queer mothers described in many of their experiences, encouraged them to seek professional mental health services.

### *Utilizing Individual or Couples Therapy*

Black queer mothers ( $n = 8$ ) described therapy as a community resource they utilized for emotional support. One code supported this subtheme (e.g., utilizing therapy). I intentionally analyzed both the significance of this experience as a code and a subtheme. Engaging in an iterative process of reorganizing the codes and generating themes led me to conclude that this experience was significant among the sample. It also helped to explain the experience of accessing a community resource (e.g., therapy). Thus, a subtheme was developed. For participants who utilized individual or couples therapy, most described having a meaningful and transformative experience.

For example, Mother 5 mentioned, "I think the person who supports me kind of the most is my therapist right now, but she supports me a lot as a mom." She further explained how her therapist continues to help her work through her biggest challenge as a mother, which is "doing the best I can with the knowledge that I have, and the access that I have." Most Black queer mothers reported having positive experiences in therapy as they developed self-understanding,

improved communication, and learned coping skills. Mother 9 said, “therapy is my favorite form of support, it is the most helpful, talk therapy is extremely helpful for me. I love to talk.” This example illustrated Mother 9’s enthusiasm to rely on professional help to process personal issues. Mother 9 elaborated by explaining the significance of therapy for her:

I'm very, very, very bad about seeking emotional support from anyone. I just don't like to do it. I don't feel safe. I don't feel like I can trust anyone with it. I have no reason to. It comes from my family so, like what makes me feel comfortable is making sure I write everything down and take that sh\*\* to therapy.

In this example, Mother 9 carefully considered who she trusts with her vulnerable displays of emotion. As a result, she utilized therapy to receive the emotional support she did not regularly seek in her close relationships. Similarly, when “things get really hairy” for Mother 7, she said:

If I'm like really struggling I will ask for an emergency session, and I've only needed a handful of those in the past 2 years, but they have been really helpful, tremendously helpful, because I went to my therapist kind of not knowing what kind of work I wanted to do, and then when we identified, how like troubling my childhood was and how like difficult that has made parenting for me at times, we're able to come up with some tools and techniques and stuff to kind of manage, cause this is a lot.

Mother 7 described the critical need for therapeutic support when she experienced the cumulative stress of complex trauma and parenting. As a result of negative experiences in childhood and their desire as adults to parent effectively, many Black queer mothers discussed using individual therapy to help them explore and resolve issues in their personal lives. For some participants who were in a committed relationship at the time of the interview, they reported how

couples therapy also provided tools to resolve conflict, improve their relationship dynamic, and develop a shared perspective of parenting expectations with their partner.

Black queer mothers who have experienced couples therapy with their partner described their motivations and outcomes of pursuing therapy. Mother 8 discussed the reason why she sought out a therapist, “it took a few years of us like drifting... being so focused on parenting, and we came to recognize we weren't relating to each other in the best way, or at all. So, it was a few years before we started.” Consistent with previous research, couples’ adjustment to parenthood can create temporary stress within the relationship (Doss et al., 2009; Parfitt, 2014). Mother 8 elaborated on her experience of being a new parent and noticing stress build in her relationship, and the positive outcome she had in couples therapy by acknowledging it:

And when we became parents, introducing a new person into your life, had its wonderful aspects, but it really decreased the amount of time we made for each other, and how to communicate with each other. And yes, it was an added love, but it was also an added stressor. So, we did couples therapy for a spell as well, and that really helped us get back into a much healthier way of communicating with each other, relearning how to communicate with each other, because we were experiencing each other in a different role because we weren't just two adults anymore, we're now two adults raising a child and being parents. And we had to learn how to parent together.

Mother 6 echoed Mother 8 by stating that she realized she and her partner were not communicating effectively, and related it to their different attachment styles as well as her experience witnessing her parents’ communication as a child:

Yeah, just because I think at that time, we were just getting to a point in our relationship where it was really tumultuous. A part of it is we're just different communicators. I'm an

active communicator all the time. And I'm clear on my wants and needs, whereas they're an avoidant type of person and has wants and needs but won't say them. And then we'll have expectations that are not met and it's like, it becomes an issue. So, I wanted to like, get to a point where we could have conversations and deal with things before [participant's child] got here because my parents argued a lot growing up. To the point where I was like it would have been better if they got a divorce. But I don't want that to be the environment we raise our kids in. So, I decided we should do that.

Mother 6 illustrated the helpfulness of she and her partner being able to access therapy during the transition to parenthood. This example from Mother 6 also highlighted her desire to not repeat the conflict resolution style of her parents. Most Black queer mothers were being mindful of their emotions and behaviors in close relationships. While some participants in relationships had sought treatment for more common stressors such as miscommunication, many utilized therapy to receive emotional support as Black queer mothers. In describing the types of resources one utilizes in their community, Mothers 3 and 4 did not mention therapy. The interview protocol did not explicitly ask participants to describe their experiences of accessing and utilizing therapy services, which could partly explain the lack of response from these two participants.

### **Negative Case Analysis**

This section will detail disconfirming evidence, or negative cases, to assist other researchers in assessing the credibility or validity of the study (Antin et al., 2014). Immediately after each transcript was initially coded, I wrote up notes reflecting on the responses from participants. As transcripts were coded and recoded, as part of generating themes, I had refined my perspective of similarities and differences across data sets and participants. In engaging my reflexivity as a researcher, I thought about the initial eligibility criterion of participants needing

to be in a committed relationship with a cis woman. This curiosity led me to consider whether there were distinct experiences attributed to partner gender.

In challenging the themes and subthemes I generated, I selected negative cases that clearly delineated from the responses provided by most participants in the study (Barusch et al., 2011). I attributed these differences to the gender of two participant's partners. While seven of the participants disclosed being in a committed relationship, two of these participants were in relationships with cis men. For the two participants in relationships with cis men, they described having gendered experiences of parenting. For instance, Mother 5 mentioned:

There's a mental load to being a mother that I don't think is oftentimes thought about or really even discussed... I think there is a mental load that I feel like my partner does not have in the same way. So, I feel like when he talks about his mental load, his is different, not that he has none, but his is a different load than mine.

She described her experience of being a mother as “isolating” because of the unique “mental load” she had compared to her husband's. Mother 10 shared a similar experience as Mother 5 of assuming more parental responsibility compared to her husband. For example, Mother 10 said:

I've taken her to conferences with me. I've taken her to festivals and gigs with me. It's hard work. [Participant's husband] has never done that work. And part of that is just what he does. He does work a lot from home, but when he is out, he's in a production truck, so that would be really hard. But at the same time, I'm like well, I'm figuring it out all the time. Like even when I leave, and he's home alone, he'll usually take her to his mom's house. So, it's like our experience of being alone with her is very different. Like, I worked yesterday, he was home with her, whatever, fine. But if it's like an overnight situation, he is not about to do that alone.

Mother 10 further elaborated by discussing the interplay of “gendered” and “circumstantial” factors. Like participants in Valiquette-Tessier and colleague’s study (2019), the assumption of mothers being the primary caregiver is explained, in part, by the different parenting responsibilities both mothers described having compared to their husbands.

Additionally, the influence of partner gender led to an embodiment of queerness, which extends to social interactions, that was qualitatively different than that of queer mothers who were in a committed relationship with a cis woman ( $n = 3$ ), a non-binary partner ( $n = 2$ ), not partnered ( $n = 2$ ), and dating ( $n = 1$ ). For instance, Mother 10 reflected on her experience accessing predominantly queer spaces by saying, “I don't always feel like it's my space just because of the ways that I do have privilege in the world as reading the way that I read.” Mother 10 elaborated by discussing how she does not experience the same oppression as a Black queer woman in a relationship with a seemingly same-gender partner because Mother 10 is in a hetero-passing relationship. Similarly, Mother 5 described being in a “hetero looking” relationship which led her to question her queer identity. For instance, Mother 5 recalled that prior to participating in her first interview she informed a friend of the study description and her intent to participate. Mother 5 elaborated that her friend was unaware of her queerness, which could be attributed to the fact that Mother 5 is married to a cis man. These two experiences of Mother 5 and 10 raising children with cis men demonstrates the potential for Black queer mothers in hetero-passing relationships to (a) take on more caregiving responsibility or “mental load” compared to their cis male identifying partners and (b) feel somewhat removed from the queer community, especially in how they are perceived by others and not being able to relate to certain experiences of discrimination due to their partner’s gender.

## Summary

In this chapter, the main themes and subthemes presented capture the experiences of Black queer mothers engaging in queer motherwork, building and navigating networks of informal support, and accessing community resources. The most salient experiences described focus on Black queer mothers' awareness of social location and how this informed safety decisions. While concerns regarding perceived or anticipated discrimination were significant, Black queer mothers also described being mindful not to enact harm in the families they have cultivated by being intentional in how they carried out parenting responsibilities. The engagement Black queer mothers described in their experiences was also reflected in the way their informal support networks were built and maintained and how they strategically accessed community resources to meet their needs. In the following chapter, I synthesize the results and provide interpretations from the lens of intersectionality rooted within Black Feminist Thought.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The present study expands the research on motherhood by gaining further understanding of how Black queer mothers experience motherwork on an individual, relational, and institutional level. Previous studies have described the way Black women who identify as heterosexual or lesbian experience motherhood, including how they rely on social support (Brewster & Padavic, 2002; Collins, 1995; Glass & Few-Demo, 2013; Mendenhall et al., 2013; Moore, 2011) and access community resources (Ajayi & Garney, 2023; Butler, 2009; Coles & Green, 2010; Radis & Nadan, 2020) to ensure the survival and well-being of their families. In contrast, the focus of this study was on understanding the nuance of motherwork, specifically in the context of queerness. Informed by Black feminists' discourses on motherhood, I sought to understand how Black queer mothers experience *queer* motherwork, how they navigate supportive relationships with others, and how they strategically seek out and utilize resources within their communities.

Specifically, this project sought to answer three research questions using Black feminist-informed frameworks. The first question examined how Black queer mothers engaged in Collins' (1994, 2000) conceptualization of maternal labor among Black mothers, referred to as motherwork. I wanted to understand the way subjugated knowledge, or the suppression of Black women's perspectives (Collins, 2000), of Black women who are also queer contributes to their perspectives of motherhood. In privileging their ideas, I wanted to know how these perspectives inform their family survival strategies, the power they perceive themselves having in raising their child to withstand an oppressive society, and their efforts in instilling a positive identity in their children. The second research question explored how Black queer mothers experience building and navigating informal support. Previous research suggests that homophobic or racist attitudes

create tension for Black LGBTQ+ mothers when they try to connect to their families of origin and engage with broader systems of support such as the LGBTQ+ community (Battle et al., 2002; Cahill et al., 2003; Crawford et al., 2002; Greene, 2000; Herek & Capitanio, 1995; Hunter & Hickerson, 2003; Moore, 2011; Pastrana, 2016); thus, I wanted to know how Black queer mothers' experience the navigation of building and maintaining informal support networks, and how they determine the helpfulness of the networks they have built. Lastly, the third research question considered how Black queer mothers access community resources. The purpose of this question was to understand how Black queer mothers seek out and utilize institutionally organized resources such as healthcare offices and daycares or schools within their communities.

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings for each research question. This discussion will be rooted in the theoretical frameworks that informed the study in conjunction with previous research. Outcomes of the study connect to and differentiate from existing literature. The primary aim of discussion in this chapter is to emphasize the findings that expand the literature on Black queer motherhood. It is worth noting the visceral tension I experienced in using Black lesbian-focused literature to inform this study given the lack of Black bi+ parenting literature available. From a demographic standpoint, this study supports the inclusion of sexually fluid samples in the Black queer parenting literature. The key findings that answer the first research question include how Black queer mothers' self-awareness of social location informs their mechanisms of survival and empowering themselves and their children to subvert social norms that dictate expectations of Blackness or threaten the liberatory nature of queerness. The key findings that answer the second research question describe the dynamics Black queer mothers perceive with their informal supports, specifically their family of origin. Lastly, the key findings

from the third research question emphasize the access to, and reliance on, mental health services. In addition, I will provide clinical implications, limitations, and future directions.

### **Contributions to the Black Queer Motherhood Literature**

This study honors the tireless activist efforts of radical Black feminist mothers who came before and their literary contributions. Symbolically, mothers in this sample are the descendants of Black feminists who laid the groundwork for disrupting nationalist, capitalist, racist, homophobic, and sexist systems. Black queer motherhood is rich with historical and political significance. The freedoms Black feminists fought for, and are *still* fighting for today, have helped to create better conditions for Black queer mothers to parent according to their own desires. Consistent with historical and political significance, Black queer mothers are reclaiming their autonomy in being able to decide how to parent, how to raise their children, and how to bring children into the world, especially in a nation that oppresses their existence by not understanding the significance of how race and sexuality impact motherhood (Gumbs, 2016; Moore, 2011). This study connects to the Black feminist literature by considering the multidimensionality of Black queer mothers' social identities, families, and communities (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Four distinct contributions to the literature on Black queer motherhood were identified based on the findings of this study, including (a) intentional decision-making; (b) queering family of origin narratives; (c) prevalence of therapy utilization; and (d) a visual depiction of Black queer family life through photo elicitation.

