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Freedom dreaming with Black Canadian mothers

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A burgeoning body of literature explores the educational experiences of Black Canadian students. Such literature reveals Black students as disproportionately impacted by academic underachievement, discipline policies, and special education placement. Black Canadian mothers have long dreamt of and advocated for humanizing learning spaces for their children. This paper explores how a group of Black Canadian mothers partnered with one another to reimagine learning opportunities for their children. This article presents insights obtained from eight in-depth interviews with Black Canadian mothers living in Toronto. In these interviews, participants shared stories that center the following questions: (1). How do Black mothers reconceptualize their motherwork to include freedom dreams? (2). How do Black mothers partner with one another to produce a vision for their children's education? Grounded in an arts-informed narrative methodology, this study compiled findings gained from interviews into the creative non-fiction story *Set it Off*. *Set it Off* captures personal narratives, shared by study participants, highlighting the central role of freedom dreams and resistance as Black Canadian mothers organize for their children's education.

KEYWORDS

Black children, Black Canadian mothers, education, freedom dreaming, literacy

Introduction

Black Canadian communities are well-established and diverse, some of which stretch back to the beginning of settler colonialism on this land (James et al., 2010). For generations, Black Canadians have denounced the chronic pathologization of Black families and the underachievement of their children in public schools (Aladejebi, 2016). Personal narratives, community-led research, and data collected by public school boards (Turner Consulting Group, 2015; Toronto District School Board, 2019; Peel District School Board, 2022) reveal Black students as disproportionately impacted by academic underachievement, discipline policies, and special education placement.

Black Canadians have long reimagined education for liberation. Following public outcry and demonstrations spearheaded by Black leaders, school boards across Canada acknowledged the injustices levied against young Black children in the public education

system (Hong, 2017). Many public school boards enacted policies and implemented initiatives to redress discriminatory practices (James and Turner, 2017). Peel District School Board's *We Rise Together* and Toronto District School Board's *Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement* are examples of the actions undertaken by some Canadian school boards to identify, understand, and address the marginalization of Black children. Yet, persistent inequalities continue to hinder young Black students from realizing their full potential. Refusing the dehumanization and disposability of their children, Black mothers, throughout the country organize to redesign learning spaces where they and their children matter (Fearon, 2020).

This article centers an arts-informed study that explored the leadership experiences of eight Black mothers in Toronto. The article weaves scholarship and narratives to provide readers with a harrowing account into the ways that a group of Black mothers came together to reimagine learning opportunities for their children. I begin this article by contextualizing Black mothers' presence and leadership in public education in Canada. I, then, use a personal narrative to position myself within the research. I also provide readers with an overview of the frameworks informing the study. The article continues with a presentation of the questions and methodology that guided the study. Afterward, a creative non-fiction story presents the study findings and insights. I close the article by offering school-based educators a series of reflection questions to support Black mothers' use of alternative visions and dreams for their children's learning experiences.

Black mothers (re)visioning educational spaces in Canada: A historical and contemporary overview

Canada boasts a deeply rooted Black population. The country's relationship with Black Canadian communities is marred by practices of slavery and segregation, and racially restrictive immigration policies (Lawson, 2013; Maynard, 2018; ALADEJEBI, 2021; Litchmore, 2021). We, Black Canadian mothers, have long been at the forefront of liberation movements, most notably those pertaining to public education. For centuries, we have leveraged our dreams to assert our children's engagement and wellbeing in Canadian schools. Our stories trace the early activism of Black mothers who, in response to the rejection of their children from public schools in the 19th century, imagined and later established educational institutions with little assistance from white school officials (Aladejebi, 2016). Black mothers, like Mary Ann Shadd Cary, spearheaded social movements in the 1800s demanding Black children's full participation in public schools (Aladejebi, 2016). During this period, community mother and educator Mary Bibb also rallied

Black families to establish separate schools for excluded Black children (Aladejebi, 2016).

Maynard (2018), Walcott and Abdillahi (2019), and Brand (2020) and other Black scholars point to the ways that Atlantic chattel slavery and its afterlives continue to unfold in Canadian institutions like education. In these afterlives, anti-Black racism is endemic to Canadian public schools and profoundly shapes the lives of Black children (Maynard, 2018; Walcott and Abdillahi, 2019). Current Canadian scholarship (James and Turner, 2017), public school board reports (Toronto District School Board, 2019; Peel District School Board, 2022), and personal narratives (Turner Consulting Group, 2015) further highlight Black students' negative schooling experiences. Such accounts identify lowered academic expectations, minimal acknowledgment of Black Canadian history in the curriculum, and disproportionate suspension as plaguing public schools in the country (Peel District School Board, 2022).

