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Freedom Choices: How Black Mothers Living in Jim Crow Protected Their Children from Anti-Black Racism and Prepared Them for Success

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Abstract: In this article, we examine how Black mothers devised strategies of resistance to prepare and protect their children during the Jim Crow era. Grounded in Black feminist standpoint theory, we rely on Black women's own perspectives to understand how interlocking systems of oppression shaped their mothering experiences and practices. We use Dedoose cloud-based software to conduct a content analysis of 210 oral histories from two oral history repositories. Our grounded theory approach to data analysis entailed a multistage coding process, revealing that Black mothers strategized to provide their children choices in the present that would give them more freedom and opportunities in the future. We refer to this mothering practice as the cultivation of "freedom choices". Freedom choices seek to minimize the hindrances and restraints that shape the choices available to Black children and to expand their available options. Black mothers fostered freedom choices by relying on both informal and formal education. They used informal education to teach their children restraint, resistance, and when to deploy which, and how to negotiate space. Black mothers facilitated their children's educational pursuits in the face of structural barriers by (1) leveraging their own sweat equity, (2) tapping into their mutual aid networks, (3) challenging landowners, and (4) insisting on prioritizing their children's education even when their partners did not.

Keywords: Black mothering; Jim Crow era; African Americans; anti-Black racism; parenting; Black feminism; education; apartheid education; grounded theory; oral history

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1. Introduction

This article examines how Black mothers devised strategies of resistance to prepare their children for success and protect them from anti-Black racism during the Jim Crow era (1881–1964) from a Black feminist perspective, which calls for an interpretation of Black women's experiences and ideas by those who participate in them (Collins 1990, p. 15). We rely on Black women's own perspectives to understand how interlocking systems of oppression shaped their mothering experiences during the era of Jim Crow de facto and de jure racism, which created a neoslavery system in which American culture, societal norms, laws, and public policies were based on rigid racial hierarchies that placed Black people at the very bottom of a caste system that used "powerful infrastructure" to hold "each group in its place" (Wilkerson 2020, p. 19). Black feminist standpoint theory clarifies a particular standpoint of and for Black women. A Black woman's standpoint—"those experiences

and ideas shared by African American women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society"—creates a specialized knowledge that is based on their ways of knowing of the world (Collins 1990, p. 22). From this perspective, history pertaining to Black women is embedded in their lived experiences. Black women's experiences are therefore crucial to the construction of theory and knowledge production about Black mothering. Thus, we ask, what are Black women's childrearing experiences from their own perspectives? How do they make sense of and respond to their lack of rights and adequate resources stemming from their experiences of Jim Crow era racism? What strategies of resistance did they devise to ensure the safety and welfare of their children?

The racial hostility and violence that Black people were subjected to during the Jim Crow era made ensuring their children's safety foremost in Black mothers' minds. While many mothers may feel compelled to protect their children, not all mothers must protect them from anti-Black racism and harm. Black mothers have had to devise strategies to protect their children from systemic racism in all its manifestations, including racialized violence. The centrality and significance of this protective function to Black mothering is not new. Every generation of Black mothers must devise protective strategies of resistance to confront how anti-Black racism is codified into laws and policies and becomes naturalized and normalized in the era in which they must parent their children. In this article, we describe the form and tenor of anti-Black racism during the Jim Crow era. Moreover, we demonstrate how Black mothers living in Jim Crow utilized informal education—which we define as a protective strategy used to teach children how to safely navigate and negotiate racial hostility and violence—to teach their children (1) when to deploy restraint and resistance and (2) how to navigate White space. Finally, we show that Black mothers relied on both informal and formal education to ensure their children's safety and success.

Racism, poverty, and exposure to anti-Black racism forced the Black mothers in our study to use education as the primary site to enlarge their children's opportunities and prepare them for success. Women unanimously agreed that education was central to their children's ability to achieve success in adulthood, which is consistent with previous research that shows that, regardless of their socioeconomic status, Black parents highly value education (Herelle 2022; Diamond and Gomez 2004). We discuss the structural barriers that cultivated an apartheid education for Black children, making it difficult for their mothers to ensure that they received an equal education, and illustrate that in the face of apartheid education, Black mothers strategized to provide their children choices in the present that would give them more freedom and opportunities in the future. We refer to this mothering practice as the cultivation of "freedom choices". Freedom choices seek to (1) minimize the hindrances and restraints that shape the choices available to Black children and (2) to expand their available options. Although both "freedom choices" and "freedom of choice" stress that individuals have options and agency, they differ in three important ways. First, with freedom choices there is no assumption of freedom or the freedom to choose. The systemic racism experienced by African Americans limits their freedoms and choices. Jim Crow laws were deliberately designed to restrict the rights of African Americans, including the rights to vote, work, and receive an education. In contrast, freedom of choice implies freedom and the freedom to choose. Secondly, freedom of choice implies access to the breadth and depth of opportunities available to an individual in the environment they inhabit. Black people's freedom of choice is significantly constrained by their social context. Freedom choices acknowledge these constraints as Black mothers push to enlarge the boundaries of their children's choices by ensuring they can access, among other things, an education. Third, freedom of choice centers individual decision making. In contrast, freedom choices focus on the choices available to those within a group, in this case, the choices available to Black people.

2. Jim Crow and Black Mothering

This article demonstrates how racism permeates Black mothers' childrearing experiences, including the ways in which they must do more (be primary breadwinners, prepare

their children for success, and ensure their safety, all while directly confronting anti-Black racism) with less (earning disparities, racial disparities in housing, education, and employment, and few protections against White violence) than their White counterparts. It also brings attention to their ingenuity and resilience as they devise racial socialization practices that simultaneously prepare their children for success and protect them from anti-Black racism. We show that Black mothering reflects both historical and ongoing racial and gender injustices.

When slavery ended, the Black Codes and Jim Crow laws sought to institute a system as close to slavery as the newly passed 13th (abolished slavery and involuntary servitude), 14th (granted citizenship and equal civil and legal rights to African Americans), and 15th (granted Black men the right to vote) amendments would allow (Gates 2019; Dunaway 2003). Jim Crow policies reclaimed and exploited Black labor through threats of actual acts of violence (e.g., physical violence, lynching, mob violence), "the cultivation of the fear of such violence," and incarceration (e.g., convict leasing system, chain gangs), thereby trapping the majority of African Americans in domestic, personal service, and agricultural work for nearly a century (Gates 2019, p. 127). Strict labor laws kept Black workers under the economic and social control of White landowners (Gates 2019; Jones 2009; Dunaway 2003). Racial discrimination combined with racial violence by law enforcement and White vigilantes shut African Americans out of most segments of the labor market, forcing most Black people to live in poverty (Althoff and Reichardt 2024; Gates 2019; Jones 2009; Dunaway 2003).

In her work on the meaning of mothering among Black women, sociology professor Patricia Hill Collins notes, "Black mothers also pay the cost of giving up their own dreams of achieving full creative ability. Because many spend so much time feeding the physical needs of their children" (Collins 1990, p. 136). While this is true of many mothers, Black women's involvement in the labor market has made their experiences different from those of other women. Historically, Black women have participated in the labor force at higher rates than other women. For instance, in 1950, 43.5 percent of Black women worked or were actively seeking work, compared with 32.9 percent of White women and 33. 7 percent of all women (U.S. Department of Labor n.d.). In 1960, 49.9 percent of Black women participated in the labor force, compared with 40.3 percent of White women, 25.5 percent of American Indian/Alaskan Native women, 41.5 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander women, 28.8 percent of Mexican women, 36.3 percent of Puerto Rican women, and 37.7 percent of all women (U.S. Department of Labor n.d.; Conrad 2001).