First, this study contributes a new perspective of the way a queer identity compels Black mothers to engage in *intentional decision-making*. Mothers in this study were mindful of how they are positioned in society as Black queer cis women. Thus, there is an interplay between Blackness and queerness that informs their critical consciousness of parenting. The mothers in

this sample anticipated and perceived discrimination toward themselves and their children. For example, as Black queer cis women, most mention their experience of witnessing or experiencing heteronormativity within their family systems and larger communities. Findings from this study demonstrated how Black queer mothers were keenly aware of the relational and institutional systems that privilege certain social identities over others. Given this vantage point in society, Collins (2000) asserted that being a Black woman “requires wisdom because knowledge about the dynamics of intersecting oppressions has been essential to U.S. Black women’s survival” (p. 257). Given their knowledge, Black queer mothers are highly motivated to instill in their children a positive sense of self to help buffer the impact of racist or homophobic depictions of Black and queer families, also known as representational intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). In doing so, Black queer mothers engage in a layered process that reflects the motherwork concepts of power, identity, and survival by exercising their maternal power to nurture a meaningful self-perception in their children that is essential to their well-being (Collins, 1994, 2000). To achieve this goal, they embrace and encourage freedom of expression in their children. Black queer mothers describe how they foster an expansive, inclusive understanding of their children within a social context that is binary and restrictive. In addition, Black queer mothers teach about, and expose their children to, diverse identities given their values as a Black queer family are uniquely tied to their own experiences of being misunderstood or underrepresented based on race, gender, and sexuality. These mothers are raising children who will be autonomous individuals who question narratives of “normalcy,” including heteronormativity. Black queer mothers are carefully considering the values they want to pass onto their children, which makes the emphasis on intentionality important in how they go about making parenting decisions.

Second, the findings contribute an additional perspective on intergenerational family dynamics within Black families. In this study, Black queer mothers navigated informal support by *queering* narratives of family closeness. To *queer* means to challenge what is deemed normal or to offer an unexpected way of doing something (Gibson, 2014). Black queer mothers intentionally differentiated their worldview from the needs, wants, and desires of their extended family. In doing so, they experienced a complex relationship between being Black and queer while maintaining a sense of individuation and relating to their families of origin. Informed by structural intersectionality, the interview prompts in the study encouraged Black queer mothers to consider how their Blackness and queerness converged to influence a qualitatively different decision-making process than that of mothers with different racial or sexual identities to determine who had access to their children (Crenshaw, 1991). Congruent with previous research, mothers actively negotiated how they engaged with family members (e.g., parents, siblings, and extended family) based on the level of queer acceptance they perceived (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013; Moore, 2011; Pastrana, 2014). Some Black queer mothers described how they were adjusting to the reality of not having certain family members be consistent supportive figures in their lives, and the lives of their children by extension, because of homophobic beliefs or heteronormative biases. Instead of conforming to the expectations of their family members, most mothers were empowered to challenge these perspectives as a means of survival by privileging their self-agency even if others disagreed (Collins, 1994, 2000). Being the filters of information for their children requires boundary-setting to prevent having to “undo” any teachings their children receive. Black queer mothers use their insight of past interactions to determine how they want to move forward in familial relationships and the role they want these relationships to have in the lives of their children.

Third, findings demonstrate the prevalence of therapy utilization among Black queer mothers. Given the mental health stigma within Black communities (Pederson, 2023; Williams et al., 2007), previous studies have illustrated how therapy is not viewed as a viable option among Black individuals (Harris et al., 2019; Ward et al., 2009). However, many mothers in this study reported accessing mental health services to help them address issues of self-esteem, trauma, or relationship dynamics. Previous research provides suggestions for approaching mental health issues with Black LGBTQ+ clients (Gibbs & Jones, 2013) as well as emphasizing the impact of homophobia and stigma on mental health outcomes among Black sexual minority women (Thorpe et al., 2019). However, the findings from this study contribute to understanding how helpful talk therapy is for Black queer mothers by hearing their firsthand accounts of their experiences in individual or couple's therapy. Of the mothers who have utilized therapy, only one reported tension in her experience. Consistent with previous research (Arora et al., 2022; Memon et al., 2016), this mother named logistical and financial barriers in being able to locate a therapist who she can "actually talk to stuff about." Noting the lack of diversity in the field of psychotherapy also contributed to her lack of access. For the mothers who disclosed the helpfulness of therapy, they note that their experience was helpful because of the insight they gained about themselves. Black queer mothers' engagement of motherwork (e.g., power, survival, and identity) was evident in the way they relied on therapy to help improve their well-being and their confidence in being able to meet the needs of their children (Collins, 1994). For mothers in the sample who were coupled at the time of therapy utilization, they additionally described the benefit of having a therapist to educate them on communication skills and conflict resolution with their partners. These findings emphasize the critical need for mental health

professionals who can competently meet the needs of Black queer women given the prevalence of therapy utilization among this sample.

Lastly, the participatory nature of photovoice engaged participants in generating visual data (e.g., photos) (Strack et al., 2022). Given their participation in data collection, Black queer mothers had autonomy over how they were visually depicted in this study (i.e., representational intersectionality) (Crenshaw, 1991). Two distinct contributions were drawn. First, researchers and community resource providers should be mindful of their assumptions of what constitutes a family by expanding their understanding and recruitment of individuals who are part of diverse family structures. One participant emphasized “there is no blueprint for a family.” Others echoed this sentiment by expressing a desire to see their photographs “spark conversation” about Black queer motherhood. Furthermore, the use of their photos and photo descriptions in publications and presentations allows me to center their voices in “critical dialogues” about their experiences (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 369). Second, mothers described the intricate balance of identifying and differentiating their experiences as Black queer mothers compared to other family structures. One participant shared, “motherhood across the board is gonna be very similar in a lot of ways, no matter what our differences as people are.” Despite their similarities and differences to other families, Black queer mothers are deserving of access to affordable housing, affirming healthcare, and inclusive daycares or schools. These contributions illustrate the need for family science researchers and policy makers to be intentional in how they include Black queer mothers in family-focused research and policy. The failure to consider Black queer mothers’ experiences risks further replicating and reinforcing the subordination of Black women.

This study contributes to the Black feminist-informed scholarship on Black queer motherhood. These findings consider the influence of queerness on motherwork, building

informal support, and accessing community resources. Given Black queer mothers' keen awareness of relational and institutional practices that support racist, sexist, and homophobic ideologies, the results suggest Black queer mothers engage in an intentional mothering role by strategically protecting themselves and their families.

### **Revisiting Theoretical Framework**

This study was situated within the theoretical framework of Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 2000) and emphasizes the critical component of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). Black Feminist Thought, namely the concept of motherwork (Collins, 1994), concretizes the maternal labor of Black women while intersectionality theorizes the significance and uniqueness of this experience by situating Black queer mothers within a societal landscape of power and oppression. The “simultaneity of oppression” (Smith, 1983, p. xxxiv) is at the core of Black feminist understanding; thus, conceptualizing the interlocking nature of Black queer mothers' lived experience was an essential aim of this study. In this section, I illustrate how Crenshaw's (1991) three categories of intersectionality (e.g., political, structural, and representational intersectionality) were depicted in the experiences of Black queer mothers' engaging in Collins' (2000) motherwork (e.g., power, survival, and identity). These concepts were evident as Black queer mothers described (a) navigating oppressive symptoms, (b) determining the power they have in raising their children, (c) relying on their values to aid in keeping their families safe, and (d) the way they foster a strong sense of self and community in the families they are cultivating and nurturing.

Crenshaw (1989) argued that intersectionality recognizes multiple oppressions are not suffered individually because oppression exists beyond a single-axis framework. Therefore, it was theorized from a Black feminist perspective that Black queer mothers would describe an

interlocking experience of being “multiply-burdened” in individual, relational, and institutional systems (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). For example, many mothers spoke about their experience being misunderstood and therefore invalidated by others who did not consider the intersections of identity and how that shapes one’s perspective. Several mothers spoke about the challenges associated with navigating healthcare spaces and daycares or schools due to anticipated or perceived discrimination. These examples demonstrate the absence of institutions enforcing anti-discrimination policies. For instance, the increase in state legislation targeting LGBTQ+ families (e.g., “Don’t Say Gay” laws) restricts the visibility of LGBTQ+ people and topics concerning their experiences in public schools (Kline et al., 2022; Rosky, 2022). Additionally, legislation banning Critical Race Theory in public school curriculum further erases and marginalizes Black families by preventing culturally relevant pedagogy in public education (Bissell, 2023; Grice, 2022). Moreover, the protection of healthcare providers’ religious or moral convictions permits discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals and families (e.g., Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993) (Barak-Corren, 2021). Institutionalizing the discrimination of Black and LGBTQ+ individuals may pave a pathway for discrimination in several domains of public life (Stern, 2014). The connectedness of inclusive school districts and affirming healthcare providers further encompasses political intersectionality by illustrating how Black queer mothers remain cognizant of the webbed impact institutional discrimination has on their survival. The vantage point of Black queer mothers in society informs the power they have in challenging systems (e.g., institutional practices and policies) that seek to invalidate or erase their existence as Black queer women raising children.

In their experience of navigating informal and formal systems of oppression, it was important to consider how Black queer mothers challenge dominant discourses on race, gender,

and sexuality in pursuit of claiming autonomy over their wants, needs, and desires. Given institutional practices and policies have differential outcomes for women of color (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), I anticipated hearing Black queer mothers describe experiences where their Blackness and queerness uniquely intersected to inform their survival strategies and the power they had to carry these out (Collins, 1994; 2000). For example, Black queer mothers reported a variety of strategies they employed to undermine oppressive institutions by refusing to conform to racist, hetero or cisnormative ideas of Blackness. One intentional way that Black queer mothers go about this is to place their children in community-centric environments where both children and mothers can receive support, whether this be daycares and schools or the informal relationships that Black queer mothers build and maintain. Black queer mothers demonstrate structural intersectionality by using their markedly different worldview from dominant discourses on race, sexuality, and gender to construct an empowering yet rich inner world for their children (Crenshaw, 1991). In doing so, their children are built to survive today's world by teaching them autonomy, self-esteem, and acceptance of their identity as a Black or multiracial queer family (Collins, 1994; 2000).

In this study, Black queer mothers expressed a desire to access community resources (e.g., daycare or school, therapy, doctor's offices, human services, photographers, summer camps, etc.) that represent their identity as Black and queer individuals. This can be done by seeking professionals who are people of color, who are openly accepting of a queer family identity, and who promote empathy and care toward Black or queer individuals. This illustrates the mothers' attentiveness to representational intersectionality because of the way Black queer mothers strategically assessed resource providers and pay close attention to the marketing of available resources to decide which community resources will best represent their needs and

desires as parents. Feeling empowered to make informed decisions may be a way of reconciling the powerless position one has in society. Having autonomy in whether one decides to access a space or not while also considering the context in which resources are organized converge to make Black queer mothers even more aware of their marginalized position in society. Therefore, word-of-mouth, customer reviews, and web-based community can be sites of support in helping Black queer mothers locate such resources within one's community. This can help to alleviate stress associated with anticipated discrimination of one's identity and speaks to the community-mindedness of Black feminism as they seek to maintain family survival (Collins, 2000; 2020).

### **Clinical Implications**

There are important suggestions and clinical implications to consider when working with Black queer mothers. Participants reported possible presenting problems such as anxiety, conflict resolution, and family of origin dynamics. In general, these were presenting problems described but not necessarily experienced by each Black queer mother in a therapy context. Thus, this section will integrate these experiences and provide therapists with a feminist-informed Family Systems Theory approach to critically examine differentiation and emotional cut-offs, recommendations for therapists and supervisors constructing genograms with Black queer mothers, and a feminist-informed interpretation of the role of the therapist.

Family Systems Theory, first proposed by Murray Bowen, has been critiqued in the feminist family therapy literature for being intellect-driven and focused on individuality within a system (Knudson-Martin, 1994; Libow et al., 1982). For example, the concept of differentiation of self is used in Family Systems Theory to inspire change (Bowen, 1976). Differentiation is defined as the capacity of an individual to function independent of their family system by using cognitive awareness to decide how one maintains a degree of emotional closeness (Kerr &

Bowen, 1988). Knudson-Martin (1994) argued that emotion and intellect parallel one another, which contradicts the differentiation process of intellectualizing emotion to manage the intensity of anxiety within a system (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Rather than intellect and emotion being competing forces, a feminist-informed perspective would suggest that differentiation includes “both the feeling and intellectual systems to make choices regarding their behavior” (Knudson-Martin, 1994, p. 42).

