



Black Educology Mixtape “Journal”

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://repository.usfca.edu/be/>

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To link to this article: <https://repository.usfca.edu/be/>



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BlackCrit Mothering

Kassie Alexander

ABSTRACT

The author of the track, Dr. Kassie Alexander, moves to create a theorization called BlackCrit Mothering (BCM) as a theoretical framework. This track brings light to new terminology through the scope of Safety and violence, trauma, and Black Women's health to frame how the lived experiences of Mothering While Black continue to unfold in various political climates. I explain that to understand the intersection of Mothering and being Black, we must take a deep look at Black Mothers in their various systems that continuously put race and gender at the forefront of how Black Mothers are treated. It is significant to pay close attention to the Black Mother experience because Black Women have been dealing with these negative systems for a long time. This track highlights Black Mothers and explores the systems that affect them in particular ways such as safety, trauma, and health [The full elaborate version will be released in my dissertation].

Introduction

In introducing BlackCrit Mothering (BCM), I have found myself asking why (and how) I, as a Black Woman, got here. This created a need to identify yet another layer of knowledge that needed to be offered to the world so that there would be additional understanding of what it means to be a Black Mother in this ever-changing society. As a Black Mother myself, I feel compelled to look at my own struggle and success and how, through it all, I still have to separate myself from other women with children who do not look like me. I have to think about how the political climate on a daily basis shifts how I prepare for my day, how I advise my children to go about theirs, and also how I show up to work. Being a Black Mother has meant that not only do I need to be aware of what's going on in the world, but how the changing social climates and landscapes impact my parental involvement and strategy as a whole.

How Music Connects to BlackCrit Mothering

Music holds such a powerful space for most people. There are so many ways to connect emotions through music, and it almost feels like there is a perfect song to fit every situation, and this case is no different. When thinking of how to summarize the unique experiences of the Black Mother, I believe music helps connect and unpack the incomparable and multilayered experiences of being Black and Women that separate our experiences from those of other mothers. Music lyrics speak to me in ways that no one has ever been able to match. I can pull from them, I can listen to music, and I just feel like no matter what, I'll be okay. A good song helps motivate me and helps me realize that there is no mountain I can't climb, and there is no valley deep enough to keep me away from being the best mom possible. Songs, such as Alicia Keys' "Superwoman," Beyonce's most recent hit "You Won't Break My Soul", or Tupac's classic "Dear Momma," are some of the songs that hit close to home when thinking about what Black Mothering and Black Motherhood represent.

What is BlackCrit Mothering and Why is it significant?

BlackCrit Mothering recognizes the power dynamics and oppressive structures in society along with the existence of ideologies that are more dominant than others (Marchand, 2019). BlackCrit Mothering emerged from two critical theories - Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Black Critical Race (BlackCrit) Theory. While Critical Race

Theory considers race as central in the struggles of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), BlackCrit Theory focuses only on the experiences of Black people (Roberts, 1998). BlackCrit addresses the existence of a racially biased system, urges understanding of what constitutes Blackness, and challenges conversations beyond racism by emphasizing what being Black and knowing what it means to be Black (Dumas & Ross, 2016).

As a result of the beliefs of Critical Race Theory, Depouw and Matias (2016) developed the concept of Critical Race Parenting (hereafter ParentCrit), focusing on the counter-narratives of parents in understanding the correlation between race, racism, and predominantly White-dominated systems. ParentCrit promotes mutual learning between parents and children by debunking the stereotypes and prejudice about race and superiority to work towards institutional change (Depouw & Matias, 2016).

As an extension of ParentCrit, BlackCrit Mothering emphasizes the importance of critically conscious Black parents and children in continually learning social justice in systems dominated by intergenerational whiteness (Williams, 2017). BlackCrit Mothering acknowledges parenting as key in establishing racial realism and establishing Black consciousness among their children in efforts to promote social justice. BlackCrit parenting builds awareness of institutionalized racism, Black affirmation, Black knowledge, and the sense of being and knowing. Black women's status within their families and communities often comes from their important contributions as bloodmothers and othermothers. In many parts of the U.S., Black women's position in African-American communities comes from their activist mothering as community othermothers (Collins, 2002) Many of the highly respected¹ Black Women in working-class Black neighborhoods are those who demonstrate an ethic of community service (Collins, 2002). Black Women in working-class Black neighborhoods are those who demonstrate an ethic of community service (Collins, 2002).