Black women enter the labor market younger than White women, continue working after marriage, and stay in the workforce longer (Jones 2009). Economics professor Claudia Goldin found that "labor force participation for White women more than doubled between 1890 and 1960, increasing from 16.3 percent to 33.7 percent, while that for non-White women remained almost constant (39.7 percent to 41.7 percent)" (p. 87). So, while White women doubled their labor market participation rates from approximately the beginning to the end of the Jim Crow era, Black women were already abundantly represented. These racial differences have been driven by Black men's lower earnings and higher unemployment rates relative to White men, Black peoples' lower non-labor income (e.g., Social Security and other transfer payments associated with aging, disability, and economic hardship), a higher prevalence of female-headed households among Black people, and distinct social norms within Black and White communities (Goldin 1977). Census data beginning in 1870 have revealed racial differences in labor market participation to exist even when women share characteristics, including "the presence of preschool children, a woman's education and training, the level of non-labor income, and the husband's unemployment experience" (Goldin 1977, p. 89).

During the Jim Crow era, White women worked in the clerical, sales, and retail sectors; professional and technical occupations; as operators in industry/manufacturing; and as proprietors and managers (Maloney 2002). Racism prohibited Black women from working in these occupations. Instead, Black women found work as domestics, laundresses, and

farm workers. They also earned an income by taking in boarders, working as hairstylists, midwives and herbalists, and selling home grown vegetables, eggs, and livestock. Some Black women owned small businesses and worked as skilled laborers and artisans. Black women who obtained more education worked as teachers, nurses, doctors, dentists, and journalists. In addition to their underrepresentation in higher paying occupations, Black women's lower wages for the same work also contributed to their earning disparities.

Black women's annual earnings have historically been significantly lower than White women: in 1939 it was $331.32 compared to $771.69; in 1949 it was $992.35 compared to $1781.96; in 1959 it was $1412.16 compared to $2371.80; and in 1969 it was $3205.12 compared to $3786.45 (Maloney 2002). Black women's wage penalty[1] also affected Black families, since Black mothers are more likely to be the breadwinners in their families. Between 1880 and 1960, African Americans had higher rates of single parent households compared to Whites: 11.7 percent compared to 8.2 percent in 1880, and 9.9 percent compared to 5.5 percent in 1960 for Black and White families, respectively (Ruggles 1994).

Black mothers' experiences have also been distinct from that of other mothers because they face significant racial disparities in maternal and infant mortality rates. Poverty and racism impeded Black women's ability to care for their children before, during, and after childbirth. Racism has been shown to significantly contribute to persistent racial disparities in infant and maternal mortality and morbidity (Alson et al. 2021). Even when controlling for the social conditions of women's lives, such as their socioeconomic status, employment status, education level, geographic location, and the safety and environmental health of their communities, Black women's exposure to racism (e.g., racism-related stress and weathering (early health deterioration, as measured across biological indicators of repeated exposure and adaptation to stressors) contributes to their higher rates of maternal and infant mortality and morbidity (e.g., preterm birth, low birth weight) compared with other women (Dominguez 2011; Geronimus et al. 2006). Prior to the passage of Title V of the Social Security Act (1935), Black women's maternal mortality rates were nearly double that of White women. Similarly, in 1916, the infant mortality rate for Black infants was 87 percent higher than the rate for White infants. In 1920, the Black infant mortality rate was 43 percent higher than the White infant mortality rate (Singh and Yu 2019).

Regardless of their socioeconomic status, geography, and the time period they live in, Black mothers must contend with the impact of racialized violence on their children's lives. During the Jim Crow era, Black mothers had to devise strategies to protect their sons from the "violence of segregation and Jim Crow culture—through lynching, police brutality, economic terrorism, and a vastly unequal justice system" (Simmons 2015, p. 2). The Tuskegee Institute in Alabama documented more than 4700 lynchings between 1882 and 1964 (Bailey and Tolnay 2015). Black mothers also had to strategize to protect their daughters from the violence enacted on Black girls, including sexual violence, and the physical and emotional violence Black girls encountered as they confronted "For Whites Only" signs, faced racist narratives of Black femininity, and negotiated the politics of respectability about what a proper girl should be.

Racial disparities in maternal and infant mortality rates and earnings persist. During the past seven decades (1935–2015), the risk of maternal mortality remained 3 to 4 times higher among Black women than White women, as White women experienced a more rapid decline in maternal mortality than Black women (Singh and Yu 2019). Black women as a group also continue to labor more intensively than White women,[2] yet they earn less, despite wage gains during the 1940s and 1960s.[3] Studies consistently find that even when considering and controlling for differences in productivity, education, industry, and occupation, substantial differences in the racial wage gap across gender persist (Paul et al. 2018; Goldin 1977). Labor force participation rates are also highest for Black mothers. In 2020, 76 percent of Black mothers were in the labor force, compared with 71.3 percent of White mothers, 62.8 percent of Chicana/Latina mothers, and 64.3 percent of Asian mothers. Eighty percent of Black mothers are the breadwinners in their families (Roux 2021). Black mothering also continues to be shaped by punitive and disciplinary forms of governance,

as Black children experience disproportionate and more severe punishment from school authorities, law enforcement, and the criminal justice system (Elliott and Reid 2019).

3. Data and Methods

We analyze oral histories from Duke University's "Behind the Veil Oral History Project" and Harvard University's "Black Women's Oral History Project". The Behind the Veil Oral History Project was undertaken by Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies from 1993 to 1995. Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the primary purpose of this documentary project was to record and preserve the living memory of African American life during the age of legal segregation in the American South, from the 1890s to the 1950s. Over the span of three summers, teams of researchers conducted oral history interviews with more than one thousand elderly Black southerners who remembered and lived through that period of legal segregation. It is the largest single collection of Jim Crow oral histories in the world. Although there are 1260 interviews in this collection, only a small subset of approximately 300 interviews come with full or partial digitized transcripts. After downloading these interviews, we used Dedoose cloud-based software to analyze the interviews with female interviewees (in some cases male interviewees and additional female interviewees were also present). These interviews accounted for nearly half of the interviews (N = 138). Interviewees lived in Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, Arkansas, North Carolina, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Alabama at the time of their interviews. We also analyzed the 72 interviews conducted with the women interviewed for the Black Women Oral History Project. These women who lived through the Jim Crow era were interviewed between 1976 and 1981. With support from the Schlesinger Library, the project recorded a cross-section of women who had made significant contributions to American society during the first half of the twentieth century. We received permission to conduct a secondary analysis of these oral narratives.

In addition to focusing on the experiences of female interviewees (male interviews were included when they were present during the interview), we managed the scale of the data by initially coding the interviews for core themes related to mothering and childhood experiences, experiences of racism and sexism, socioeconomic experiences, access to resources, and protective factors. Interviewees' accounts of how they as mothers (or their mothers) tried to protect and prepare their children in the face of anti-Black racism suggested that most respondents utilized informal and formal education to achieve this goal. The existing literature on African Americans' educational experiences during Jim Crow, as well as their parenting practices, was utilized not only to describe the significance of informal and formal education among mothers but also to explain the catalysts for their significance. A strong link between keeping children safe and informal education, as well as between ensuring that they had opportunities in the future that they didn't have in the present and formal education, was revealed in the data. Interview data was recoded using a new set of emergent codes, thereby unpacking the strategies mothers used to (1) keep their children safe and (2) give their children what formal education they could given their social context. Through this data analysis, our concept of freedom choices, which contributes to our understanding of Black mothering practices and Black feminist perspectives on mothering, emerged. Coding was cross-checked with all authors to ensure reliability. This multistage coding process therefore employed a grounded theory approach, allowing categories to emerge from the data rather than imposing a theory prior to commencing the research, while maintaining connections with the extant literature in drawing theoretical conclusions (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

4. Protecting Their Children from Anti-Black Racism

> "If you don't raise a boy right, he won't last long. You know what I'm talking about. They kill him. . . . And I don't mean cow him down, but you need to instruct them that they treat everybody right". Arthur Clayborn (b. 1926)

In general, mothering involves raising children "right" by imparting lessons and engaging in practices that instill morality, meaning that they knew "right from wrong" and did "the right thing". But as Arthur Clayton's comment makes plain, Black mothers must teach their children the "right" actions and behaviors to keep them alive amidst the anti-Black racism that follows their children's Black bodies everywhere in America said bodies may take them. What does it mean to raise one's children right if they are Black children coming of age during legalized segregation? For the mothers in this study and their families, it meant the following: (1) teaching children restraint, resistance, and when to deploy each; and (2) negotiating space, including understanding under what conditions it is safe or unsafe to take up more or less space.