In connecting to the experiences of participants, Black queer mothers turned to therapists for emotional support as they navigated internal and interpersonal conflict; thus, therapists would serve these clients well by steering away from privileging cognitive awareness and instead focus on emotional processes as they arise in session (e.g., feeling anxious) (Knudson-Martin, 1994). Likewise, therapists should have an awareness of how historical representations of Black women, such as the “strong Black woman” (e.g., being resilient), robs the ability of Black women to experience and process intense emotional experiences (Carter & Rossi, 2019). One activity for therapists using a feminist-informed family systems approach would be to direct an individual, couple, or family to express what they need in a supportive relationship, especially if conflict with others is centered on unmet needs. For instance, many participants in the study discussed instances of miscommunication and conflict within their romantic or familial relationships; thus, it would be important for therapists to attune to the reasons for Black queer mothers’ strained relationship dynamics (e.g., recent transition to motherhood, different parenting expectations compared to one’s partner or co-parent, and implicit or explicit discrimination by family members, peers, or community resource providers). As the clients share their unmet relational needs (e.g., feeling misunderstood and invalidated by others), they would be instructed to simultaneously reflect on their emotional experience of expressing a need and, if

applicable, how hearing their partner or family member's response affected them. The aim of this activity would be to bring a client's awareness to both their cognitive and emotional processes by helping them to observe their emotional experience and cognitively understand the reason underlying their emotional reactivity (Knudson-Martin, 1994). Underlying reasons could be due to the multi-layered oppression Black queer women face because their race, sexuality, and gender are socially minoritized. Family Systems Theory already provides a framework to consider how one's level of differentiation is dependent upon factors such as stress and individual differences in responding to stressors (Brown, 1999); thus, it would be imperative for therapists to assess how Black queer mothers experience and cope with the stress of discrimination in their daily lives and within their family relationships.

Individual differences also determine the degree of communication individuals engage in within their family systems (Brown, 1999). A balanced approach to differentiation could support Black queer mothers in deciding how they want to maintain a healthy degree of emotional closeness and separation with family members who have contrasting worldviews and values than their own (Haefner, 2014). For example, Black queer mothers in the study engaged in boundary setting with certain family members to maintain a degree of familial closeness. These clients would be best served by therapists who seek to understand and validate their reasons for doing so and by encouraging clients to identify how it feels to emotionally process and articulate this experience of boundary setting in a therapy session. In applying Family Systems Theory, therapists will also be able to access language that further explains the tension Black queer mothers experience within a strained family relationship by explaining the emotional process of fusion or lack of differentiation (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Fusion refers to the emotional dependence on another individual (Bowen, 1976; Papero, 2014) either by feeling a responsibility

for another's reactions or engaging in an emotional cutoff (e.g., limiting physical contact or withdrawing emotionally). A feminist critique suggests concurrently addressing excessive togetherness and individuality to teach clients how to function autonomously at the same time that they are learning how to connect with others (Knudson-Martin, 1994). To further combat fusion, therapists can assist Black queer mothers by increasing their awareness of how to foster "the reciprocal experiences of togetherness and separateness" (Knudson-Martin, 1994, p. 42). In doing so, individuals and couples are able to gauge their self-responsibility in maintaining conflict while simultaneously expressing their need for connection (e.g., attachment) (Knudson-Martin, 1994). For instance, Black queer mothers in the study seemed to manage their own emotional reactivity within their family systems and immediate relationships as a means of maintaining a low conflict relationship. Given most of the participants in this study utilized therapy at some point in time, it may be that their therapists assisted them in being able to cope with the intensity of an uncomfortable emotional experience in order to discern healthy versus unhealthy relationship dynamics. Therapists can further raise a client's awareness of their emotional and cognitive processes by engaging the client in constructing a family genogram.

A genogram is a sophisticated family tree outlining intergenerational relationship dynamics between family members (Bowen, 1978; Winek, 2017). Genograms can be used to trace three or more generations of "family narratives" across time and space (McGoldrick et al., 2008, p. 7). McGoldrick and colleagues (2008) argued that genograms are situated within a socio-cultural context, which lends itself to a feminist perspective. The use of a Critical Genogram (CritG) to address the influence of power dynamics in the lives of Black queer mothers, especially in how they relate to others (Kosutic et al., 2009), further aligns with a feminist-informed approach. CritG focuses on the deleterious impact of racism, homophobia, and

sexism by raising an “awareness of interlocking forms of oppression, together with action aimed at dismantling oppressive practices” (Kosutic et al., 2009, p. 153). This complex awareness of oppression, or *critical consciousness*, would allow Black queer mothers to dream of ways they can actively resist systems that perpetuate subordination (Kosutic et al., 2009). This tool can be used to better understand how clients’ presenting problems are supported by their family of origin dynamics embedded within larger social structures. For supervisors, the CritG can be taught and incorporated during any point of supervision. Informed by Kosutic and colleagues (2009), supervisees are advised to create a CritG of their own family system to examine their “social ecologies” as individuals embedded within a unique context of power (p. 153). As therapists, it is necessary to be able to analyze and understand interlocking forms of oppression (e.g., sexism, racism, homophobia, etc.) because it contributes to a therapist’s ability to ethically assess and treat clients (Garcia et al., 2009). Genograms are also valuable tools for the therapist and supervisor because of the reliance on client or supervisee-generated reports of family functioning. For therapists and supervisors who are mindful not to privilege their expert status over an individual’s lived experience, genograms can assist them in fully understanding the client or supervisee’s perspective of their own family system. In a supervisory relationship, the supervisor can instruct the supervisee to explore how power and oppression define and maintain different social locations, including the influence of power dynamics in the supervisee’s lived experience (Kosutic et al., 2009). The CritG is one of many interventions that supervisors can rely on to facilitate raising the critical consciousness among clinicians in training, which therapists can then apply in their work with Black queer mothers. Black queer mothers’ accounts of historical and current patterns of family functioning, within an oppressive socio-cultural

landscape, can aid a therapist's understanding of how these clients engage in relationships, including the knowledge base they draw from when viewing themselves in relation to others.

In Family Systems Theory, the role of the therapist is to be a differentiated coach who can assist clients in exploring and resolving unhelpful patterns of relating to others such as their parents, siblings, extended family members, partners, or children (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). From a feminist family systems perspective, therapists are additionally encouraged to consider the oppressive systems in which impact the way Black queer women relate to others (Kosutic et al., 2009). Therapists who take a Bowenian approach to therapy are advised to be highly self-aware of their own family of origin dynamics, especially being mindful of their own experience of fusion and differentiation with others and how pitfalls in relating to others may impact the therapeutic process (Bahr, 1990). Feminist-informed family systems therapists must also contend with their own privilege and subjugation to prevent one's values (un)intentionally obscuring the therapeutic process (Hardy, 2018). For example, therapists can avoid reactive reflexes by self-interrogating their own assumptions of Blackness, queerness, and motherhood (Hardy, 2016; Hardy & Laszloffy, 1995). Consultation with one's supervisor or colleagues can also facilitate a process of self-interrogation because this can provide the therapist with an opportunity to verbalize any unspoken biases that could implicitly guide the therapeutic process and lead to unintended consequences (e.g., ruptured trust with clients and poor therapy outcomes).

The nuances of individual, couple, or family therapy with Black queer mothers can be further explored with other clinical models. For example, contextual family therapy is another intergenerational clinical model that emphasizes *relational ethics* centered on principles such as trust, fairness, justice, loyalty, and entitlement (Hargrave & Pfitzer, 2003). When tensions are experienced due to unfair and unjust entitlement, principles of trust and loyalty can be threatened

(Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984; Fowers & Wenger, 1997). However, the findings from this study suggest that Black queer mothers are disinterested in maintaining the familial status quo as a means of demonstrating trust and loyalty, rather they seemed more concerned with *queering* family narratives (Lumpkin et al., 2008). Given the way Black queer mothers described their internal decision-making processes in close relationships when worldviews differed, I saw a window of opportunity to imagine how their family systems could be explored in therapy using a feminist-informed family systems approach. Therapists are advised to interrogate their own family systems and biases to meet the needs of Black queer mothers and their families. An awareness of interlocking systems of oppression and self-accountability on behalf of the therapist can complement the perspectives of Black queer mothers and may help to foster a meaningful therapeutic alliance.

### **Limitations**

While this study made several contributions to the literature on Black queer motherhood and Black feminist theory, there were several limitations to this research. First, the findings in this study should be considered within the context of the ten participants within the study. Both the narrow sampling criteria and small sample size limit the generalizability of these findings (Gibbs et al., 2007; Queirós et al., 2017). Second, socioeconomic status (SES) was indicated based on participant-generated descriptions during the interviews of their occupation instead of including SES in the eligibility questionnaire to inform the sample demographics. Additionally, because of the exclusion of an SES question, added parameters such as education, income, and material assets were not included (Khairnar et al., 2021). Third, based on the occupations described, majority of the participants were affiliated with traditionally well-paying jobs such as being a professor, molecular microbiologist, nurse, attorney, or engineer. Only one

participant spoke openly about her experience with financial insecurity. Mothers from different socioeconomic backgrounds may have demonstrated different ways of experiencing Black queer motherhood. Fourth, the data was analyzed and interpreted by a genderqueer person who is not raising children. I approached this study by considering my insider-outsider status as a Black queer person who is an outsider to the experiences of being a cis identifying mother. Having an insider status afforded me the cultural familiarity with how participants described the impact of racism or homophobia on their experiences as well as allowed me to ask probing questions when responses were vague or unclear. In contrast, not fully understanding the experience of being a cis identifying mother may have had the unintended consequence of me not asking probing questions that better capture a cis motherhood experience. Fifth, participants in the study were not required to list the ages of their children, however most mothers reported raising children who were under the age of 12. Thus, the benefits and challenges of parenting a child over the age of 12 may contrast with what was described by participants in this study. Lastly, due to time constraints with data collection, analyzing, and reporting deadlines, participants were not invited to engage in member checking. This is a method of eliciting feedback post-interview from participants to help improve the accuracy, credibility, and rigor of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Potential to misinterpret certain aspects of Black queer motherhood is evident due to participants not being invited to engage with the interpreted data. These are important limitations to consider and address in future research studies on Black queer motherhood to increase the visibility and variability of underrepresented experiences.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings from this study demonstrate a need for future research that examines the influence of relationship status, child and partner gender, and geographical location in the

experience of queer motherwork, navigating informal support, and accessing community resources. First, participants in this study varied in their report of relationship status; however, seven of the ten participants were in a committed relationship. Seeking to understand the differences in relationship status, and partner involvement by extension, may reveal different parenting experiences and perceived support between partnered and non-partnered mothers. Second, regarding the seven participants who reported being in a committed relationship, four reported being married to a cis woman, two reported being married to a cis man, and one reported being married to a non-binary partner. While there were overlaps in their experiences as Black queer mothers, there is still room to better understand the different experiences based on partner gender by recruiting a larger cohort sample classified into categories based on partner gender. Third, fourteen children in total were mentioned across interviews. Of the fourteen children described, one is non-binary and five are cis boys. Future research may explore the role of child gender in influencing family safety, parenting choices, and parenting feedback received. Lastly, the focus on accessing community resources could be further explored by recruiting a sample of mothers who represent both urban and rural locations within each geographic region in the United States. Most mothers in this study were situated in urban locations along the East Coast. Despite the increase in access to virtual offices, the access one has to community-based affirming resources may vary by location. The research area of Black queer mothers engaging in motherwork, navigating informal support, and accessing community resources is scarce; therefore, additional research is needed to explore these concepts within this population.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to take a Black-feminist informed approach to understanding the experience of Black queer mothers engaging queer motherwork, navigating

informal support, and accessing community resources. This study generated responses using semi-structured interviews and photo-elicited prompts. RTA informed the analytic plan and resulted in four major themes and six subthemes that represent the findings and help to answer the research questions (see Figure 2 in Appendix M for thematic mapping process). Findings suggest that autonomy and self-awareness are essential elements in queer motherwork. Black queer mothers describe their resistance to social conditioning which negatively impacts Black queer family survival. The added emphasis on Black queer acceptance is also important to Black queer mothers because they describe wanting their children to thrive in spaces that promote acceptance and inclusion of identities that have been marginalized in society. Creating supportive environments within the home that aid emotional development among children is another way Black queer mothers reclaim their power. This study provides an in-depth exploration of Black queer mothers' unique experiences fighting for the "longevity and holistic well-being" (Watson & Baxley, 2021, p. 146) of their children, their families, and themselves.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Informed Consent

#### VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY Consent for Participants in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

**Title of Project:** Intentional Mothering: A Black Feminist-Informed Thematic Analysis of How Black Queer Mothers Engage in Motherwork, Navigate Informal Support, and Access Community Resources

**Principal Investigator:** April L. Few-Demo, Ph.D. [alfew@vt.edu](mailto:alfew@vt.edu)

**Co-Investigator:** Stephanie “Steph” Cooke, M.A. [cookesc@vt.edu](mailto:cookesc@vt.edu)

**Key Information:** The following is a short summary of this study to help you decide whether or not to be a part of this study. More detailed information is listed later on in this form. The goal of this study is to learn more about how Black queer mothers engage in motherhood, navigate informal support, and access community resources. Roughly 20 Black queer mothers will be interviewed for this study. The researcher doing this study is Steph Cooke, a doctoral candidate at Virginia Tech in the Department of Human Development and Family Science.