In thinking about all the obstacles that the Black Mother must endure in order to not only take care of herself but to take care of her children; I think about the historical significance of what has led us to need to reference and identify BlackCrit Mothering. In addition, it is important to think about the potential stereotype threat that we pose with² the continued presence of community traumas that African-American communities have always valued motherhood, but in doing so, Black mothers' ability to cope with intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation [has transcended] the injustices that have characterized these oppressions. Without the presence of committed relationships with Black Men, Black women have relied on the presence of their children to fill the void of love and companionship. This has led the Black Mother to have to continue to endure the pain of being vulnerable and knowing that they will struggle to provide for and protect their children (Collins, 2002).

Black Mama Trauma

With all the highs and lows of mothering, trauma is something that has historically surrounded the history of being a Black Mother. Dr. Joy DeGruy (2005) spoke to it in the best-selling book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, where she highlighted how the experiences of slavery have become a genetic predisposition that has carried with us through generations and we're still holding on to and have never been able to dig our way out of the trauma of being slavery's child (DeGruy, 2005). I know that might sound crazy or cliché, but when you really think about it. It's not hard to think about how we have been disconnected from our children because we've been disconnected from our own parents. Many of us Black Mothers grew up in single-family households, which typically included the primary caregiver being a Black Mother.

The Black Mother has shown up not only in her own household but also in the capacity of the othermother in roles such as being a childcare provider, being the neighborhood aunty or being the grandmother that everyone

¹ Patricia Hill Collins describes othermothers as women who held the family households together by way of love, care, support, and service to their community. These women were not always bonded by blood but could show up as other maternal figures such as a grandmother, aunt, community member, daycare provider, teacher, etc. They are often seen as the backbone or foundation within the Black community.

² Stereotype threat- being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group.

knew they could come to if they needed a place to get feed, to feel seen or to feel secure. Responsibilities like this created so much stress in the household that sometimes you would find that the Black Mother's children are raising themselves because the Black Mother is so inundated with other responsibilities that she loses herself. This loss of self could sometimes be seen as getting into drugs, working too much, or negatively impacting one's health.

Safety: I Wasn't Hiding My Kid From The World / I Was Hiding The World From My Kid. -Drake

As a Black Mother, the range in which I parent is so much deeper than just the scope of making sure that my children's basic needs are met. Historically, the idea of motherhood has been paramount for the beliefs of people of African descent (Collins, 2002). There are African-American communities that believe in the sanctity of Black motherhood so much that "the idea that mothers should live lives of sacrifice has come to be seen as the norm" (Christian 1985, p. 234).

The Black Mothers' approach to parenting is informed not only by factors that are internal to their families but also by the racial landscapes that exist within their immediate communities and the broader society (Dow, 2019). Black parents must be able to cultivate a level of consciousness that will teach them how to navigate the constant environmental and systematic oppressors that impact their lives.

Protecting our Black children from constant dangers that the world consistently shells out has been a continued mission. For example, the dangers of not knowing if someone will be threatened by you based on how you look, talk, how you are dressed, or how they have chosen to perceive your existence, among so many other things. We constantly turn on the television and open up our social media, and trauma, drama, and stress alleys find their way to the frontline. As a mother, the task has become less about ensuring my children have food, shelter, and clothes and more about whether they will be accepted in society, whether it be in their neighborhood, at the park, at the grocery store, or in their classroom. There is a constant need to be concerned about who they will offend today because they showed up in the skin that they are in and someone around them has decided that today is the day that they unleash their opinion on them. Drake (2018) exemplifies this phenomenon in his song "Emotionless" in which he tells the world that he has a son in a way that highlights the complexities and nuance of Black parenthood.