Black Canadian mothers continue to reimagine and push for the transformation of their children's education. In 2019, Shada Mohamed led a group of Black mothers demanding the Alberta Ministry of Education to take action against anti-Black racism afflicting their children's schools (McGarvey, 2019). Mohamed and fellow mothers accused school officials of denying the existence of anti-Black racism in public schools and ignoring its negative impact on Black children's health and achievement. To the media, Mohamed declared, "I've been into the school every time there's been an issue, I address it right after school and address it with the principal. Nobody seems to take this seriously. It's a joke" (McGarvey, 2019). Also in 2019, Edmonton school officials called an 11-year-old Black boy a gang member because he wore a durag (Konguavi, 2019). While the boy's mother, Una Momulu, sought redress from the principal, school personnel called the police on her and later prohibited her from entering her son's school. In addition to her son being racially profiled, Momulu maintained that she was "painted as an angry Black woman" and threatened with legal action by the school board (Konguavi, 2019). At a board meeting, Momulu said, "It is time to acknowledge that this entire incident has to do with race from the very beginning" (Konguavi, 2019).

Scholarship led by Henry, 1992, 1993, 1996, 1998 and Mogadime (2000) further attest to Black Canadian mother leaders enduring commitment to uphold Black children's dignity within the education system and the larger community. By positioning Black mothers' present-day liberation work within a historical context, we better understand their experiences in the public education system as being shaped by a continuum of anti-Black racism (Henry, 1992, 1993, 1996, 1998; Mogadime, 2000). Much like Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Mary Bibb and other Black mother leaders who have come before us, Black Canadian mothers continue to use alternative visions for education to reclaim our humanity and that of our children (Henry, 1992, 1993, 1996, 1998; Mogadime, 2000; Fearon, 2020).

Situating myself within educational research on Black mothers

I am a Black Canadian mother of two young children. I grew up in an immigrant neighborhood not far from the Toronto zoo. My Jamaican-born parents, sister, and I lived in a pink-brick house a few blocks from Baker Public School. A pine tree stood at our school's back entrance and towered over the playground. Each school day began with Mr. King, our principal, leading the announcements and national anthem. One Friday morning in November, just after my class sang O'Canada, my third grade teacher summoned me to her desk. I rose from my chair and trudged toward a seated Ms. Marchant. I remember passing the room's lone window. I also recall a group of classmates giggling and my sneakers screeching against the tiled floors. Ms. Marchant slouched behind her oak desk and placed her red tipped fingers atop a dozen or so papers. She swept aside her silver bangs revealing a set of blue eyes.

"Do you know what lazy means?" the woman pursed her rouged lips.

"Yeah," I tugged one of my braids, "I know what that means."

"That's what you are," Ms. Marchant scoffed, "you're lazy."

The teacher pushed my one-paged assignment to the edge of the desk. Red rows of her handwritten words marked the sheet.

"I can tell you rushed your assignment," the teacher tapped my work.

Tears clung to my eyelashes and pooled above my cheeks.

The teacher sighed, "you need to put more effort into school."

I snatched my assignment and marched to my seat. I slumped into the chair, shoved the paper inside my desk, and peered out the window. The recess bell rang. I watched children in zipped up coats rush to the school yard and run around the pine tree.

That night, right before bed, I curled onto the couch with my mother. I recounted to Mummy the day's events. Mummy shook her head and stomped the parquet floor. "How can she teach you," Mummy wondered aloud, "If she doesn't care about you?" Mummy spent the weekend on the phone with Aunt Vee. Mummy balanced the telephone on her shoulder and twirled its white cord around her fingers. The two women rehearsed their upcoming meeting with Ms. Marchant, each taking turns role-playing the teacher. Mummy and Aunt Vee began imagining how Black children and their families could create their own educational spaces. They dared to dream of learning opportunities for me and other Black children that existed outside the confines of the school.

In her book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals*, Hartman (2020) argues that research has long failed to uphold Black mothers as thinkers, planners, or leaders. Sociologists, historians, and other scholars, explains Hartman, "fail to discern the beauty and they see only the disorder, missing all the ways Black [mothers] create life and make bare need into an arena of elaboration" (Hartman, 2020, p. 23). A growing number of educational researchers investigate the agency, authority, and authenticity that Black Canadian mothers exercise in their children's education (Onuora, 2015; Fearon, 2020). This arts-informed study adds to educational research centering the leadership of Black Canadian mothers to reimagine learning opportunities for our children.