**Detailed Information:** The following is more detailed information about this study in addition to the information listed above.

#### Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to Steph Cooke by phone at 540-818-0047 or by email at [cookesc@vt.edu](mailto:cookesc@vt.edu) or April Few-Demo by email at [alfew@vt.edu](mailto:alfew@vt.edu). This research has been reviewed and approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may communicate with them at 540-231-3732 or [irb@vt.edu](mailto:irb@vt.edu) if:

- You have questions about your rights as a research subject
- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team
- You cannot reach the research team
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team to provide feedback about this research

#### How many people will be studied?

We plan to include about twenty people in this research study.

#### What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

You are welcome to ask questions about this study. If you decide to participate:

- (1) First we will ask that you complete an eligibility questionnaire (lasting approximately 10 to 15 minutes). You will answer the questions via an online survey (QuestionPro). You will give your consent or permission to be in the study if you are eligible to participate.

- (2) Once you are considered eligible to participate, we will schedule your first interview. The interview will take place online via videoconferencing (Zoom). The interview should take between 60 and 90 minutes to complete. We will go over the consent form prior to beginning the interview. Your responses to the interview questions will be audio recorded.
- (3) Upon completion of this interview, you will be invited to participate in the photovoice portion of the study. You will give your consent (e.g., sign a photo release form) for the researchers to include your photographs as part of our research findings. Photovoice is a visual research method in which you will be instructed to photograph and reflect on two images that you will submit online (via email, [cookes@vt.edu](mailto:cookes@vt.edu)) to the researcher. We estimate this task will take between 25 and 30 minutes to complete.
- (4) A second interview will be conducted upon receiving your photographs. It should take between 30 and 45 minutes to complete. This interview will take place online via videoconferencing (Zoom). Your responses to the interview questions will be audio recorded.
- (5) Once you complete both interviews and the photovoice submission, you will be done with participating in this study. At the end of the interview, I will ask if you would like to be contacted in the future to provide feedback on the findings of this study.

**What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?**

You can leave the research at any time, for any reason, and it will not be held against you. There are no negative consequences associated with withdrawing from this study.

If you decide to leave the research, you will not face any penalties and will receive the full \$50 e-gift card if you have begun the interview.

If you decide to leave the research, contact the investigator so that the investigator can delete any of your information associated with the research study. You are welcome to provide a rationale for your withdrawal from participation, but you do not have to provide this information.

**Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me? (Detailed Risks)**

The risks of being in this study are very low. However, you might have some emotional reactions such as anger or sadness. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. You can stop the interview at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

**What happens to the information collected for the research?**

We will make every effort to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study and medical records, only to people who have a need to review this information.

We cannot promise complete confidentiality. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB, Human Research Protection Program, and other authorized representatives of Virginia Tech. Your participation in this study is confidential. This means that no one, except the researchers will see or hear your answers to the interview questions. After you finish the two interviews, the audio recording of your interviews will be separated from any paperwork that has your name on it. When this happens, your individual interviews will be

assigned a code number and it will not be possible to match your name to your answers to the interview questions.

I will type your responses to the interview questions. While doing this, I will remove your name, the names of your family members, and any other information that can be used to identify you. The written copy of your interview answers will also get a code number.

All information from this study will be stored on a Virginia Tech Google Drive folder that only the primary investigator and I will be able to access. All computer files with your identifying information will be encrypted and stored on Steph Cooke's password protected laptop. The typed answer to your interview questions will be kept. Only the researchers will be able to use this information. Upon completing the transcriptions, audio files will be permanently deleted. Photographs will be included as part of the findings of this study (see photo release form).

Confidentiality will be protected, unless we learn about current child abuse or elder abuse. Abuse can be emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. This information must be given to the appropriate government authorities. Also, if we think that you are a threat to yourself or others, we must report this to authorities. These are the only times that your confidentiality will not be protected.

It is possible that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view this study's collected data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of this protection of human subjects involved in research.

If identifiers are removed from your private information or samples that are collected during this research, that information or those samples could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without your additional informed consent.

The results of this research study may be presented in summary form at conferences, in presentations, reports to the sponsor, academic papers, and as part of a thesis/dissertation.

### **Can I be removed from the research without my OK?**

The person in charge of the research study or the sponsor can remove you from the research study without your approval. Possible reasons for removal include instances where a report of elder abuse or neglect must be made.

### **What else do I need to know?**

Any expenses accrued for seeking or receiving medical or mental health treatment will be your responsibility and not that of the research project, research team, or Virginia Tech.

If you agree to take part in this research study, you will receive two egift cards, totaling \$50, for your time and effort.

## Appendix B: Social Media Post Wording

### Version 1.0

We are recruiting mothers who identify as Black and queer in the US for a research study about how Black queer mothers engage in motherhood, navigate social support, and access community resources. Mothers that participate will be asked to complete two interviews over Zoom and submit two photographs capturing their experience of motherhood and community.

You are eligible to participate if you are:

- Between the ages of 21 and 50 years old
- A Black, cisgender woman
- Identify as queer (self-identified attraction to more than one gender)
- Raising a child under the age of 18 years old
- In a committed relationship with a cis woman for at least a year

You must have access to a computer with internet. Data will be deidentified and protected. Compensation will be provided for both interviews and two photographs submitted (\$50). This study is approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (#22-284).

If interested or you have questions, please fill out this survey (<https://virginiatech.questionpro.com/t/AVbBHZseo8>) or contact the researcher at [cookesc@vt.edu](mailto:cookesc@vt.edu). Please share with other mothers who may be interested. Thank you!

### Version 2.0

We are recruiting mothers who identify as Black and queer in the US for a research study about how Black queer mothers engage in motherhood, navigate social support, and access community resources. Mothers that participate will be asked to complete two interviews over Zoom and submit two photographs capturing their experience of motherhood and community.

You are eligible to participate if you are:

- Between the ages of 21 and 50 years old
- A Black, cisgender woman
- Identify as queer (self-identified attraction to more than one gender)
- Raising a child under the age of 18 years old
- In a committed relationship with a cis woman, trans woman, or non-binary partner for at least a year

You must have access to a computer with internet. Data will be deidentified and protected. Compensation will be provided for both interviews and two photographs submitted (\$50). This study is approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (#22-284).

If interested or you have questions, please fill out this survey (<https://virginiatech.questionpro.com/t/AVbBHZseo8>) or contact the researcher at [cookesc@vt.edu](mailto:cookesc@vt.edu). Please share with other mothers who may be interested. Thank you!

**Version 3.0 (Final)**

We are recruiting mothers who identify as Black and queer in the US for a research study about how Black queer mothers engage in motherhood, navigate social support, and access community resources. Mothers that participate will be asked to complete two interviews over Zoom and submit two photographs capturing their experience of motherhood and community.

You are eligible to participate if you are:

- Between the ages of 21 and 50 years old
- A Black, cisgender woman
- Identify as queer (self-identified attraction to more than one gender)
- Raising a child under the age of 18 years old

You must have access to a computer with internet. Data will be deidentified and protected. Compensation will be provided for both interviews and two photographs submitted (\$50). This study is approved by the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (#22-284).

If interested or you have questions, please fill out this survey (<https://virginiatech.questionpro.com/t/AVbBHZseo8>) or contact the researcher at [cookesc@vt.edu](mailto:cookesc@vt.edu). Please share with other mothers who may be interested. Thank you!

**Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer****Recruitment Flyer 1.0**

# RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS WANTED

We are recruiting **mothers who identify as Black and queer** in the US for a research study about how Black queer mothers engage in motherhood, navigate social support, and access community resources. Mothers that participate will be asked to complete two interviews on a HIPAA compliant version of Zoom and submit two photographs capturing their experience of motherhood and community.

**You are eligible to participate if:**

- You are between the ages of 21 and 50 years old
- Identify as a Black, cisgender woman, and experience attraction to more than one gender
- Raising a child under the age of 18 years old
- Are currently in a committed relationship with another cisgender woman for at least one year

Compensation will be provided for both interviews and two photographs submitted (\$50). This research is being conducted by the Department of Human Development and Family Science at Virginia Tech (IRB # 22-284).

**To participate or for more information,  
please contact: Steph Cooke  
cookesc@vt.edu**



## Recruitment Flyer 2.0

# RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS WANTED

We are recruiting **mothers who identify as Black and queer** in the US for a research study about how Black queer mothers engage in motherhood, navigate social support, and access community resources. Mothers that participate will be asked to complete two interviews on Zoom and submit two photographs capturing their experience of motherhood and community.

### You are eligible to participate if:

- You are between the ages of 21 and 50 years old
- Identify as a Black, cisgender woman, and experience attraction to more than one gender
- Raising a child under the age of 18 years old
- Currently in a committed relationship with a cisgender woman, trans woman, or non-binary partner for at least one year

Compensation will be provided for both interviews and two photographs submitted (\$50). This research is being conducted by the Department of Human Development and Family Science at Virginia Tech (IRB # 22-284).

### For more information, please contact:

**Steph Cooke**  
[cookesc@vt.edu](mailto:cookesc@vt.edu)



## Recruitment Flyer 3.0



# RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS WANTED

IRB # 22-284

- **PURPOSE** - To learn how **Black queer mothers** engage in motherhood, navigate social support, and access community resources
- **ELIGIBILITY** - Ages 21 to 50, identify as a Black cis woman, experience attraction to more than one gender, and currently raising a child under the age of 18
- **REQUIREMENT** - Two interviews on Zoom and submit two photographs capturing one's experience of motherhood and community
- **COMPENSATION** - Compensation will be provided for both interviews and two photographs submitted (\$50)

**To participate or for more information, please contact:  
Steph Cooke (cookes@vt.edu)**

## Appendix D: Eligibility Questionnaire

*There were three iterations of the eligibility questionnaire. The following questions represent the final survey.*

### Screening Questions

*(QuestionPro will end survey if not eligible).*

1. How do you identify your racial/ethnic identity?
  - a. Black or African-American *(survey continues)*
  - b. White *(survey ends)*
  - c. American Indian and Alaska Native *(survey ends)*
  - d. Asian *(survey ends)*
  - e. Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander *(survey ends)*
  - f. Two or more races (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_ *(survey continues)*
  
2. How do you identify your gender identity?
  - a. Transgender man/female *(survey ends)*
  - b. Transgender woman/female *(survey ends)*
  - c. Cisgender female (assigned female at birth) *(survey continues)*
  - d. Cisgender male (assigned male at birth) *(survey ends)*
  - e. Non-binary *(survey ends)*
  - f. Gender queer *(survey ends)*
  - g. Agender *(survey ends)*
  - h. Another gender identity (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_ *(survey continues)*
  
3. How old are you? *(Survey ends if potential participant is less than 21 years old or older than 50 years old)*
  
4. How do you identify your sexual orientation?
  - a. Heterosexual/Straight *(survey ends)*
  - b. Lesbian *(survey ends)*
  - c. Gay *(survey ends)*
  - d. Bisexual *(survey continues)*
  - e. Asexual *(survey ends)*
  - f. Pansexual *(survey continues)*
  - g. Queer *(survey continues)*
  - h. Fluid *(survey continues)*
  - i. Another sexual orientation (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_ *(survey continues)*
  
5. Do you have any children?
  - a. Yes *(survey continues)*
    - i. How many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

- ii. Are your children under the age of 18? \_\_\_\_\_ (*If no, survey ends*)
    - iii. Do your children live in the home with you? \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. No (*survey ends*)
- 6. Do you own a cellular device capable of taking digital photos?
  - a. Yes (*survey continues*)
  - b. No (*survey ends*)
- 7. Are you willing to participate in
  - Option A: a virtual interview through Zoom
  - Option B: capture and submit two photographs
  - Option C: participate in a second virtual interview to discuss submitted photographs?
  - a. Only option A
  - b. Both option A and option B
  - c. All of the above – options A, B, and C
  - d. Other: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E: Screening Email Template

### **Script A (*If participants are not eligible*)**

Thank you very much for your time and responses. Unfortunately, you did not meet the inclusion criteria for participation in this study. Please provide your email address if you would like to be contacted about future research participation opportunities: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Script B (*If participants are eligible*)**

Thank you very much for your time and responses. Please provide your email address, phone number, and general availability so the researcher can contact you to schedule an interview:

- a. Email address:
- b. Phone number(s):
- c. Your general availability (please specify days/times of the week that best work for you):

Again, thank you for your time and responses. I will be contacting you in the next 3-5 business days to schedule your interview. I look forward to speaking with you soon! Please feel free to contact me in the meantime if you have any questions or concerns.

Steph Cooke

Personal pronouns: she/her/hers and they/them/theirs

Email address: [cookesc@vt.edu](mailto:cookesc@vt.edu)

IRB Protocol: 22-284

Research supervision provided by A. L. Few-Demo, PhD ([alfew@vt.edu](mailto:alfew@vt.edu))

## Appendix F: Photo Release Form

### Photo Release Form

Intentional Mothering: A Black Feminist-Informed Thematic Analysis of How Black Queer Mothers Engage in Motherwork, Navigate Informal Support, and Access Community Resources

I give permission for public dissemination of my photographs titled:

---

I took these photos as a participant in a research study (IRB #22-284) to convey my perspective on the experiences of being a Black queer mother which is part of a study being carried out by doctoral candidate, Steph Cooke and their research supervisor, Dr. April L. Few-Demo as part of a dissertation study. I understand that the photos may be included in a research report and subsequent professional publications, and other exhibits at local, state, national or international health, public or professional conferences to disseminate the findings from this study. I understand that I may choose to have the photos displayed anonymously or I may choose to have a pseudonym (a different name) used.