I Wasn't Hiding My Kid From The World / I Was Hiding The World From My Kid Drake's song *Emotionless*

This particular lyric rings a different type of melody in my ear due to it hitting a different type of nerve that most songs don't. This line is forever relatable; the need to protect and care for our children never leaves our bodies. I think of all the little Black kids who have such strong ambition, drive, motivation, and desire to do great things, but as soon as they step into the world, they realize that the world isn't rooting for their greatness. While I would love to say a mother's love is enough, the reality is that it isn't true. It's so important to be accepted by the environment around you, not just by the one you go home to every night. As a mother, I know that I want my children to explore, learn and experience all facets of life, but as a Black Mother, I know that the world has other motives for them due to the color of their skin.

Every time I turn on the TV, open up social media, or turn on the radio, I have to worry about what mother, father, family, and community are mourning the loss of their loved one. Who has lost their life at the hands of the police, one of our own, or the not-so-off chance that the police who look like us are responsible?

Constantly having to not only see these images but also explain to our children when these events happen has been EXHAUSTING. Understanding the level of exhaustion has added so many extra levels to the added stressors in day-to-day life, such as learning how to deal with my mental health and protecting my children. Learning to navigate the uncertainties that could happen during the day and when you are someone like me who has issues with not being in control of what happens daily, there is an added pressure of knowing that no matter what I do, no matter how "good" the neighborhood is that I live in, no matter how GOOD.. the school, there is nothing that I could ever do to fully protect my children from someone's ignorance towards my community.

Ever heard of the paper bag test? Take a look at the photo below.



photo credit: (Lee, 2014)

Does anything look familiar? How about the fact these men wouldn't pass the old slave test of being light enough for the privilege to be treated with some dignity and respect? How about they wouldn't be given the common courtesy of having adequate housing and would be more susceptible to pain and trauma solely because of the color of their skin? While I am not saying that lighter-skinned Black people aren't targeted, I am saying they don't represent the majority of what you see being attacked.

The darker their skin, the brighter the target on their backs.

As a mother whose sons all fall into this group, my fear is different; my concern comes from what feels to me like a deeper place. I don't share the same thoughts as my friends of different races, my friends who have mixed lighter-skinned children. My fear comes from looking at the faces of these men and seeing that my sons look just like them and could be them at any moment.

To understand BlackCrit Mothering, one must understand the true differences of what it means to be a Black Mother. To be a Black Mother is to always have to be aware of what your child is doing. There are no choices, there are no options when it comes to thinking about your child's safety. Something as simple as sending them to school or asking to go to get candy from the liquor store can mean their end. BlackCrit mothering focuses on the wise in the house of how when even looking at something like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, how that's just not enough.

You Won't Break My Soul: Trauma, Drama and Mommas Lack of Support

As I'm moving to this next section, I'm singing in my mind Beyonce's "You Won't Break My Soul" as she says :

*... I'm lookin' for motivation
I'm lookin' for a new foundation, yeah
And I'm on that new vibration
I'm buildin' my own foundation, yeah
Hold up, oh, baby, baby
... You won't break my soul*

(Beyonce, 2022)

I think about the need for us to hang in there no matter what. Black Mothers Unite! No matter where we come from, no matter what we got going on we figure it out! “You won't break my soul” allows us to feel that no matter what society throws in front of us, no matter if our children's father chooses to support our child(ren) or not, no matter if our job pays us what we are worth, no matter what we lack: But we will make do.

When I was writing my dissertation, I had an equal number of single Black Mothers as I did married Black Mothers in my study and something that I realized was that regardless of having a spouse in the house or not, these mothers often felt like a single mother. Most of the Black Mothers said that with or without their partner, they still felt like they were responsible for EVERYTHING that had to do with their children. The Black Mother is just so overwhelmed with responsibilities. This included enrolling their kids in school, giving them baths, making sure their homework was done, if they got injured taking care of them, staying home with them when they were sick, having to make sure that there was some form of emotional support available, cooking dinner, washing clothes, taking care of the household responsibilities, and somehow still finding time to take care of themselves.