Underpinning frameworks

To carry out this arts-informed study, it was necessary to complete a critical review of the theories framing the research. Freedom dreams, Black motherwork scholarship, and endarkened feminist epistemology underpinned all phases of this research study.

Freedom dreams

A body of Canadian scholarship elucidates the schooling experiences of Black children and youth (e.g., Henry, 1992, 1993, 1996, 1998; Dei, 1997; James and Turner, 2017; McPherson, 2020; Litchmore, 2021). However, the notion of "freedom dreaming" in relation to Black Canadian children has received minimal attention within the fields of education. Kelley (2002, 2022) describes freedom dreaming as a process of collective radical imagining. The act of freedom dreaming conjures and sustains visions of freedom, especially in challenging times. In his book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Kelley (2002) guides readers through the histories of select social movements by centering their visions of a better future for all. According to Kelley (2002):

Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society (p. 9).

Freedom dreams, concludes Kelley (2002), enables us to see beyond our immediate ordeals and produce visions grounded in love, hope, and liberation.

Love (2019) extends notions of freedom dreams to illuminate the schooling experiences of Black children and youth. In her book, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, Love (2019) challenges us to "demand the impossible" and dream of the world Black students, families, and communities deserve (p. 7). Echoing Kelley (2002, 2022) and Love (2019) affirms that such dreams for a liberated future, within educational spaces and beyond, are acts of radical love,

joy, and resistance. This study used freedom dreams as a framework to investigate not simply the beliefs, actions, and structures that harm Black students. In fact, Freedom dreams allowed the study to stress Black Canadian mothers' collective visions of a liberatory educational praxis for their children. Indeed, it is not enough to imagine a world without oppression. Thinkers like Love (2019) and Kelley (2002, 2022) remind us that the process of freedom dreaming requires us to understand the mechanisms that reproduce the subjugation and exploitation of Black students in schools across Canada.

Black motherwork

The study explored how a group of Black Canadian mothers drew on their motherwork to rethink educational opportunities for their children. Rich (1986) and Ruddick (1989) have propelled the study of mothering and motherwork internationally. These American scholars explored mothering as a site that affords women opportunities for agency. Ruddick (1989) argued that the work of mothering "demands that mothers think" and "out of this need for thoughtfulness, a distinctive discipline emerges" (p. 24).

In Canada, thinkers continue to politicize mothering as work of resistance and self-determination (Henry, 1992, 1993, 1996, 1998; Mogadime, 2000). Canadian scholars such as O'Reilly (2004) and Massaquoi and Wane (2007) documented the preserving, nurturing, and healing aspects of Black motherhood. In her book *Toni Morrison and Motherhood*, O'Reilly (2004) traced Toni Morrison's theory of Black mothering as articulated in Morrison's novels, essays, speeches, and interviews. O'Reilly (2004) illustrated how Morrison (1972, 1977, 1981, 1984) builds upon Black women's experiences of and perspectives on motherhood to theorize a Black motherwork that is, in terms of maternal identity, role, and action, radically different from the motherwork prescribed in the dominant culture.

Citing Hooks (1992), Morrison (see O'Reilly, 2004) and Collins (2000) conceptualizes Black motherwork in the following dimensions: (1) communal mothering, (2) a site of power, (3) motherline, and (4) homeplace. Indeed, Black motherwork is an act of resistance, essential to Black women's fight against racism and sexism, and propels our ability to achieve wellbeing for ourselves, our children, and our community (O'Reilly, 2004). Motherline, an aspect of Black women's motherwork that centers communal learning and cultural knowledge systems, and homeplace, a site where the agency of Black mothers and their children is nurtured, are integral components of Black motherwork (Hooks, 1992; O'Reilly, 2004; Fearon, 2020). The following sections provide readers with an extended description to the four interrelated aspects of Black motherwork:

Communal mothering

Communal mothering is a formal or non-formal arrangement to care for children. Communal mothers (i.e., othermothers, community mothers, and transnational mothers) take care of children who are not necessarily biologically theirs. This form of parenting is indigenous to African communities (Wane, 2000) and remains a present-day staple practice in the African diaspora preserved through enslavement and immigration. This form of communal parenting is revolutionary as it opposes the idea that parents, especially biological mothers, should be the only child rearers. Communal mothering advocates for a form of parenting where mothering is understood as collective work.