4.1. Practicing Restraint and Resistance

When Black mothers taught their children, explicitly or implicitly, to practice restraint, they taught them to follow the rules, even if they were not fair. They taught them to not outwardly express their real emotions or feelings about the impact that anti-Black racism had on them. Oral history interviewees' stories revealed the ways in which what they had been taught about how to deal with anti-Black racism kicked in when confronted with its various forms. Even if they did not obey what they had been taught, what they learned still surfaced. For instance, Alice Dunnigan (b. 1906), born and raised in Russellville, Kentucky, was taught by her mother to practice restraint in the face of anti-Black racism. Yet, she resisted:

There has always been a racial problem. . .a situation I encountered as a young child, about ten years old or so. . .I would head straight. . .into the 'White ladies' restroom. My mother opposed this action. Oh, she would get so mad with me, ordering me to stay out of the 'White folks' toilet. 'Them White folks gonna get you in there some day, and beat you half to death, and there's nothing I can do about it.

As Alice recalled the incident, she makes explicit Black mothers' concerns about their children's safety in an environment plagued by racialized violence, not to mention the lack of recourse Black families had should something happen to their children. Alice's resistance to racialized violence followed her into her adulthood. Alice became a teacher at the only school for Black students in the county where she lived. She described an incident in which she had been charged with taking a group of her students to take a "final year examination":

Their greatest problem was the availability of a usable rest room. They would come to me and ask, "Miss Alice, where can we go to the john?" "Go in there where the White children are going," I would advise. "But that says 'White ladies' and we are afraid to go in there". So, I would have to escort each one of them in, whenever they had to go.

Elizabeth Pointer (b. 1927) was born and raised in Tuskegee, Alabama. She learned to practice restraint in the face of a common form of racial violence faced by Black children, racial violence at the hands of White children riding school buses:

We could not ride the buses although we were paying taxes. But we couldn't ride those buses nothing rode the bus but the Whites. And they would ride and throw trash, throw rocks and everything at us on the road and hoop and holler, "n***** n***** n*****" all up and down the road. We weren't allowed to say one word to 'em or not throw back nothing, 'cause you threw back at 'em you was going to jail.

In contrast, Bernice Magruder White (b. 1927) and her sisters exemplified resistance to this form of racial violence:

But I can remember, when we were in Sunflower County around the Sunflower River, we did get to fighting with a group. We were walking, and every day when the bus came along—it was a narrow road. We had to walk about three miles to this school, and the place was called Kennelock [phonetic]. . . . So, one day we happened to be along when they were putting out about three White students. . . And so, when they got out of the bus, some words were passed. I don't remember. And one threw—they had these big hard balls of mud. . . .threw it at us, and we fought. They went running home. They didn't have far to

go, but we had about two miles to go. We ran all the way. We didn't tell our parents. We were frightened for about the rest of the remainder of the school, and I think they were frightened, too, because we never had that problem anymore. So, we settled that.

Bernice, who was born in a rural part of Washington County, Mississippi, shared that she and her sisters knew that they could not tell their parents about their response to the racial violence they experienced by White children. She provided insight into how she and most Black children were taught to practice restraint in the face of racial violence and other forms of anti-Black racism. Similarly, Ferdie Walker (b. 1928), born and raised in Fort Worth, Texas, recounted an experience of not filling in the seats at the back:

And the bus driver got up and came back to tell me that I had to move out of that seat because I had to go all the way back to the back. And it made me so angry. Now I wasn't really a rebellious kid. I followed the rules. I never got in any trouble, but that day, I was just mad. So, I got up and I did not go to the back of the bus I just stood in the stairwell that you had to walk out of to get off the bus. And he was determined that he was going to make me go and sit down. I was determined I wasn't going to do it. So, I just stood there. And he finally said, "Well, I'm going to have to go get a policeman". And so, I just stood there. And I knew that if my mother knew that I had acted out, that's what it was called, she would really be very upset with me. But I just stood there and when the bus stopped, I just got off and I walked home. I just didn't want to do what he said do. And that's about the most rebellious that I was.

Ferdie balanced the restraint her mother taught her with her own quiet resistance to combat the degradation she experienced when asked to move to the back of the bus. She didn't "act out" but she also didn't comply. While Bernice and Ferdie were taught by their mothers to exercise restraint in the face of anti-Black racism, Abna Lancaster (b. 1907), born and raised in Salisbury, North Carolina, learned indirect and direct resistance from her mother:

I was told to hold my head up and walk with dignity anywhere. However, I knew that water fountains, there was White water and there was colored water, and I would have to drink at the colored water fountain. So, my mother didn't permit us to drink water at any of the fountains. "You don't have to drink that water. Come home. We've got water at home"…. But there were certain things that we just did not accept. For instance, my mother would not buy things from a store in which they called her by her first name. And that was a rather usual thing, because the clerks would say, 'Well no, I hope you're satisfied, Mary.' Or, 'How you doing, Sally?' Something of that kind. But my mother would tell them that she was honorably married, and they would either call her Mrs. Aggrey or would not say anything at all".

Other oral history interviewees shared that they or their parents also refused to shop at stores that forbade Black people from trying on clothes.

4.2. Negotiating Space

Negotiating space was about how much or how little space to take up in public and in interactions with Whites, including when to move out of the way, where to stand or sit, and enter or exit. Ann Pointer recalled how she was taught to move out of the way when Whites passed:

I had not told [my children] about the oppression, how bitter I had been as a child. I felt like I wasn't nothing. . .you coming down the street like this and you meeting a White person coming this way, I don't care if you could be on the sidewalk and he be'd on there but if he and his wife are walking together on there, you going to have to step down in the gutter and let them pass. You walk right up to 'em and they'd tell the sheriff and you'd go to jail.

Negotiating space was also about learning the significance of geography and place; specifically, learning what parts of town, what businesses, and what individuals to avoid and which ones were safe. For example, Ira Lee Jones, born and raised in East Lake, Alabama, recalled how she learned from her mother to avoid a particular nearby neigh-

borhood because it was known for its high concentration of Ku Klux Klan membership and activity. To earn extra money, Ira's mother went to sit with an elderly White man in the neighborhood. When he asked her to retrieve a belt from his bedroom, Ira's mother expected him to put it on. Instead he "just sat up there and started doing this (smacking sound) with the belt and said this was the way I used to whip niggers". Her mother never went back. After that, Ira and her brother were taught to avoid this area. "I don't think we went to 68th Street. Klu Klux Klan and all of those folks lived in that area". Ira continued:

I don't ever remember them [parents] telling us anything but watch where you go, just be careful where you go 'cause by the time we got in high school my brother had learned to drive. She'd [mother] tell us don't go in certain parts of town, and to be sure what time we were supposed to be back home that we got there. Don't mess around come straight home. When we go to dances at the Civic Center and uh 'cause they would give dances just for Blacks or give dances just for Whites. . .And they would tell us be sure you get back home . . . don't go nowhere else 'cause I want to know where you are, that you're safe. It wasn't that we would get into anything, there were people . . .. who even lost their lives and nobody knows today how. . .just riding along and somebody decided I don't want to see them niggers riding or walking or and whatever, and they'd be gone.