\_\_\_\_\_ Include these photos in the research report and subsequent professional publications with my pseudonym listed as the photographer.

\_\_\_\_\_ Include these photos in the research report and subsequent professional publications as taken by an anonymous photographer.

\_\_\_\_\_ Include these photos in any exhibit/presentation with a pseudonym listed as the photographer.

\_\_\_\_\_ Include these photos in any exhibit/presentation as taken by an anonymous photographer.

I understand at any time prior to the printing of the research report I may choose to withdraw my consent for these photos to be included. I understand that I may also decide to change the way I am identified as the photographer at any time prior to the printing of the report or subsequent professional publications. Once the report or subsequent professional publication is published, I may choose to withdraw my release of these photos for possible future publications. I understand I may withdraw my permission for these photos to be included in a health, public or professional exhibit at any time prior to the opening of such exhibit. I understand I may decide to change the way I am identified as the photographer at any time prior to the opening of such an exhibit. I understand that I am being given a copy of this consent form for my own records.

---

**Photographer**

---

**Date**

## **Appendix G: Interview Protocol (First Interview)**

*There were three iterations of the interview protocol. The following questions represent the final interview protocol.*

Thank you for talking with me today. The first interview will take about 60-90 minutes, and it will be audio recorded. Please know that there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers to these questions and that your responses will not be identified with your name. You can withdraw at any point in the study if you feel uncomfortable. Please feel free to ask any questions. Before we begin, are you in a secure, private area that you are confident you will not be disrupted or interrupted? In this interview, we will talk about you and your relationships.

***The first set of questions are about your experience as a mother and parenting.***

1. Motherwork is defined as: The work that you do as a mother in terms of teaching your child who she/he/they are, how much power you have on raising your child, and how you help your child to survive today’s world.
  - a. On a scale of 1 to 5, how much does this definition resonate with you and your experience? With “1” being “strongly disagree” and “5” being “strongly agree.”
2. What are the best things about being a mother?
  - a. How have you felt benefitted as a mother?
3. What are the challenges about being a mother?
  - a. How does being a Black queer mother influence your experience of these challenges?
4. Tell me about a time that you may have felt that being Black and queer influenced your choices in raising your children.
  - a. When did this happen?
  - b. What was going on for you at the time?
  - c. How did you decide what to do?
5. How are decisions about raising a child made?
  - a. Who, if anyone, influences how parenting decisions are made?
  - b. What, if anything, could help you make parenting decisions?
6. Tell me about a time when you received parenting feedback that you disagreed with.
  - a. Who provided the feedback?
  - b. What was that experience like for you?
  - c. What did you decide to do?

*Next, I'd like to ask you about your experience with building supportive relationships.*

7. When we think of family, we may think of certain people in our family.
  - a. Who is considered your family?
  - b. Who is not considered family? And why?
  - c. Who is considered your chosen family? And why?
8. How might, if at all, being Black and queer influence whom you choose to bring around your children? For example, think of certain people in your family who you don't want your children to be around.
  - a. How do you make those decisions?
  - b. Why do you choose certain people over others?
9. How, if at all, do people support you as a Black queer mother?
  - a. How, if at all, do you receive emotional support?
  - b. Physical?
  - c. Financial?
  - d. Spiritual/religious?
  - e. How, if at all, do you receive support from other Black queer mothers? What does that look like?
  - f. When you have sought support, what have you found to be the most helpful? Least helpful?

*Next, I'd like to ask you about your experience accessing community resources.*

10. How, if at all, do you seek out community resources?
  - a. What have you found to be the most helpful as a Black queer mother?
  - b. What have been the challenges, if at all, with locating these resources?
11. What are the ways you participate in LGBTQ+ family programming, if at all?  
*LGBTQ+ family programming is defined as interventions delivered to parents by program facilitators, specifically to create a supportive educational environment where LGBTQ+ families can thrive.*  
*If they participate in LGBTQ+ family programming, these are the prompts:*
  - a. What have you found to be the most helpful as a Black queer mother?
  - b. How did you find LGBTQ+ family programming?

- c. What have been the challenges, if at all, with locating these resources?
- d. How long did it take you to locate these resources?

*If they don't participate in LGBTQ+ family programming, these are the prompts:*

- a. What are the reasons that you do not participate in LGBTQ+ family programming?
- b. What would you need in order to participate?

Those are all the interview questions that I have. Thank you for taking the time to share these things with me.

### **Debrief**

*\*Ask these once recording is turned off*

1. Are you having any strong emotional reactions right now? If so, are you feeling ok to leave? (If not, process a bit with them and give them some time to decompress)
2. Do you have any suggestions to improve the overall interview process?
3. Were there any questions I did not ask that you think would have been useful?
4. Can we contact you when our study is finalized so you can see the outcome of this study?
5. Do you have any final questions?

## Appendix H: Photovoice Interview Protocol (Second Interview)

Thank you for talking with me today. This interview will take about 45-60 minutes, and it will be audio recorded. Please know that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers to these questions and that your responses will not be identified with your name. You can withdraw at any point in the study if you feel uncomfortable. Please feel free to ask any questions. Before we begin, are you in a secure, private area that you are confident you will not be disrupted or interrupted? In this interview, we will talk about the photographs you submitted.

*Describe your Picture:*

1. What is **H**appening in your picture?
2. Why did you take a picture **O**f this?
3. What does this picture **T**ell us about your life?
4. How can this picture provide **O**pportunities for us to improve life?
5. What, if anything, is missing from this picture?

### Appendix I: Photovoice Submission Email

Hi \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for completing the first interview. For the next phase of the research study, I am inviting you to participate in a photography submission. I am asking that participants submit one photograph for each prompt listed below (totaling **two** photos). You will send your photographs in reply to this email. I will invite you to complete a follow-up interview lasting no longer than 1 hour on the time you previously agreed to, unless otherwise stated, to discuss your photographs. Upon completion of photograph submission and interview, you will receive a \$25 digital gift card sent from an automated email.

Prompt A: What does motherhood look like to you?

Prompt B: What does community mean to you as a Black queer mother?

Steph Cooke

Personal pronouns: she/her/hers and they/them/theirs

Email address: [cookesc@vt.edu](mailto:cookesc@vt.edu)

IRB Protocol: 22-284

Research supervision provided by A. L. Few-Demo, PhD ([alfew@vt.edu](mailto:alfew@vt.edu))

## Appendix J: Electronic Privacy Protocol

Hi \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study! We are grateful to hear about your experience. It is important to us that all of your responses will remain de-identified and confidential. To help you take additional precautions to protect your confidentiality and anonymity, here are some security recommendations we suggest:

### Clearing Your Browsing History

If you are using a shared or public computer, here are steps you can take to keep your browsing history private as you complete the online questions and access information about this study:

#### Firefox

- You can click the History button in any new browsing window, or you can always view your browsing history in the History sidebar. Open it by pressing Alt to show the menu bar, then choosing View → Sidebar → History. This gives you a quick look at your history. From this menu you can also View History Sidebar.
- Lastly, you can open your browsing history in the Firefox Library. To open this view, press Alt to show the menu bar, then choose History → Show All History. When viewing your history here, you can highlight individual pages in your history and press Del to delete them. Right-click any item for more options.
- To clear your browsing history in Firefox:
  - Select History.
  - Choose Clear Recent History.
  - The Clear Recent History window will open. In the drop-down menu, choose how far back you want to clear the history, then click Clear Now.

#### Google Chrome

- In any Chrome window navigate to the URL `chrome://history`.
- To clear your browsing history in Chrome:
  - Click the Menu button, choose More tools and then Clear browsing data.
  - Select what data you'd like to clear from your history using the drop-down menu and check the appropriate boxes.
  - When you're ready to clear your history, click Clear browsing data.

### **Safari**

- Open the Safari browser.
- Click the History menu at the top of the screen. The menu lists recent pages from your browsing history, which you can navigate to by clicking on them.
- To edit your history or view it in detail, click Show All History.
- To clear your browsing history in Safari:
  - Open the Show All History view. To delete individual history items, right-click them and choose Delete, or press the Delete key to clear selected history items.
  - To clear everything, click Clear History.
  - Use the drop-down menu to choose how far back to delete your history. Click Clear History.

### **Internet Explorer**

- In an Internet Explorer browser window, click Tools in the upper righthand corner.
- Select Internet Options from the drop-down menu.
- In the General tab, under Browsing history, click the Settings button.
- In the Temporary Internet Files tab, click the View Files button.
- To clear your browsing history (Internet Explorer 7 and above):

- Open a Microsoft Internet Explorer browser window.
- Click Tools in the upper right-hand corner.
- Select Internet Options from the drop-down menu.
- On the General tab, in the Browsing history section, click the Delete button.
- Check the boxes of the data you'd like to clear. Click Delete.

*Note.* Adapted/Reprinted from Smithee, L. (2021). *Emotional Intimacy in Transition: Interpersonal Processes in Transgender-Cisgender Romantic Relationships* (pp. 214-216). [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Virginia Tech.

**Appendix K: Theory Research Question Map (First Interview)**

<b>Intersectionality Theory</b>		<b>Black Feminist Thought (Motherwork)</b>
<p><b>Theoretical Concepts</b></p> <p>Structural – The convergence of “systems of race, gender, and class domination” that demonstrate a qualitatively different impact on women of color compared to other social groups (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1246).</p> <p>Representational – The “cultural construction” of Black women (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). Cultural constructions of Black women are often based on cultural stereotypes and shape the objectification of Black women in society along the axes of race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1991).</p> <p>Political – “Women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas” (Crenshaw, 1991, pp. 1251-1252).</p>		<p><b>Theoretical Concepts</b></p> <p>Power – Ability to feel empowered to decide how to raise one’s children and how to bring children into the world, especially in a nation that oppresses the lived experiences of Black women (Collins, 1994, 2000).</p> <p>Survival – Fighting to undermine oppressive institutions by refusing to confirm to racist, hetero/cisnormative ideas of Blackness to protect themselves and their children from harm (Collins, 1994, 2000).</p> <p>Identity – Resisting the social conditioning that strips away one’s identity by instilling a positive sense of self in their children while simultaneously increasing their children’s self-awareness of their social location (Collins, 1994, 2000).</p>
<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Theoretical Concepts</b>	<b>Interview Questions</b>
<p>RQ1: How do Black queer mothers describe the experience of queer motherwork?</p>	<p>Structural Representational Political Power Survival Identity</p>	<p>Motherwork is defined as: The work that you do as a mother in terms of teaching your child who she/he/they are, how much power you have in raising your child, and how you help your child to survive today’s world.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>On a scale of 1 to 5, how much does this definition resonate with you and your experience? With “1” being “strongly disagree” and “5” being “strongly agree.”</li> </ul>
	<p>Structural Political Power Survival</p>	<p>Tell me about a time that you may have felt that being Black and queer influenced your choices in raising your children.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When did this happen?</li> <li>What was going on for you at the time?</li> </ul>

	Identity	How did you decide what to do?
	Structural Power Survival Identity	What are the challenges about being a mother? How does being a Black queer mother influence your experience of these challenges?
	Power Survival	What are the best things about being a mother? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How have you felt benefitted as a mother?</li> </ul> How are decisions about raising a child made? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who, if anyone, influences how parenting decisions are made?</li> <li>• What, if anything, could help you make parenting decisions?</li> </ul>
	Power	Tell me about a time when you received parenting feedback that you disagreed with. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who provided the feedback?</li> <li>• What was that experience like for you?</li> <li>• What did you decide to do?</li> </ul>
RQ2: How do Black queer mothers build and navigate networks of informal support?	Structural Political Power Identity	How might, if at all, being Black and queer influence whom you choose to bring around your children? For example, think of certain people in your family who you don't want your children to be around. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you make those decisions?</li> <li>• Why do you choose certain people over others?</li> </ul>
	Structural Representational Political Survival	How, if at all, do people support you as a Black queer mother? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How, if at all, do you receive emotional support?</li> <li>• Physical?</li> <li>• Financial?</li> <li>• Spiritual/religious?</li> <li>• How, if at all, do you receive support from other Black queer mothers? What does that look like?</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When you have sought support, what have you found to be the most helpful? Least helpful?</li> </ul>
	Political Survival	<p>When we think of family, we may think of certain people in our family.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who is considered your family?</li> <li>• Who is not considered family? And why?</li> <li>• Who is considered your chosen family? And why?</li> </ul>
RQ3: How do Black queer mothers access community resources?	Structural Political Power Survival	<p>What are the ways you participate in LGBTQ+ family programming, if at all? <i>If they participate in LGBTQ+ family programming, these are the prompts:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have you found to be the most helpful as a Black queer mother?</li> <li>• How did you find LGBTQ+ family programming?</li> <li>• What have been the challenges, if at all, with locating these resources?</li> <li>• How long did it take you to locate these resources?</li> </ul> <p><i>If they don't participate in LGBTQ+ family programming, these are the prompts:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the reasons that you do not participate in LGBTQ+ family programming?</li> <li>• What would you need in order to participate?</li> </ul>
	Structural Political Power	<p>How, if at all, do you seek out community resources?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have you found to be the most helpful as a Black queer mother?</li> <li>• What have been the challenges, if at all, with locating these resources?</li> </ul>