I definitely want to acknowledge that there are many good Black fathers out there, but the reality is most of the Black Moms, and even non-Black moms that I have spoken to, have all agreed that their children's fathers all consistently get kudos for doing the basic tasks that we are expected to do daily such as taking our kids with us to the grocery store, helping them with homework, or just being there consistently. When you take a look at the world of Black communities, the conversation will reveal that far too many Black men who praise their own mothers feel less accountable to the mothers of their daughters and sons. They allow their wives and girlfriends to support the growing numbers of African-American children living in poverty (Collins, 2002).

The issue with this statement is that no one man or woman, regardless of their color, should feel like they are singled out in their responsibilities. It's deeper than just saying it takes two. To have children in this world, especially Black children who already have all the odds going against them, the power in unity or the power in partnership is so important. This is significant to Black Mothering because when you think about the joy of motherhood or the joy of Black Motherhood, it's often absent in our household. In an article I read about Black Joy mothering, most or many Black Mothers felt as if the maternal bond was often absent at the beginning because of the fears and insecurities that came along with being the mother to Black children while knowing that not only would we have to release them to the actual world but we also would have to be able to navigate within this world ourselves.

In her book *Black Mothering*, Don Marie Dow (2019) highlights how mothers fit into separate categories, and a part of these categories were how Black Mothers would often find different ways to fit into whatever system would help them stay connected to their Blackness, and Blackness to each of these mothers meant different things. For some, it meant staying in the hood even when they could afford to get out. For others, it meant maintaining connections to the hood through activities for their children maybe by staying close to their home Church. Still, for others, it meant just finding a way to give their children the Blackness that they wouldn't particularly get in their new neighborhoods. This brings me to the Black Mothers who opted to move to “better neighborhoods,” that often didn't include other Black people, here in the Bay Area, Blackness in neighborhoods often equals being poor, so to get yourself and your children to a place where there is safety in the environment, means removing yourself from those who look like you.

Cranes in the Sky: BCM from the views of HealthCare, Pandemics, etc.

Solange's song *Cranes in the Sky* (2016) uncovers her need and desire to escape and heal from her wounds of all the sadness that was filling her life. She sang to reflect on her moments as a Black woman, wife, and mother and all the issues that surrounded her. She sung:

*"I tried to drink it away
I tried to put one in the air
I tried to dance it away
I tried to change it with my hair
I ran my credit card bill up
Thought a new dress would make it better
I tried to work it away
But that just made me even sadder
I tried to keep myself busy
I ran around circles
Think I made myself dizzy
I slept it away, I sexed it away
I read it away
Away....
Well, it's like cranes in the sky
Sometimes I don't wanna feel those metal clouds*

(Solange, 2016)

I am doing my best not to grow comfortable with being numb to mistreatment. To disregard the things that I know that I deserve especially when it comes to access to proper healthcare. In my dissertation, I wrote about a time when I was pregnant with my first son, and my grandmother, well, if it wasn't for her I likely wouldn't be here today. My son wouldn't be here today. My grandmother was a nurse, and she came into the room and realized that there was something wrong with me. Mind you, I had been in the hospital in and out for the last week. I had gone in on a Friday at let's say 130 lbs came in the following Friday, and I was 30 lbs heavier. No Lie 30 lbs heavier. My doctor sent me home. ell, I should say my white doctor sent me home with not even a mention as to the issues that were involved with me gaining 30 lb in one week. The story below reflects one of my most traumatic experiences in healthcare. I wrote a letter to my son to discuss what happened:

Thinking about the story makes me think about the fact that the fight to stop hurting continues and may not happen in my lifetime. I cried for my son's life even before he took his first breath. I feared for his life even before his presence in this world impacted anyone other than his immediate family. The fight to hold significance in the world as a Black woman, a Black Mother.

Sometimes I just don't want to feel anything. Black Mothering forces us to discuss the statistics of how many times more likely Black Mothers are to die in childbirth because they don't get adequate health care support during the course of the term of their pregnancy and even after. our children are pretty much doomed even before the start. The risks of childbirth vary by both race and parental income, but most importantly, Black families, regardless of their socioeconomic status, are disproportionately affected.