Some mothers tried to shrink the space their children had to roam as much as possible. Arnette and William Earl Davis' brother was murdered by Whites in Mississippi for dating a Black girl who was also secretly dating a White man. He was murdered on his twentieth birthday. William Earl described what happened:

But you know back during that time, you know, black girls were, you know sneaking out and courting white men. And the same black girls was courting, the black girls was courting the black guys. But, you know, if the white guy find out about it, you know, they want to use brutality. And that's what happened to my brother, you know. . .. about 4:00, 4:30 that morning I guess some by-pass was going home and saw his body like laying there in the middle of the highway. They busted his skull open, had, used some type of ax or hatchet or something, because half of his skull was found some seven miles away from his main body. It wadn't only just to bruise on one. Seemed like they punched him in the side with a tire iron. I guess they had to tie his hands or something cause he was very strong.

After their brother was murdered in 1962, Arnette and William Earl Davis' mother became very protective of her remaining six sons and one daughter.

Arnette Davis: Due to that my mother, like if I go out I always have to be back in by 8:00 o'clock. I did that until I left home that following, the beginning of the winter, you know, the second quarter of the Mississippi Valley State. That was during the time that Dallas State was on the quarter system. So I enrolled in Valley the second quarter after we gathered crops. So I didn't come home no more about two or three times during that whole school term due to the fact that if I come home, you know, I'd be very protected.

William Earl Davis: Very protected. Very sheltered.

Arnette Davis: My mama, she didn't want me to go no place.

William Earl Davis: You could not participate in the sports, special events. Things like that.

William and Arnette's mother knew that their family had no legal recourse to pursue justice for her son. Arnette stated, "You couldn't get any help". So, she controlled to what degree she could, the amount of space her children had to negotiate.

Global gender studies professor Lakisha Michelle Simmons brings attention to how space determined the kinds of physical and verbal assaults and insults that Black girls navigated on Jim Crow streets: "On some city streets black girls might routinely walk by a cacophony of catcalls; on other streets they might have to withstand touching from whites or other physical insults; and . . .on some streets black girls faced insults from white children" (Simmons 2015, p. 58). Bernice Magruder White exemplified how, during segregation, Black mothers tried to protect their daughters from the geography of insults that assailed them, to no avail. Black girls were most vulnerable outside in the world.

Bernice, the mother of three, described an incident where she had been unable to protect the female students she taught while traveling with them to a YMCA meeting:

I was taking some girls to Laurel, Mississippi to a meeting. It was something like a YMCA meeting, but it was through the high school, and in high school they call it Hi-Y. It was four girls in the car, and this was during the time that they had what they called the sit-ins and marches and freedom riders, as some of them called them. Three of my girls were real light-skinned. One was dark-skinned. . . . and then I was what you called brown skinned. I got stopped outside of Laurel about one mile, and, of course, we were accused of everything. We were called all kind of slutty names. Sixteen, fifteen, and sixteen-year-old girls, and I'm their teacher. . . .and he cited me for reckless driving and insulting him. Nobody said a word to him. But what had happened, one of the girls had great big eyes, and they were just kind of this wide around. And so when he came to the door, I let the window down. He reached his hand in and unlocked the door, and then he reached his hand around and unlocked the back door and opened it. He did that, with his hands right here. Oh, that was frightening. He didn't use any profane, but he used a lot of slut-like, the names he called us. It's embarrassing. It was the worst feeling I ever had.

So I went on to the judge. . . . I had to pay the fine, which took all the money we had, and that hurt me more than him to belittle me and call me all these names and I couldn't say anything about it, and call these girls all these names and I couldn't say anything about it. We didn't have nothing. He had his gun, he had his night stick, and he told us what he ought to do to us, take us out and beat us all up.

5. Navigating an Apartheid Education

Africana Studies professor Noliwe Rooks defines apartheid education as education that occurs when groups that are not themselves poor or of color control education curricula and forms offered only to Black people and the poor (Rooks 2017, p. 50). Rooks maintains, "Skin color and class determined the type of education a student was seen as worthy of acquiring" (Rooks 2017, p. 50). As a result, Black children were largely relegated to Black only schools and seldom attended schools frequented by children who were of means (Rooks 2017, p. 50). The legacy of this early period of education during the Jim Crow era is still with us today.

Immediately following Reconstruction (1868–1877), which made federal funds available for schools, teachers, and school buildings, "southern legislatures moved aggressively throughout the South to dismantle the political and educational progress Black communities had made" (Rooks 2017, p. 52). Although school segregation was already a fact of life throughout the South, the states where oral history interviewees resided codified this fact of life into law. After wresting control back from Black elected officials, state and local governments immediately passed laws making an integrated education a violation of the law. For example, in 1878, Mississippi lawmakers wrote it into state law by requiring "that the schools in each county shall be so arranged as to offer ample free school facilities to all educable youths in that county but White and colored children shall not be taught in the same school-house, but in separate school-houses" (Southern Poverty Leadership Council 2017). Other Southern states followed suit by passing similar legislation.

Rooks identifies the ways in which state and local governments "also used their legislative authority to institute policies forbidding the use of "White tax dollars" to educate Black students. Some states went so far as to require Black people to pay a double tax if they wanted their children educated—one to educate White schoolchildren, and another for the education of their own" (p. 52). In 1890, Mississippi adopted a new constitution that reinforced racially segregated schools and created a new school funding mechanism that allowed wealthy, White school districts to levy taxes for education revenue far in excess of the taxes generated in poor, largely Black districts (Southern Poverty Leadership Council 2017). In the decade before the United States Supreme Court declared segregated schools unconstitutional in Brown v. Board of Education (1954), White Mississippians begin to recognize that ensuring Black schools were equal to White schools may be the best way to

fend off lawsuits that could end segregation. A 1952 state report, however, showed vast disparities between Black and White schools; a Delta district, for example, spent $464.49 per White student but only $13.71 per Black student (Southern Poverty Leadership Council 2017). Similarly, in 1930, Alabama spent $37 on each White child and only $7 on each Black child (Irons 2004).

The magnitude of the educational disparities experienced by Black children is also evident in Black teachers' salaries. In 1891, in one predominantly Black county in Alabama, the total budget for teachers' salaries was $6545, which was the same amount they spent per student at White schools in the same county (Rooks 2017, p. 54). When the state legislature determined that educational funding was to be decided by White local officials, Black teachers' salaries were immediately slashed and remained that way for years. By 1938, in that same county, Black teachers earned just over $8000 (for teaching 8483 students) while White teachers earned nearly $60,000 (for teaching fewer than 2000 students) (Rooks 2017, p. 54).

Black schools had to overcome significant obstacles to educate Black children. Black students not only received inadequate state and local funding to fuel their education as demonstrated in per student funding disparities, but they also had access to fewer schools compared with White children (Brooker n.d.). Because they were actively denied an education, Black children had to go great lengths to get an education beyond the eighth grade, and indeed their difficulty in doing so was by design. Political science professor Peter Irons notes the following:

A report on secondary education for Blacks in 1933 showed that between them, the states of Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina had a total of 16 Black high schools accredited for four-year study. This report also noted that "89 percent of all Negro secondary schools are essentially elementary schools with one or more years of secondary work included at the top—often at the expense of the lower school". Even the four-year high schools had few resources; they averaged just five full-time and two part-time teachers, and most often one of the teachers doubled as principal. Hardly any of these Black high schools offered science courses or had laboratories, and very few had courses in foreign languages, music, or art. Their curriculum was limited, and their teachers had little training in academic subjects (Irons 2004).