**Appendix L: Theory Research Question Map (Second Interview)**

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Photovoice Prompts and Connection to Theory</b>	<b>P.H.O.T.O. Interview Questions (Hergenrath et al., 2009)</b>
<p>RQ1: How do Black queer mothers describe the experience of queer motherwork?</p>	<p>Prompt A: What does motherhood look like to you?</p> <p>This prompt allows the researcher to examine how Black queer motherhood connects to motherwork (e.g., power, survival, and identity) while also assessing the demonstration of structural, representational, and political intersectionality in their conceptualization of motherhood.</p>	<p>What is happening in your picture?</p> <p>Why did you take a picture of this?</p> <p>What does this picture tell us about your life?</p>
<p>RQ2: How do Black queer mothers build and navigate networks of informal support?</p> <p>RQ3: How do Black queer mothers access community resources?</p>	<p>Prompt B: What does community mean to you as a Black queer mother?</p> <p>This prompt allows the researcher to explore participants' depictions of community (i.e., informal support), which could include resources within one's community. These depictions would allow the researcher to examine how motherwork is utilized in making meaning of community (e.g., power, survival, and identity) and how meaning is constructed based on Black queer mothers' unique positioning in society (e.g., structural, representational, and political intersectionality).</p>	<p>How can this picture provide opportunities for us to improve life?</p> <p>What, if anything, is missing from this picture?</p>

## Appendix M: Findings Handout

### Intentional Mothering: A Black Feminist-Informed Thematic Analysis of How Black Queer Mothers Engage in Motherwork, Navigate Informal Support, and Access Community Resources

#### Purpose of the study

To understand how Black queer mothers experience motherwork as queer mothers, how they build and navigate networks of support, and how they use community resources. The study was guided by intersectionality rooted within the theoretical framework of Black Feminist Thought, as well as an emphasis on motherwork as both a theoretical framework and a concept explored.

#### Data collection procedure

Participants were recruited mostly online through social media (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook). Ten eligible participants completed the first interview. Eight of these ten participants went on to complete the photovoice portion. Participants submitted photos that depicted their meaning of motherhood and community (one photo each). A second interview was conducted to analyze the photos alongside participants.

#### Main findings

Four key themes were identified:

##### Attentiveness and Resistance to Discrimination

Subtheme: Active Reflectivity in Parenting Strategies

##### Promoting Openness of Self-Expression in Child(ren)

Subtheme: Queer Identity Helps Foster Acceptance and Intentionality

##### Negotiating Informal Support

Three subthemes: Barriers to Support, Desiring Like-Minded Social Groups, and Boundaries in Close Relationships Are Critical

##### Emphasis on Finding the “Right” Environment to Meet Family Needs

Subtheme: Utilizing Individual or Couples Therapy

#### Why this study and your experiences matter

This study honors the tireless activist efforts of radical Black feminist mothers who came before and their literary contributions. Black queer motherhood is rich with historical and political significance. The freedoms Black feminists fought for, and are still fighting for today, have helped to create better conditions for Black queer mothers to parent according to their own desires while still navigating a society that oppresses one's existence by not understanding the significance of how race and sexuality impact motherhood.

## Appendix N: Tables and Figures

**Table 1**

*Sample Demographics*

ID	Age Range	Sexual Orientation	Race/Ethnicity	Geographic Location	# of Children	Child's Gender	Occupation	Relationship Status	Motherwork Rating (1 to 5 scale; 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)
M1	21-34	Bisexual	Black/AA	Illinois	1	Cis boy	Unreported	Committed relationship with a non-binary partner	3
M2	35-50	Queer	Black/AA	South Carolina	1	Cis boy	Engineer	Married to a cis woman	2
M3	35-50	Bisexual	Black/Latina	Georgia	1	Cis girl	Teacher	Married to a cis woman	3
M4	21-34	Bisexual	Black/AA	North Carolina	1	Cis boy	Private school employee	Not partnered	5
M5	21-34	Fluid	Black/AA	Georgia	3	Two cis girls, one cis boy	Student Affairs	Married to a cis man	5
M6	21-34	Pansexual	Black/AA	New York	2	Cis girl (stepchild) and non-binary	Molecular microbiologist	Married to a non-binary partner	4
M7	35-50	Queer	Black/AA	Illinois	1	Cis girl	Nurse	Not partnered	5
M8	35-50	Bisexual	Black/AA	New York	2	Two cis girls	Attorney	Married to a cis woman	4.5
M9	21-34	Pansexual	Black/AA	North Carolina	1	Cis boy	Reproductive Rights Non-profit	Dating	5
M10	35-50	Bisexual	Black/White	New York	1	Cis female	Academic	Married to a cis man	4

*Note.* M=Mother, AA=African American

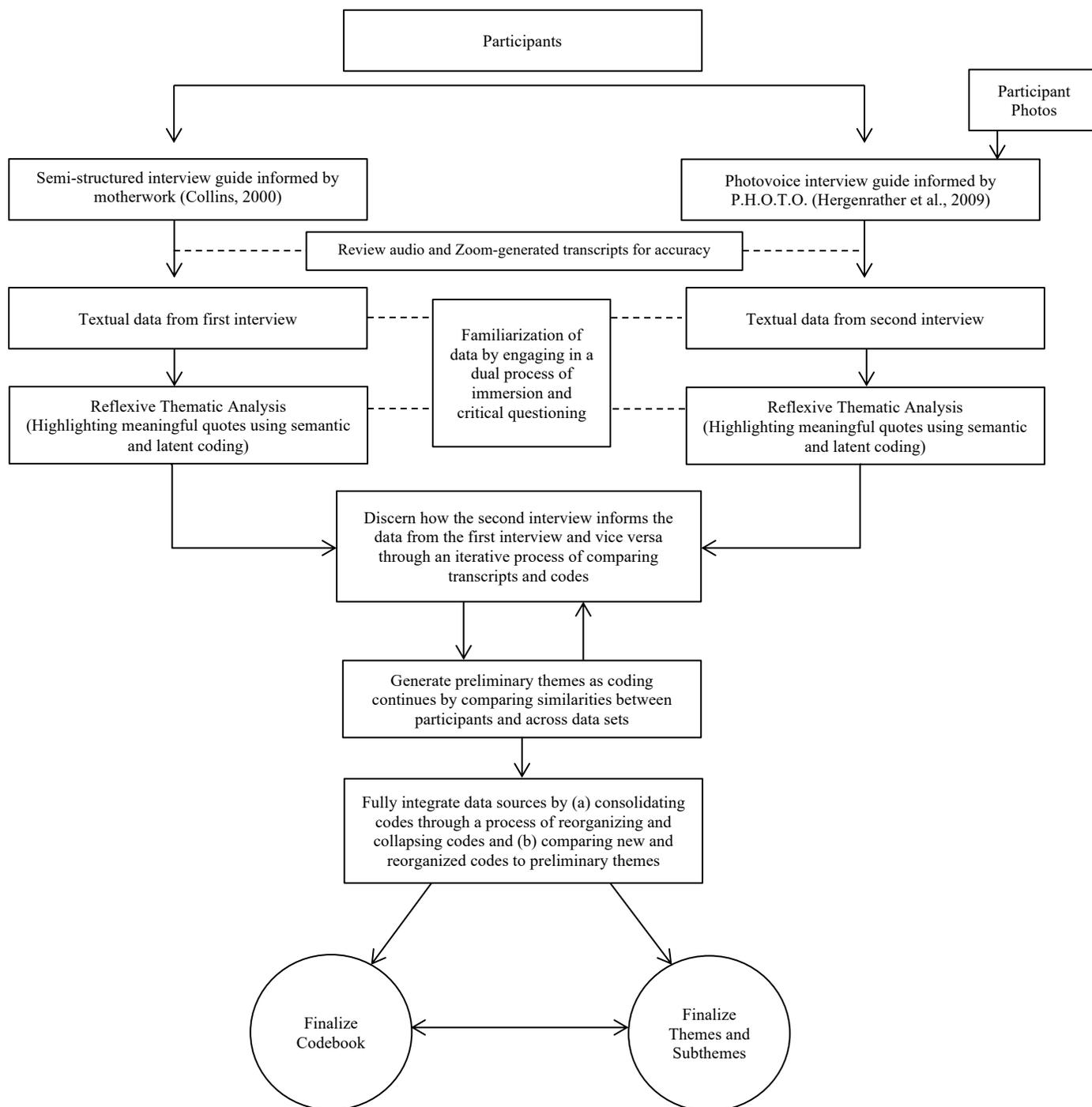
Table 2

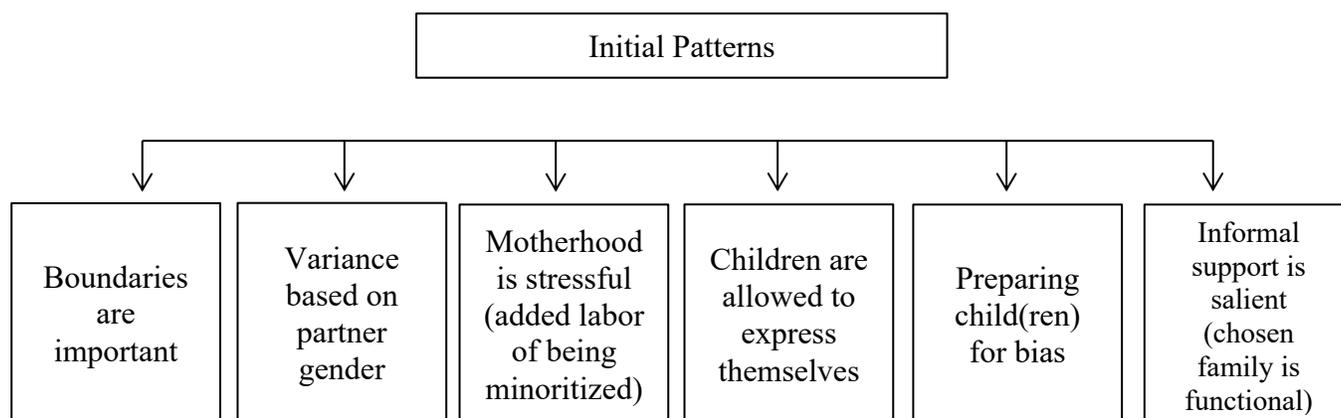
*Themes and Subthemes*

RQ	Themes (Most to least salient)	Representative Quotes	Data Source: Text	Data Source: Photovoice
1	<b>Attentiveness and Resistance to Discrimination</b>	“I mean he has two eyes and two ears, and he sees it. I just want to have a little more control over what he's exposed to, and what he learns and build up his toolbox so to speak. You know, I want him to be confident in, and comfortable with, who we are and not get earfuls of...you know, there's only so much like...I can't control anything that happens in school day to day, right. So, I think you know what we, I, can control to some extent is: I want him to feel and to know that in this community that you know there's plenty of people, if he may hear negative things from someone else, then he can look and see, here's this group of people who love us and support us as we are. And I want that number to outweigh the other.” (M2)	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M7, M8, M9, M10	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M7, M8
	Active Reflectivity in Parenting Strategies	“...parenting decisions that I don't agree with, those are things that have happened in the past with either my own upbringing or my husband's upbringing in ways that have affected us through adulthood. Do you know what I mean? Like, “oh, that's a pattern that I don't want to perpetuate. How do we not have this thing happening in the family anymore?” So, like those generational, cyclical things that come up in families that you want to do your best not to repeat and reify those.” (M10)	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M7, M8, M9, M10	M1, M2, M4, M5, M7
1	<b>Promoting Openness of Self-Expression in Child(ren)</b>	“He definitely gets to have full range and autonomy over his expression of gender in a way that we don't allow our boys to. Like, in a way we don't allow who we decide is cis to even be cis because we don't let them express their true expression of	M1, M2, M5, M6, M7, M8, M9, M10	M1, M2, M3, M6, M7