New data presented by Kliff, et.al.,(2023) from California shows that, for every 100,000 births,

- *173 of the babies born to the richest white mothers die before their first birthday.*
- *350 babies born to the poorest white mothers die.*
- *437 babies born to the richest Black mothers die.*
- *653 babies born to the poorest Black mothers die.*

I knew something wasn't right, and my grandmother told me to call the advice nurse, and in this case, it's time that you lie. Sometimes, you have to tell them a lie to get seen, sometimes, you have to tell them a lie to be heard. Those weren't her exact words, but, I know what she meant. My grandmother saved me; my Black grandmother saved me. Once I got in that hospital room on that Friday, there was a nurse who actually cared. She looked like me, and she said there's no way in the world the doctor should have sent you home last week. Your son has fluid that's leaking, and if we don't get him out of you, you'll likely lose him. Not too long after this, my body started going into a shock, which my mother said appeared as if I was having seizures. I don't really remember it because I was under so much medication. I can't honestly tell you what happened during that childbirth. I just remember my grandmother rushing in, calling for the doctors, and telling them what they needed to give me. He told the doctors who were responsible for my care what medicines I needed, and these were the people who were trying to, or were going to bring my child into this world. But honestly, they were going to be what took my son and I out of this world, and as I stated before, this could have been a moment where this was my last breath, and my son may have never seen his first.

Conclusion: The Real Superwoman

As I continue to reflect on the importance of this article, I think about what it has meant to maintain, being a superwoman and keeping the 'S' on my chest. Black women have unwarily adapted habits and traditions that have influenced how we think, what we eat, knowledge of health and our healthcare. (DeGruy, 2005) Through this adaptation, Black Mothers have to navigate healthy ways to let go of trauma that shows up in our relationships, work, and how we parent.

BlackCrit Mothering is not a new experience but a critical synthesis of an ongoing experience that Black Mothers continue to face. The implicit bias that society has held over our community has continued to plague our community and has in so many ways, kept Black Mothers as casualties of an unprovoked war and unseen heroes. Black Mothers continued representation in the poverty numbers, the existence of single motherhood, high infant mortality rates, low achievement gaps has kept our existence in an ongoing stereotype. Black women are some of the rarest gems in the world because we have to endure all things Black, all things women, and all things Black women while keeping a smile on our face. Alicia Keys tells us:

*Everywhere I'm turning
Nothing seems complete
I stand up and I'm searching
For the better part of me
I hang my head from sorrow
State of humanity
I wear it on my shoulders
Gotta find the strength in me
Cause I am a Superwoman
Yes I am
Yes she is
Even when I'm a mess
I still put on a vest
With an S on my chest
Oh yes
I'm a Superwoman*

(Keys, 2007)

We are all SuperWoman. I know that I have accomplished a lot, maintained a lot, and continue to be the best Black Mother that I can be, regardless of my circumstances. I didn't highlight the word resilience through this track not because I don't agree with the term but because I believe that Black Mothering aims to show that we want to be defined as more than just a resilient being. Being resilient means that we have to go through a struggle or that we have gone through a struggle, and I would love to see the day that Black Mothers can just be mothers without having to focus on being Black.

To all the Black Mamas out there, hold on and work through all the trials and tribulations. Keep holding on. We can only pray brighter days are on the way. And remember, the goal is to practice positive parenting with the aim to be the mother our children do not have to heal from. Lastly, remember:

*Everything will be alright if you hold on
It's a struggle every day, [you] gotta roll on
And there's no way I can pay you back, but I plan to show you that I understand: you are appreciated*
(Tupac, 1995)

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributor

Kassie Phillips-Alexander, ACSW, MSW, EdD was born and raised in Oakland, CA. She began her college experience at Chabot College's Daraja Program as a first generation, low-income student parent where she earned her Associates of Liberal Arts with a Social and Behavioral Science Emphasis. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and a Masters in Social Work with an emphasis in Mental Health from Cal State University, East Bay. Dr. Alexander recently earned her Doctorate in International and Multicultural Education with a concentration in Human Rights and a minor in Organizational and Leadership at the University of San Francisco. In addition Dr. Kassie Alexander works as Dr. Alexander has spent her past several years working as a college counselor and mental health clinician working intentionally with the BIPOC community to support efforts to close equity gaps in education and personal health.

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