As a result, very few of the Black children who finished grade school in the 1930s were able to attend high school because of the scarcity of Black-serving high schools and the scarcity of resources within them. In Mississippi and Georgia, a dismal 5 and 8 percent of Black children were enrolled in high school, respectively. Only in North Carolina did as many as 20 percent of Black children attend high school. In the 1950s, only one of every eight Black adults had completed high school, while four of ten Whites had earned their diploma (Irons 2004). This damning evidence of Black children being barred from further education provides context for understanding the necessity and difficulty of cultivating freedom choices among Black mothers. Moreover, it makes plain the distinction we make between freedom choices, which do not assume freedom or the freedom to choose, and the freedom of choice, which implies freedom and the freedom to choose. It illuminates the choices available to Black people and the limits of their agency in the face of systemic racism. Finally, it lays bare the constraints Black mothers faced as they pushed to enlarge the boundaries of their children's choices by ensuring they could access an education.

Despite the racial disparities in their educational outcomes, Black people pursued education with a vengeance. In 1870, 20 percent of American adults were illiterate, but 80 percent of Black adults were. In 1900, 44 percent of Blacks remained illiterate. By 1969, 3.6 percent of Black people were illiterate compared to 0.7 percent of Whites (National Center for Education Statistics n.d.). The difference in Black and White school enrollment rates narrowed from 23 points in 1900 to 7 points in 1940. Enrollment rates continued to rise in the post-war period, and by the early 1970s, enrollment rates for both White and Black people had risen to about 90 percent and have remained relatively stable since (National Center for Education Statistics n.d.). Although these statistics hide disparities in the length

of school enrollment Black children were permitted, the quality of education they were afforded, and their access to secondary education, they corroborate that education was seen as a vehicle to achieve a freedom not experienced by Black people living as second class citizens in a country that established itself as a dominant economic power on the world stage by exploiting their labor and innumerable other contributions under the chattel slavery system. Ample evidence exists not only about White hostility to Black education from slavery through Jim Crow, but also about African Americans demand for education through teaching themselves (Williams 2005), through public schooling (Moss 2009), and by creating and transforming higher education institutions (Williamson-Lott 2018). The testimonies shared below, of attending school despite being confined to apartheid education, also demonstrate the value African Americans living in Jim Crow placed on education. What is unique about these narratives is that they provide insight into apartheid education across generations; as mothers tell their own stories, they provide insight into their parents' decision-making about sending (or not sending) them to school. At the same time, they construe their perceptions of apartheid education from the position of mothers with their own children. Their narratives are a powerful testament to the ways in which Black families ensured their children took advantage of the available educational opportunities, while concomitantly strategizing to improve their educational experiences.

We identify four structural barriers that produced apartheid education and obstructed Black mothers from ensuring their children had an education on par with their White counterparts: unequal school terms, inadequate educational resources, lack of access to transportation, and unequal numbers of schools.

5.1. Black Children Were Denied Access to Equal School Terms

Black children faced shortened school terms (as little as three months) compared with White children, who received an average of nine months of education annually (Rooks 2017). Several structural factors created racial disparities in school terms. For starters, White landowners controlled when school districts opened and closed Black schools. In general, White landowners did not believe Black children needed classroom instruction, rationalizing that Black children were needed in the fields. As a result, Black education revolved around the overrepresentation of Blacks in agriculture, especially sharecropping. Almost all Black children in the South missed school to do farm work (Irons 2004). Thelma Woods Nash was born and raised in Brown's Corner, Arkansas. As an adolescent, she worked with her father on the railroad and picked cotton on nearby farms. Thelma elucidated the political economy that gave birth to apartheid education by explaining the relationship between Black children's education and sharecropping: "Yeah, the White people would go on to school. They started on time now, but the Blacks, that's the way they were scheduled, convenient for the big farmers, see. Because those big farmers had like 300 and 400 and 500 acres of land, and all these people that lived on it if they said for the school not to start it wasn't going to start if you weren't through". Thelma continued, "And they had like two months of summer school in the summer. Maybe you would get, maybe three in the fall".

Secondly, landowners engaged in direct confrontation with teachers to prohibit Black children's school participation. Elizabeth Pointer remarked, "If you got a child and the man want him to work, he go and tell the teacher that 'this boy can't come to school right now cause he workin' for me,' and he'd go there and get him out of school and (Laughs.) make him go to the field. . . how horrible it is when you have to, everything you do the man's got to approve it". Elizabeth described her own shorter school term compared to Whites:

And we only went to school, we could not go to school until October. It would have to be after Columbus Day. And you know why? Because Mr. Childer's cotton had to be picked and gathered before the Black children went to school. And we started the school in October, the middle of October.

Cora Randle Flemming (b. 1933) was born in Stallo, Mississippi in the rural community on Chapel Hill. She articulated, "We'd go to school maybe eight, six months. We'd get out

of school and go to the field and gather the crops. Then we'd go back to school when the crops and things were gathered, like a split session".

Elizabeth Tunage (b. 1932), born and raised in Fargo, Arkansas, talked about not understanding why Black children received shorter-terms:

We went to school around six months in the winter. Now that was the only thing that was kind of aggravating and I couldn't understand. The White kids would start to school in September and go 'til May. We didn't start school until sometime about the last of October or about the middle of November somewhere along in there, and we went until it was time to start in the fields in the spring. . . .I neber did understand why I couldn't go to school.

Delores Twillie Woods, born and raised in Colwell, Arkansas, added that Black children may not even get the shorter term they received if they were needed in the fields: "Like two months in the summer, and maybe three in the fall. It depended on how the cotton was developing. Like July and August. July and August, you went to school. And you know what? You may didn't get two months in the fall, because sometimes that cotton would. . . You wouldn't be through chopping".

Some oral history interviewees connected Black children's inability to spend more time in school to their lesser educational attainment compared with Whites. Arnette Davis remarked, "That's why there's such a lot of kids from the south have a problem with school, because they've never gone to school a full term". Similarly, Virginia Jackson Sutton (b. 1917), raised in Four Corners, Louisiana, associated her inability to stay in school to her and her sibling's inability to "learn too much". She remarked, "We went to school but I didn't learn too much because when I was in the third grade I stopped and went in the field, went to work in the field . . ..I think my oldest sister stopped school in the sixth or seventh. And my sister Emily, I don't know what grade she stopped in but she didn't learn much, her at all. No, she didn't learn too much at all".

5.2. Black Children Were Denied Equal Educational Resources

Not only did Black children not get the same amount of time in school as White children, but when they were in school, their schools and educational material were subpar. As Elizabeth Pointer talked about attending school in Alabama in the 1930s and 1940s, she provides insight into the difficulties Black students and teachers faced:

Well, you know we were the janitors, the maid. We had the first two weeks of school we had to clean the school, clean around the school, and get the school in shape. So, we really didn't start our classes up until November. . . .I went to Chehaw elementary, it was a two-room school. It went through one through six grades. And one, two, three was in the same room. Four through six was in the same room. And two teachers. One teacher taught one through three, the other taught four through six. . . .We didn't have nothing at our school. They give the teachers some chalk and a couple of erasers for the board but no kind of supplies did we have. Not even heat. If your father didn't bring two loads of wood to that school then they make you go to the woods and gather wood and you, you not going to sit by the other children's fire.