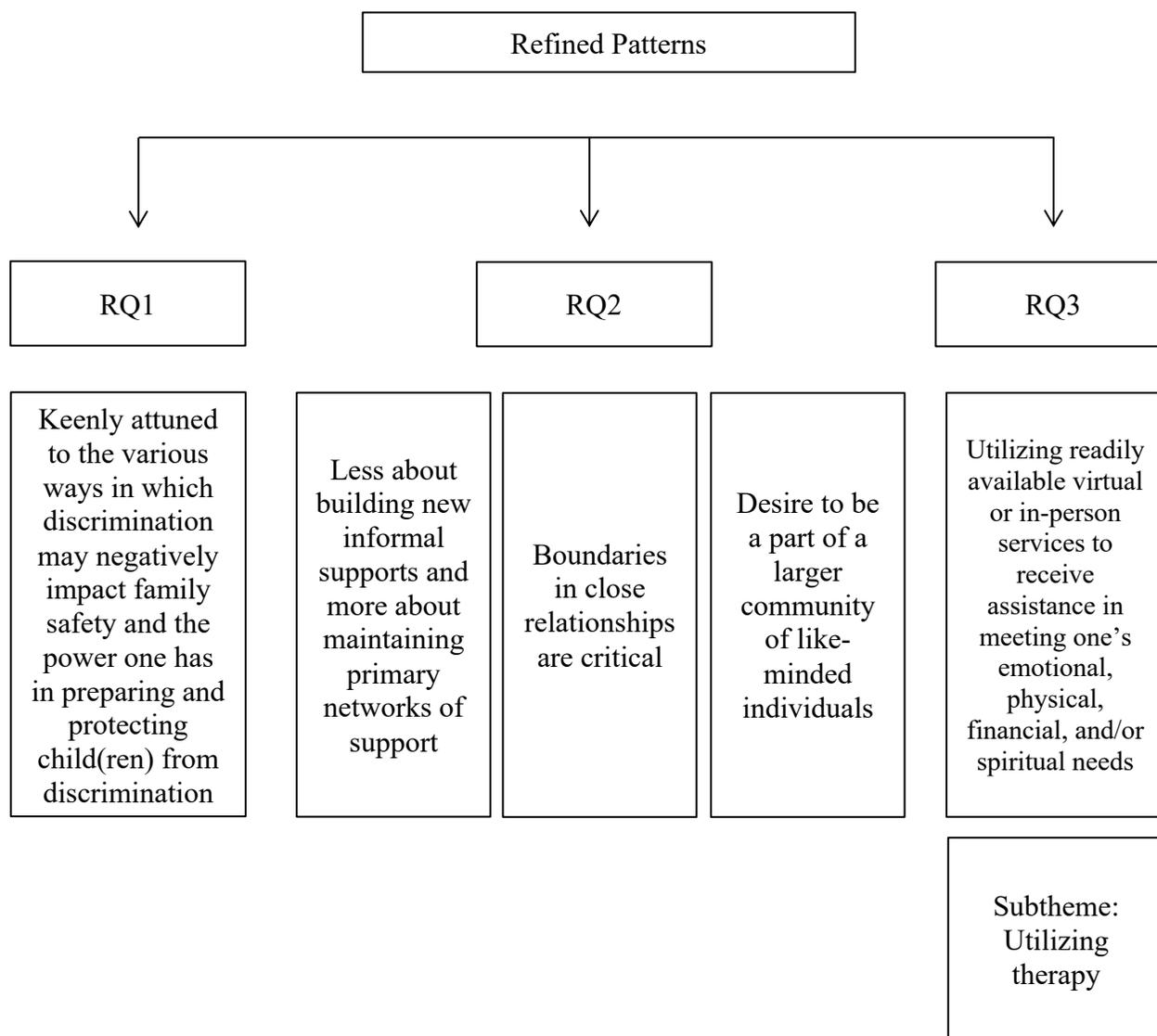
		that gender, so letting my baby pick out his nail polish at Walmart, making nail appointments for him to get his nails, making sure he cares about his hair, and feelings. I'm teaching him how to do his hair as we go. All the little things, and making sure he eats, let him pick out his teas, teaching him just about the beauty on the inside as well as outside, and like just nourishing him in a way that we sort of evade, or have historically evaded.” (M9)		
	Queer Identity Helps Foster Acceptance and Intentionality	“I'm not saying that like being queer makes me inquisitive, but I am saying that being queer definitely makes me more aware of the fact that there's many more ways than one to live. So, I feel like that understanding, and just recognizing that there are so many different ways to be, has been invaluable. It helps me be flexible when I when I'm not feeling flexible, it helps remind me, like, hey, there are more options out there.” (M7)	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M7, M8, M9, M10	M3, M5, M6, M7, M8
2	<b>Negotiating Informal Support</b>	“My mother and I are very close...and coming out to her...her reaction to things, that was difficult, but thankfully, didn't change, didn't completely change our dynamic. And having the discussion with her too, you know, she just said, “though I don't agree with it I'm not going to make enemies of my children.” So, knowing that I still have my mom as someone, that I can go to, very much so, in my life.” (M3)	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M7, M8, M9, M10	M2, M3, M4, M5, M7, M8
	Barriers to Support	“...here's the thing, when you have a kid, and a lot of people that you hang out around don't have kids, you automatically get count out of stuff. So, I work in a place with a lot of art people, and sometimes they'll be like, “oh, well, we've just decided that we're going to go to a show tonight. Do you want to come?” It's like, “no, it's in 4 hours, I can't get a sitter in that time. No, I'm not coming.” You know what I mean. So,	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M7, M8, M9, M10	M1, M2, M4, M5, M6, M7, M8

		people end up being acquaintances because, not like they don't like you, or whatever, you don't like them, it's just that the shape of your lives are so different that it's just really hard to build that friendship.” (M10)		
	Desiring Like-Minded Social Groups	“I don't have any friends who are Black queer moms. Or any relatives...it's just sort of making me reflect on like wanting to make sure that I'm seeking out people and programs that fit our family and can be as beneficial to us as possible.” (M4)	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M7, M8, M9, M10	M1, M4, M6, M7, M8
	Boundaries in Close Relationships are Critical	“My parents, in particular, know if I'm talking about something that my kid, “what you need is...” they'll give some feedback about what we should be doing. But I'll point out that's not how we raise our child, we don't do that in our home. And I'll point out why I think it's so problematic.” (M8)	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M7, M8, M9, M10	N/A
3	<b>Emphasis On Finding the “Right” Environment to Meet Family Needs</b>	“The decision to go to that Montessori was driven by this hope and desire to be accepted for all our otherness...that first initial, you know, choice was really trying to look for acceptance, and it wasn't necessarily the best choice for us.” (M2)	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, M7, M8, M9, M10	M7
	Utilizing Individual or Couples Therapy	“I'm very, very, very bad about seeking emotional support from anyone. I just don't like to do it. I don't feel safe. I don't feel like I can trust anyone with it. I have no reason to. It comes from my family so, like what makes me feel comfortable is making sure I write everything down and take that shit to therapy.” (M9)	M1, M2, M5, M6, M7, M8, M9, M10	M5, M7

**Figure 1***Flow chart of the data analysis process*

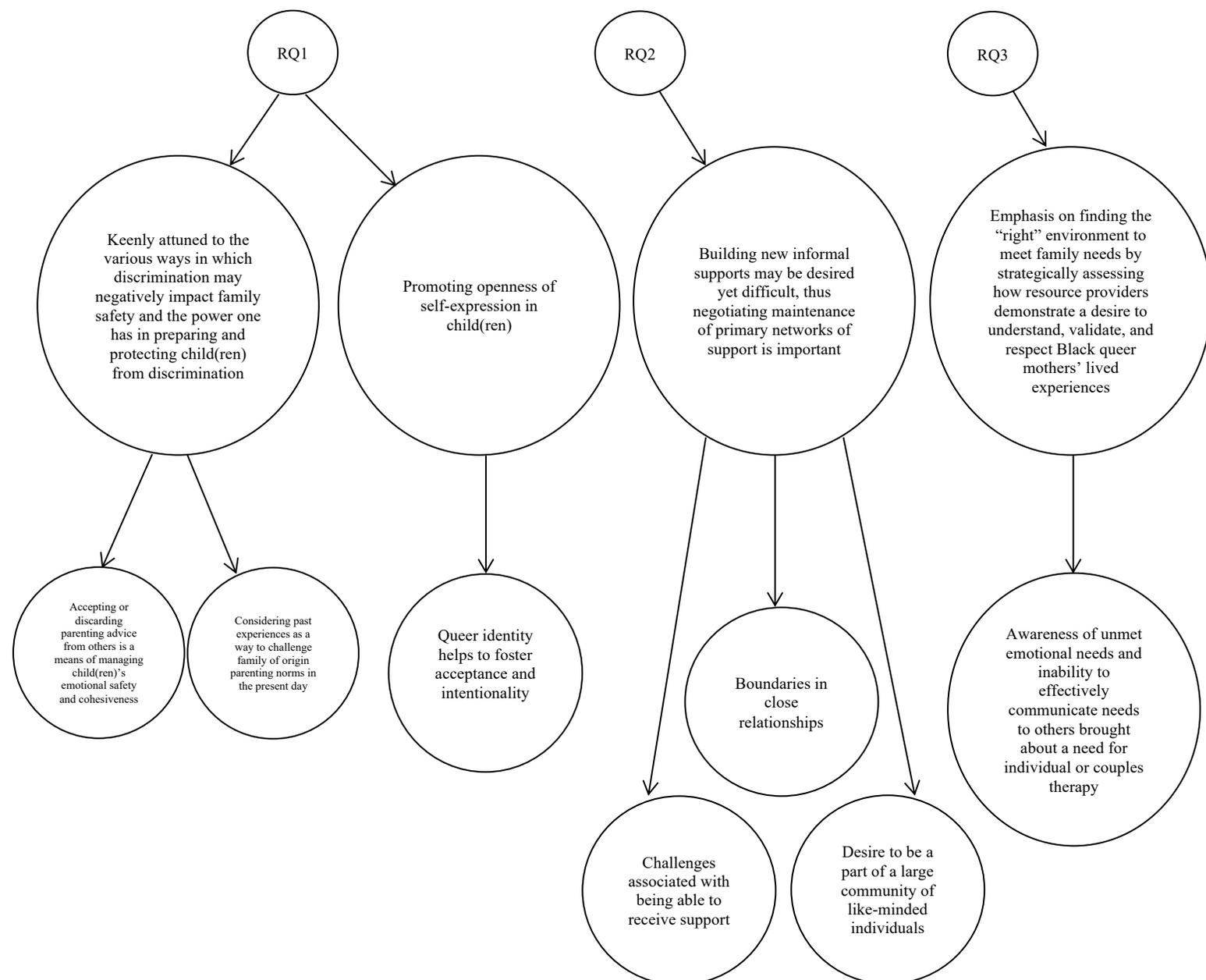
**Figure 2***Thematic Mapping***Initial Mapping of Patterns (Thematic Map 1)**