Many Black children were educated in one room school houses. Cora Randle Flemming stated, "The rural schools, the one-room schoolhouses. They had one or two teachers, maybe two teachers in the classroom. Maybe they had 150 kids and maybe two teachers". Black children not only learned in inferior environments and had a higher student to teacher ratio, but often lacked textbooks altogether or relied on hand-me-down books from White schools. Ira Lee Jones shared, "We used the same books but they were always what we called the hand me downs. They were raggedy books. . . .Our teachers always had problems filling in the parts of the lesson that was missing from the book". One woman shared how at the beginning of the school term they would have to erase the racial epithets written into some of the textbooks by White students who knew that Black students would be given their old books. Their teacher armed them with tape for when they ripped the pages.

Delores Twillie Woods noted that Black children had to use the facilities at White schools to engage in extracurricular activities: "The Black schools did not have, we did not have a gym or nothing or no place for a football field for the boys to play football. . . . And they used to do that and then finally they built a football field over for the Black people to have". Delores shared that she was taught little Black history:

Oh no, nothing. We didn't study Black History until we got in high school. It wasn't too much then. We had one class. And then our teachers didn't know to say, well, it's important that everybody take Black History. They get a mandatory subject like some of them, like American History and things like that. And that was what you called an elective and you could take it if you wanted to and I wanted to take it. So, I took Black History, but a lot of people didn't. Had one class of Black History. That's right. Not many of us got a chance to really read about Black History.

In contrast, other women reported being taught Black history by their teachers. Daisy Livingston (b. 1926) who was born and raised in Greenwood, Mississippi, shared, "We were taught about everything, but our teachers taught us mostly about black history with their own books or their own knowledge and with the Bible". Daisy talked about the impact of one teacher in particular:

Then we had a teacher, Mrs. Brooks, who taught us that—she said, "What goes around come around". She told us that the Egyptians and whatnot were our brothers and there were a time when they had like we were in slavery and made like second-class citizens, that we had done that to a Caucasian race at one time in history. And, I don't know, that we came from queens and kings. A lot of us—I wasn't the only one. There were more of us. Yes, we felt like we was as good as anybody. We sure did.

Women often remarked about the ways in which Black teachers created opportunities from limited resources in terms of educating Black students with a fraction of the resources White students and teachers received. Lola Hayes Hendrick (b. 1932) who was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama exemplified this perspective. Lola spoke eloquently about how Black teachers were committed to the success of Black students despite having few resources to work with:

Elementary school, we went to a little wooden building. Everything was segregated then. . . . We had very little to work with, very bad books and things that would be torn that were provided for us to read. We had excellent teachers. We have to really give praises to the Black teachers that we had during that era. They were committed to our being better students, or equal students on the part of the same level with the Whites, with less accommodation for us. They taught us more than what was in them books. They taught us how to prepare ourselves, to the best that we could be with whatever talent that we had. We did not have access to a lot of cultural things during my high school era. Elementary school was just basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, and when we got to high school, we had very little cultural thing, other than the choirs. At Parker [high school], we did have a drama club and we did have a speech club, but as far as going in the community to do things, we did not have as much exposure as the White student.

Bernice Magruder White also noted that Black teachers taught them well given their shorter time frame to cover material: "I completed eight grades in the rural area. Now, one thing I can say, our school time was much shorter, six months probably the most, but during this time we didn't have a lot of subjects, but we did cover those real well".

5.3. Black Children Had Access to Fewer Schools

Black children did not have access to the same number of schools as Whites, especially high schools. While schools for kindergarten through eighth grade were more readily available, Black communities (1) often lacked a high school all together, (2) relied on one high school to educate all of its students, or (3) were forced to bus children to a Black high school outside of their community.

Sue Kelker Russell (b. 1909) was born in Milton, Florida, and grew up there. She explained how some Black communities had no high school at all:

We couldn't go to school with the Whites. We had to go to Escambia County, to Pensacola to school. We didn't have a high school in Milton and we had to leave Milton for Escambia or go somewhere else if we wanted to finish high school. And, that was about, you knowed you had the race problem, but it was just about, I guess, like every other, small southern town. Whites had their areas and Blacks theirs. Blacks was, of course, subservient to Whites, so to speak.

Similarly, Ira Lee Jones commented: "They had an elementary school over [in Birmingham] but did not have a. . . high school at that time".

Ferdie Walker explained how, regardless of what part of town Black children lived in, they all had to attend the one Black high school:

Fort Worth was separated for Black people into lots of different areas because many Black people lived on each side of town, but I lived on the east side which was really a relatively poor neighborhood. . . .There was one Black high school. So, all of the Black kids from all over town went to one Black high school. And there were elementary schools in each section of town for Black children. I never had a White teacher in my life, until I got in college.

Cora Randle Flemming remarked about the dearth of schools available in Mississippi at the higher levels: "We had from pre-primer through eighth grade. To us at that time, it was good, because we didn't know anything different from that. But then when we went to high school, I found a lot of things were different from the rural community schools".

Bernice White expressed feeling "lucky" to have attended high school:

But I do think I was somewhat lucky. If I go back just a little bit, before we left the rural area, I was sent to, when I got fifteen, then I had finished—well, fourteen, I'm sorry. I finished elementary school. There was no school that I could go beyond eighth grade, and so if you go to school, you had to live with someone or they had boarding schools. So I was sent to a boarding school in Coahoma County. The name of that school was Coahoma Agricultural High School, and I finished ninth and tenth grades there. Then I came to Indianola to go to school, because my people were well established.

5.4. Black Children Were Denied Access to Transportation

It was commonplace for Black children living in the rural south to walk miles each day to get to school, while White children often rode on taxpayer-supported buses. Rooks notes, "Black parents were repeatedly told by educators that if they wanted their children to ride on school buses then they should be free to purchase them, fill them with gasoline, hire a driver, and repair them—all at their own expense. However, there would be no tax dollars spent on the transportation of Black children" (Rooks 2017, p. 84).

Daisy Livingston commented: "There were a school out there with one teacher, but I didn't attend that school. I walked about five or six miles, maybe farther, to school. I walked first to McLaurin Street School for elementary, and then you passed by Nicholson Elementary". Similarly, Elizabeth Tunage spoke about Black children's lack of access to transportation to and from school: "And another thing, we walked to school and I thought that was maybe because we didn't have far to go, the reason why we were walking, because it was something like a mile, mile and a half for most of us that went to school". Elizabeth Pointer shared that she too walked to school: "every day and back no matter if it was storming. We could not ride the buses although we were paying taxes. But we couldn't ride those buses nothing rode the bus but the Whites".

Lola Hayes Hendrick shared that the Black children in her community were only provided transportation when they attended the high school, of which there were only two that they could attend:

Yeah, we had to walk. There was no public transportation, no specials [buses] to take us. We had to walk to school. The only time we had specials was when we got to high school. They would bus us to high school, and that was only because they had us segregated to Parker or Ullman. Those were the only two high schools in the city of Birmingham that you could graduate from. Ullman was a two-year high school; Parker

was a four-year. So those people who lived on the north side went to Parker the whole four years, but we lived over on the south side, so we had to go to Ullman two years and the other two years at Parker.

Instead of walking, Ira Lee Jones took the city bus to school, which she had to pay for:

The only segregation that I can recount of my early age was going to school 'cause we had to pass all the White high school to get to where the negroes went to school and from where I lived. . . .We had to ride the bus . . . not a school bus but the city owned bus and if it was snowing or raining whatever we had problems getting to and from the bus and the White kids didn't seem to have that problem.

Elizabeth Pitts pointed out that not only did Black children walk to school, but so did Black teachers: "We had to walk to school. We didn't have transportation. We didn't have buses. And the teacher she had to walk too".

6. Strategies of Resistance: Cultivating Freedom Choices

> "Well, I tell you I just wish that we all had the same chance. I mean, we just don't have the chances that the White people have. They get the better breaks. We just don't get the good breaks. I mean, you may see one out of ten, they get a good break. But we don't have even the opportunities now. The kids in school, they don't have the opportunity that the Whites have. They don't have that offer. And they don't know about it. . . .. And I believe it'll always be there". Elcie Snorton Eaves

Elcie Snorton Eaves (b. 1928) observed the ways in which systemic racism differentially ordered the opportunities available in American society by race. She made the above remarks in 1995, and twenty-six years later what she believed had come to pass. Black children still experience significant racial disparities in educational outcomes. The U.S. prides itself on its freedoms. But its freedoms are not only limited to certain domains, constrained by laws and social expectations, and defined by external boundaries, but also limited to certain people. Black people's choices during the Jim Crow era were intensely constrained at best, and non-existent at worst. As the stories above indicate, Black mothers gave their children freedom choices by ensuring they attended school at all, which was significant given the economic pressures faced by Black families, the social control Whites exerted over Black educations, shorter school terms, lack of transportation, inadequate resources, and fewer schools. But what the stories above do not reveal are the ways in which Black mothers facilitated their children's educational pursuits. We show that Black mothers leveraged their own sweat equity (meaning they tapped into their own labor rather than relied on their children's), tapped into their mutual aid networks, challenged landowners, and insisted on prioritizing their children's education even when their partners did not—all to give their children the one thing they knew could provide the freedom to have choices beyond those they would likely have without it—an education.

Jessie Lee Chassion (b. 1926) illustrated the use of different strategies across generations to increase children's educational attainment. As a child, Jessie was sent to live near relatives to get an education:

I wasn't living there. I was living here. I could walk to school. See you couldn't send your children to, they had a little school out there, a little country school but if it rained too much the children couldn't go to school because there was too much water. So, I came to school here and I lived here. I had family here so I could go to school.

When she had her own son, she stressed the importance of education over work for her son, despite needing the extra income produced by his labor:

Because I have a son that did restaurant. . . and my son I let him work with me after school washing dishes because he needed the little extra money. And one day he, he didn't like to go to school to start off with and one day he told me that the man said if he wasn't going to school he would give him a full-time job and believe it or not I made him quit. I didn't quit and I needed for him to work but he didn't want to go and this wasn't going

to help me none and I wanted him to finish school so I said, "Well, as of today you don't come back".

Jessie showed how mothers worked hard so that their children could have a better life by focusing on obtaining an education. Similarly, Alice Dunnigan (b. 1906), who lived in Russellville, Kentucky, spoke repeatedly of her lifelong devotion to education, describing how, "One of the things I remember best is. . .my interest in education. I always wanted to go to school, even when I was only three or four years old. When my big brother would go to school, leaving me at home, I would always cry". Her earnestness impressed her brother's teachers, who let her start school at age 4; when she began official schooling at age 6, she was a grade ahead of her peers. Despite the long distance to school, Alice made the trek daily. If it rained or snowed, Alice recalled her mother forbidding her from walking, and Alice would stay home and "[cry] all day". Alice knew firsthand how education could be a way to improve one's life. She went on to become a teacher, mother, activist, economist, and journalist. She labored to help her son finish college: "I discovered that I couldn't depend upon my husband for support. Our son, Robert William (Bob), was in his second year of college when my mother died. I worked hard, and kept him in school until he finished at Kentucky State College".

Oral history interviewees reported being encouraged by mothers more than fathers to pursue and complete their education. Bernice Magruder White reflected on how her mother emphasized education: "My mother. . . she was the one that pushed education. What my father was trying to do was just find food and things that we need in the home". Bernice's mother pushed education despite her poor health and did so more than her father:

Well, let me tell you, she passed in '54 at the age of forty-seven. She was not real active in working because she was somewhat ill, and we didn't know what was wrong with her. A strange thing, you don't know. We thought our mother was lazy because she didn't like to cook. But my grandfather did like to cook, and so that's why we kind of hung around at his home. But my mother had an enlarged heart. I think she grew up with that, and that was a problem. But it was years, we were grown when we found that out. She assured that we went to school. She was the one that looked to find out what school we could afford to go to, and whereas my daddy, I don't know whether it would have mattered with him if we had continued on or not, but it did matter with her. She was, as I said, somewhat in the background a lot and just believed in going to school.

Ira Lee Jones talked about the length her mother, who worked as a laundress, went to in order to make sure that she and her brother received an education:

Getting to and from school was not the greatest thing. It was a mile away from our house and mother didn't want us to walk so most of the time she would put a quarter's worth of gas in the car and take us. You know a quarter's worth of gas at that time was a lot of gas. And she would take us back and forwards to school and it was fun to see her learn to drive. And she also bought us a piano taking other children back and forwards to school, they'd pay her a quarter and she would take them and she paid for a piano like that. So, we could take music.

History professor Jacqueline Jones featured the story of the educator William Pickens, who, speaking from experience, declared, "Many an educated Negro owes his enlightenment to the toil and sweat of a mother". A common practice used by Black mothers to support their children's education is evident in the saying "chickens for shoes". Mothers used the money they earned selling eggs and chickens to buy shoes for their children so that they could attend school in the winter (Jones 2009, p. 91). Likewise, educator Rossa B. Cooley moved to St. Helena Island in 1901 to set up a school. She found that some Black mothers were concerned about ensuring that their daughters did not experience the same fate they themselves had endured. "For example, born and raised in slavery, the Sea Island woman Chloe had "one idea" for her daughter Clarissa and that was "an education that meant going to school and away from all the drudgery, the chance to wear pretty clothes any day in the week, and as her utmost goal, the Latin and algebra offered by the early Negro schools in their zeal to prove the capacity of liberated blacks" (Jones 2009, p. 91).

Like other studies, we found that Black mothers were more likely to emphasize education for girls than boys. Jones observed that while girls engaged in some type of field and domestic labor at an early age, parents excused them more often and for longer periods of time (compared to their brothers) to attend school. In 1910, the census indicated that "Negro girls and younger women have received at least such elementary school training as is represented by the ability to write, more generally than have Negro boys and men" (Jones 2009, p. 92). Between 1880 and 1915, school attendance rates among Black females remained higher than those among males, producing an early form of the "farmer's daughter effect". In the fifteen-to-twenty-year age bracket, only seven Black males attended school for every ten females (Jones 2009, p. 87).

Elizabeth Pitts was born and raised in Greenwood, Mississippi. When asked if she left school to pick cotton, Elizabeth responded, "No, uh uh, I didn't have to but some of the guys, some of the bigger boys did. They had to leave school to go to work, but I was fortunate enough I didn't have to leave to go to work". The interviewer continued, "So did they treat the girls different than they treated the boys?", to which Elizabeth replied, "Well, the boys lived on plantations too so if there was something to do they had to stop and go do it, you know, like plow or haul, whatever the boss had for them to do, uh-huh, they had to leave and go do that. But we never did, the girls never did leave school".

Black mothers also had to make decisions about whether to expand their children's choices by integrating schools. Delores Twillie Woods signed her children up to integrate their school:

So shortly after they started marching and doing all this stuff, they were able to help them to integrate schools. . . .And freedom of choice and it was that I could sign my child up to go over there to that school if I wanted to. And so, they did that like what, about a couple of years? So that freedom of choice must have started about 1966 or '67', cause I remember my daughter graduated from over there in 1968. My daughter graduated and I had a girl and a boy. This was before they had totally integrated the schools. And so, then they had freedom of choice and they thought the Black people would be afraid to sign their children up to go over there. So, I signed mine up. And so, they was telling me, well, they not too good a student. You going to sign them up. I said, "I can't sign one up without signing the other one up". . . But she did good over there.