## Refined Mapping of Patterns (Thematic Map 2)

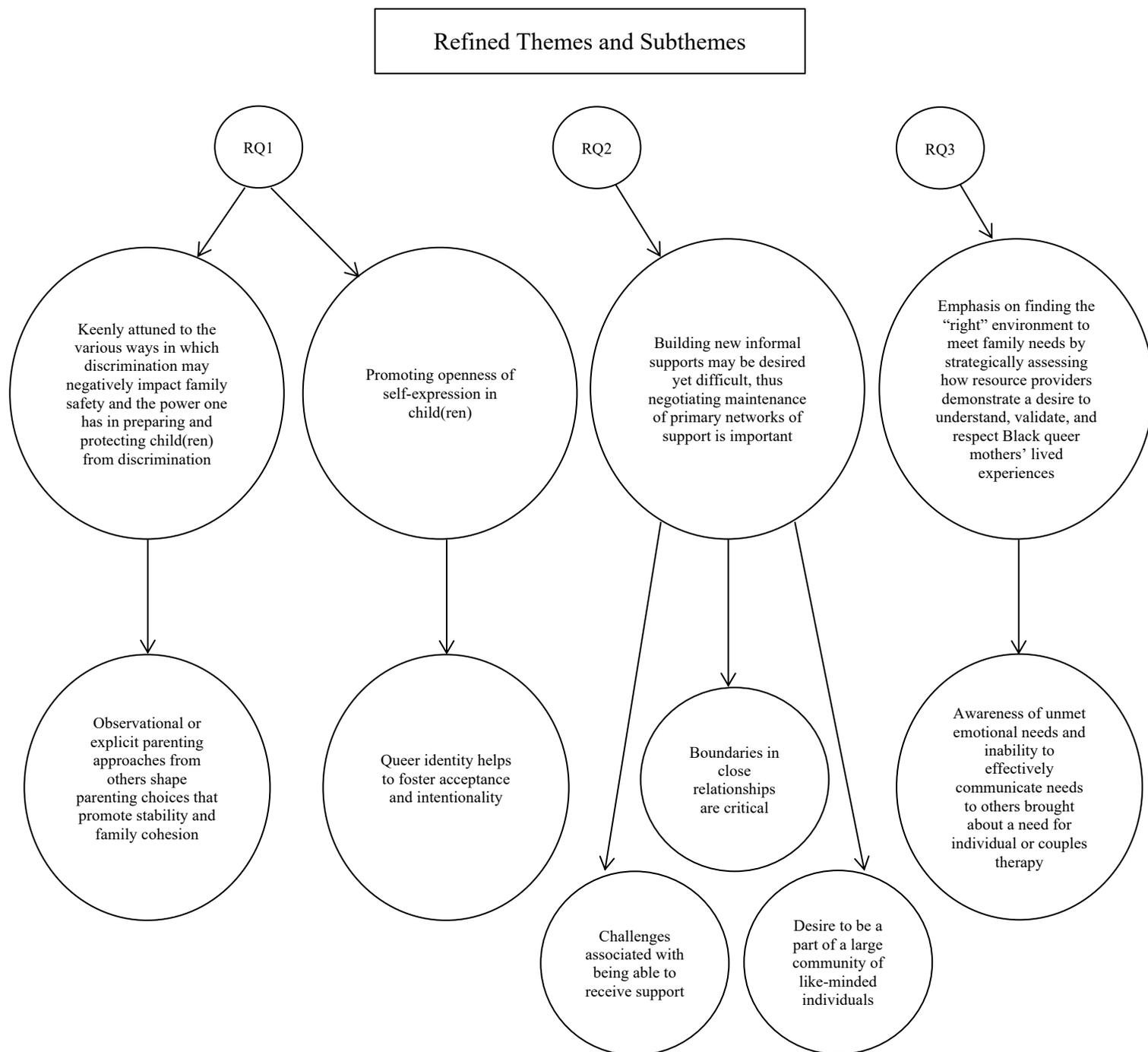


### Preliminary Themes and Subthemes (Thematic Map 3)

#### Preliminary Themes and Subthemes

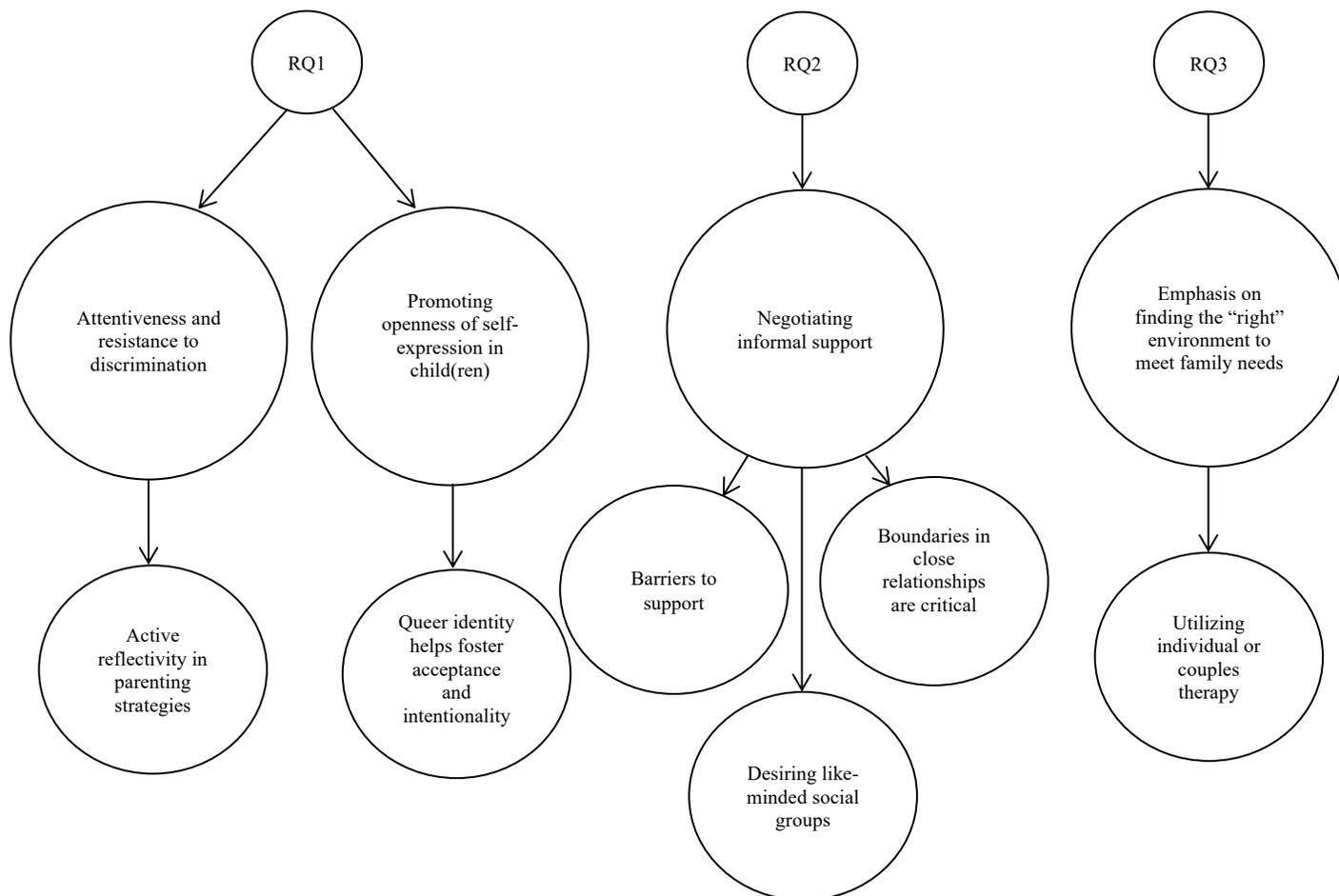


## Refined Themes and Subthemes (Thematic Map 4)



## Refined (Final) Themes and Subthemes (Thematic Map 5)

### Refined (Final) Themes and Subthemes



**Figure 3***Selected Photos from Photovoice*

(Photo 1.1: “Mommy’s got you, baby girl.” Submitted by M3)

“I just feel like when I look at it it’s, to me, such a reminder of how while she’s kind of exploring the world, and getting to know things, like I’m the one that’s... I’m one of the ones, if you will, that just kind of has her back. And while her focus is elsewhere, my focus is on her, you know, being her mom. So that’s just kind of what that picture signifies to me...just making sure that all of her needs are met, that she’s happy, healthy. And I think for me, just being there for her throughout her life no matter how old she is, no matter where in the world she is.”



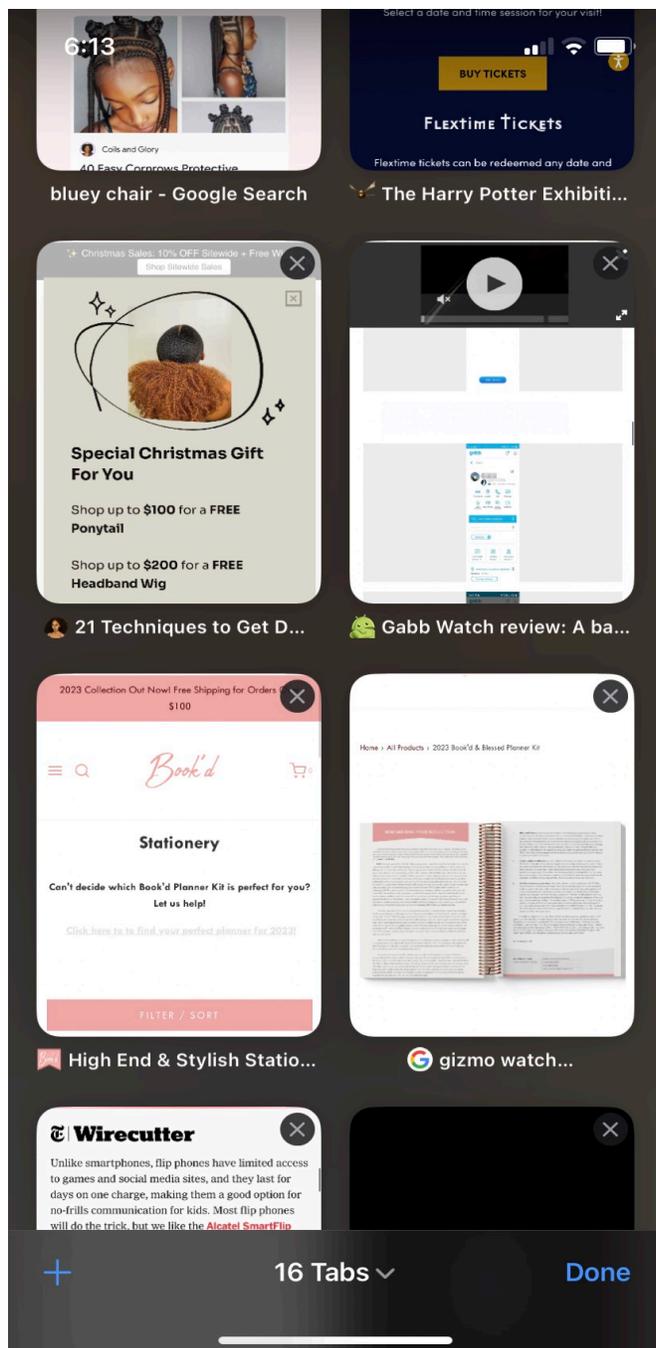
(Photo 1.2: “Journey to my higher self.” Submitted by M4)

“I guess we are connecting in a way...I was trying to make him laugh...I want him to always feel like he can trust me and feel safe with me...I feel like as a parent, we are our kids first relationships really. And I know what it's like to navigate the world without having that in a relationship close to me, and I think it's much better to have it.”



(Photo 1.3: “Black motherhood.” Submitted by M7)

“I was thinking through the pictures that I sent, and I remembered this one, I was like, this one is layered...these women in my life showed up to a 4-year-old’s school play, no matter where they were, they all got there...the support was there, but every single woman in that picture is bearing some sort of burden that we just can’t see in that moment, in that picture, and all of that impacted me and how I grew up, right. My mom will sometimes joke, “you were such a happy kid, what happened?” And I’m like, I started paying attention.”



(Photo 1.4: “All the tabs are always open.”

Submitted by M5)

“This picture is a snapshot of what I would say is reflective of my brain. So, there are a bunch of tabs, and I feel like that is my brain on any given day...it’s Christmas season, and so all of the tabs are things that have to do with my kids, except for the one, random one... I try to make the best and most informed decision when it comes to my kids. I do a lot of research and information seeking to kind of like affirm the decisions or the directions that I’m heading to as it relates to motherhood...there’s a mental load to being a mother that I don’t think is oftentimes thought about or really even discussed.”



(Photo 1.5: "Who are you cheering for, Ima?" Submitted by M2)

"...he's like "okay, Ima, they're the Wolverines? Is that Michigan? ...and the Panthers are hockey?" No...you know, [we] just have all these conversations...and he's like, "well, how does that work?" I just want him to be comfortable being inquisitive, asking questions, and finding out what he likes. And that to me would be what he's interested in and feeding that...he's so bright, he's so sweet, and I just want him to find his comfort in his niche, and what he's good at, and help him grow in that way."



(Photo 1.6: "A season of motherhood." Submitted by M1)

"...we were apple picking...we were just enjoying the day being relaxed and carefree and no worries. It was a stress-free day, and it was an experience for them. It was something that they hadn't did before. We were happy to do it together, and it was a little bit exciting seeing them excited, the kids, excited over something so simple... I've been talking about activities...like, you don't have to do just this thing. Like [child's name] what do you want to do? We can take a cooking class, or we could take a swimming class, or we can look for things outdoors, or we can go to a park, state park. I try to give experiences, even if it's not something that I've ever participated in myself...let other parents or let other kids know that it's okay to do something new. It's okay to experience a new thing."



(Photo 1.7: “Support local Black artist!” Submitted by M7)

“...one day [participant’s child] drew a picture of me on a chalk board...And [participant’s friends] were like, “oh, my God! It looks just like you.” We were joking about how like, you know, her little child picture was so cute...we ordered T-shirts, and we got a pillowcase for her. We didn't tell her until they arrived. And so, she comes home from school, we all have our shirts on, and we're all standing next to the easel, and she goes... she's like “you put my picture on a t-shirt!” And so, we pretended to have a gallery opening for her....but I think that Black people will know that, like behind the scenes, there’s always struggle for us, like it's inevitable. But I wanted to focus on joy and what community, how community... one simple act, making T-shirts, can make so many people happy in so many ways.”



(Photo 1.8: "Together but apart" Submitted by M1)

“I often feel like an invisible queer if that makes sense. Like there's so many basic perceptions of what that means and no one person fits into a box – I definitely don't – But sometimes I just feel invisible within community...the moldy orange is kind off to itself, it's distant, somewhat. But there are a couple of other oranges that are different shades that have a little bit of mold as well, or a little bit of darkness as well. And I feel like, overall, that sums up my feelings of being Black and queer and community.”



(Photo 1.9: “My chosen family.” Submitted by M4)

“One of the things that we had agreed upon before we went out there was to try and connect with people that we may not have the deepest connection with cause...we don't all live in the same cities, or all see each other all the time, so that was a cool way to just get to know each other even better than we already do...I remember talking about it in the last interview...about like having more resources, or access to community, with queer mothers. I feel like even though I have just the two in my friend group, it does, I guess, let me know that there is opportunity out there for me to be able to expand, and connect with other Black queer moms...you actually really need people, because if you were supposed to be alone, you'd be the only person. There are billions of people on the planet, and you just have to find your right people.”