While Woods spoke about her willingness to allow her children to be on the frontlines of school integration, even when White people thought Black parents would be too scared to do so, not all mothers were eager to integrate White schools. Elizabeth Pointer refused to let her children integrate at school:

I wouldn't never sent my children down there. . . I may as well send my children to the rattlesnakes. . .I was not going to have my daughter mistreated and people throwing things on her like they did a lot of little, 'cause I'd a went down there and they'd a had me killed or in jail.' Cause they sure don't touch my daughter, they'd a been a dead bird.

7. Conclusions

Consistent with research on the ways in which Black mothers prepare their children for success and protect them from anti-Black racism (Herelle 2022; Elliott and Reid 2019; Diamond and Gomez 2004), we demonstrated how Black mothers living in Jim Crow used formal and informal education to prepare their children and to keep them safe from harm. Extending this area of research, we demonstrate that while several intervening factors likely shape how Black mothers use formal education to facilitate their children's success, minimizing hindrances and restraints that shape children's educational choices and expanding their available options is central to their strategizing. We contend that the practice of cultivating freedom choices stresses that individuals both have options and agency, and that they are constrained by their social context. Freedom choices acknowledge these constraints, as Black mothers push to enlarge the boundaries of their children's choices by ensuring they can access an education. Black mothers knew that their children would need an education to transcend Jim Crow racism. Black children attended schools

that received less funding than the schools where White students were educated. As a result, the learning environments in Black schools were too often inadequate despite the efforts of Black communities, school boards, and teachers to give Black children the best education they could. Black children often learned in dilapidated school buildings, lacked textbooks altogether or relied on hand-me-down books from White schools, and studied in overcrowded schools with too many students per teacher. More Black schools than White ones had only one teacher to handle all grade levels. Black schools were also more likely to have all grades together in one room. Moreover, because of the ways in which agricultural work structured and exploited the lives of many Black workers and families, it was difficult for Black children to enroll and remain in school because of competing work demands and financial constraints. Still, Black mothers across generations facilitated their children's education by emphasizing education over work and by stressing education even when their partners did not. They also sent their children to live with loved ones when they had a chance of receiving a better education. Some Black mothers sought to integrate schools to access better education for their children, while others resisted their children being at the forefront of school integration because they were concerned about their safety. Finally, Black mothers made sure that they educated their girl children, who were much more likely to be become educators and to stress education not only for their own children, but for all Black children.

Black children's unrelenting experiences of punitive and disciplinary governance structures (e.g., school authorities, law enforcement, the criminal justice and child welfare systems), as well as their confinement to separate and unequal schools, mean that Black mothers must continue to cultivate freedom choices for their children. Seventy years after the passage of Brown v. Board of Education, only about "1 in 8 White students (12.9%) attends a school where a majority of students are Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). In contrast, nearly 7 in 10 Black children (69.2%) attend such schools. Black students are also in economically segregated schools. Less than 1 in 3 White students (31.3%) attend a high-poverty school, compared with more than 7 in 10 Black students (72.4%) (Garcia 2020)". High poverty school districts receive on average 5% less (about $800 per student) of state and local revenue than low-poverty districts (EdTrust 2022). Nationwide, predominantly White school districts receive $23 billion more than predominantly non-white districts, despite serving a similar number of children (EdBuild 2019). According to one study, "Unaddressed school segregation is a major longstanding policy failure" and accounts for the persistent performance gaps between White and Black children (Garcia 2020).

During Jim Crow, Black mothers understood, even if their children did not, that they had to be alive to take advantage of the opportunities they worked so hard to create for them. So, they used informal education to keep them safe. Like their contemporary counterparts, Black mothers raising children during Jim Crow understood that their children could be insulted, assaulted, or killed just because of the color of their skin. Like their contemporary counterparts, Black mothers raising children during Jim Crow tried to protect and prepare their children wherever their Black bodies took them in America. Across time and space, Black mothers understand that anti-Black racism manifests in their children's premature and violent deaths at the hands of police and White vigilantes and racists. Thus, Black mothers in our study used informal education to teach their children restraint *and* resistance and set them forth in a world they knew would assuredly test whether they knew which strategy to employ when faced with countless instances of anti-Black racism. As they faced "For Whites Only" signs, the degradations of White children riding on school buses hurling racial slurs, trash, and rocks at them, and Whites who used their position at the top of the racial hierarchy to terrorize them in ways big and small, Black children frequently pulled from the arsenal of strategies that their mothers explicitly and implicitly taught them.

But there were limits to Black mothers' ability to teach their children how to navigate Jim Crow racism and to keep them safe. Black mothers like Mamie Till-Mobley knew and defied these limits when she insisted on speaking out about her son Emmett's death at the

hands of White racists and on an open-casket funeral, avowing, "I wanted the world to see what they did to my baby". After Emmett's death, Mamie continued a life of activism (Till-Mobley and Benson 2005).

Black mothers like Lezley McSpadden articulated the simultaneity of limits and resistance when she was stirred to activism after her son Michael Brown was murdered by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, moving the then-nascent Black Lives Matter solidly into the national consciousness as a social movement. Black Lives Matter protests and Lezley's continued activism call out another facet of racist policing and structural racism: fines as a way of funding police departments, and violent arrests and incarceration for unpaid fines as racial violence and racialized impoverishment. Like Mamie, Lezley shared her family's experience by writing a book, as well as seeking to change the world for other Black families by founding an organization dedicated to education, justice, health, and family.

Finally, Black mothers like Gwen Carr expressed the unique limits and resistance of Black mothering in the face of anti-Black racism by relentlessly protesting to end state-sanctioned violence upon losing her son Eric Garner to police violence in Staten Island, New York. Although George Floyd's mother has passed, Gwen stepped up to speak on her behalf.

None of these mothers obtained justice for the murder of their children. Yet, they did not stop pursuing it, demonstrating that motherhood does not end when children die. Black mothering too often necessitates speaking and acting for both the living and the dead: for the living, so that no mother has to experience losing her child to state-sanctioned violence; and for the dead, as they keep their children's memories alive.

Black mothers have long been iconic leading voices of protest against state-sanctioned violence directed at their children, speaking out publicly to catalyze protest, insist on structural change, and challenge the demonizing narratives that are circulated to blame Black people for the violence they experience, and which seek to legitimize the behavior of police, White racists, and so on. Black mothers have spoken at vital moments when protests and social movements come together, resulting in a shift in national consciousness around state-sanctioned violence in all its forms. When they do, they shape the narrative and appeal to the consciousness of all mothers in their insistence that "these children belonged to somebody!", and that "This was somebody's child!". Black mothers like Mamie, Lezley, Gwen, Delores, and Elizabeth speak and act in support of other Black mothers who have confronted the limits of individual and familial efforts to protect their children from state-sanctioned violence, especially those whose stories have not been told.

This study is limited insofar as our data did not allow us to compare how Black mothers prepared and protected their children based on age or time period, but future work could explore this question. Future research could also explore other contexts in which the freedom choices framework is applicable, and compare effectiveness by type of educational settings (e.g., private and public schools), school districts, parenting styles, and types of caregivers.

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Notes

1 Earnings are lower than White women and men, and Black men.

2 "Since the 1920s, White women's labor force participation has increased substantially due to the entrance of married White women into the workforce (Collins and Boustan 2013) but has only exceeded Black women's participation once, briefly, in 1994 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015)" (DuMonthier et al. 2017, p. 21).

3 Black women experienced relative wage gains of 16.2 percent in the 1940s and 15.8 percent in the 1960s. In the 1940s, Black women's weekly wages increased from $13 to $24, and Black to White female earnings increased from a ratio of 0.44 to 0.59, meaning Black women earned 59 percent of what White women did (Bailey and Collins 2006).

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