Site of power

Site of Power is a place, spanning time and space, where Black mothers and their children come together and engage in acts of resistance (O'Reilly, 2004). Black women's motherwork provides a foundation for Black women's activism. Black women's feelings of responsibility for nurturing the children in their networks stimulate a more generalized ethic of care where Black women feel accountable to all the Black community's children.

Motherline

Motherline is an aspect of Black women's motherwork that centers communal learnings and knowledge systems. Black mothers pass on narratives about women's physical, psychological and historical triumphs. This transmission of intergenerational knowledge, values and worldviews serves to teach Black mothers and their children self-love, leadership and "an astute opposition to oppression" (King and Ferguson, 2011, p. 24).

Homeplace

This study extends motherwork scholarship by positioning the work of Black Canadian mothers to envision affirming learning spaces for their children, and act on these dreams for the future, as resistance. Hooks (1992) opens the chapter, *Homeplace as Resistance*, with a personal story recounting childhood visits to her grandmother's house. Through a series of confessional anecdotes, Hooks (1992) explores the significance of homeplace for Black mothers and their children. Homeplace, according to Hooks (1992), is a site led by Black women where their own agency, as well as that of their Black children, is nurtured. Homeplace affirms Black children's relationships, identities, and ideas. Black motherwork scholars (see: O'Reilly, 2004; Onuora, 2015; Fearon, 2020) uphold homeplace as integral to ensuring Black children's health and wellbeing in a society that "attempts to dehumanize, oppress, suppress, and annihilate Black [lives]" (Evans-Winters, 2019, p. 23).

Henry, 1992, 1993, 1996, 1998 and Mogadime (2000) document the traditions of Black women teachers drawing

on motherwork to affirm Black children within school settings. A motherwork framework is essential to this study's investigation of the work and visioning of Black Canadian mothers. A motherwork framework provided insights needed to interpret and articulate how we, Black Canadian mothers, understand, practice, and leverage motherwork to reimagine our children's education.

Endarkened feminist epistemology

Endarkened feminist epistemology (EFE) (Dillard, 2000) guides my work as a Black mother and researcher. EFE offers Black mothers opportunities to establish alternative sites of existence within educational institutions and our communities. EFE implores Black mothers to reclaim our cultural, historical, and spiritual identities (Dillard, 2000; Toliver, 2021). In so doing, we center our whole selves, heal and uplift our communities, and create new worlds in which we and our children might live life more fully. EFE beholdens us to be accountable to the Black mothers and their children in which we engage (Dillard, 2000; Toliver, 2021). Through EFE, Dillard (2000) invites Black mother scholars "to become aware of multiple ways of knowing and doing research [and it is] available to those serious enough to interrogate the epistemological, political, and ethical level of their work" (p. 663).

EFE provides us, Black mother scholars, with frameworks to reimagine the ways we engage in inquiry. EFE calls on Black mother scholars to challenge traditional ideologies that valorize objectivity in the research process, separate the researcher and researched, and recognize research participants as a bounded, autonomous individual (Toliver, 2021). Dillard challenges me and other Black mothers to center our work in a paradigm of spirituality where humanity and the self, creativity and healing, and safety and liberation (Dillard, 2006; Okpalaoka and Dillard, 2012) exist. Echoing Toliver (2021), EFE allows me to refute traditional methods of data representation and encourages space for the imaginative and cathartic use of creative non-fiction as a means to be responsible to the Black mothers I work with and for.

Guiding questions

Through a data-driven short story, this arts-informed narrative study captured the ways in which a group of Black mothers living in Toronto came together to reimagine their children's learning experiences. The following questions guided this arts-informed inquiry:

- How do Black mothers reconceptualize their motherwork to include freedom dreams?
- How do Black mothers partner with one another to produce a vision for their children's education?

The study

The purpose of this arts-informed study was to explore with eight Black mothers living in Toronto their maternal experiences of organizing educational possibilities for their children. Specifically, I sought to understand how these particular Black Canadian mothers navigated their immediate ordeals to reimagine humanizing learning sites for their children. A purposeful sampling procedure was used as it enabled me to yield the most information about the phenomenon under study. Since I sought to locate Black mothers in Toronto, a snowball sampling strategy, sometimes referred to as network or chain sampling (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002), was employed. Participants were asked to refer other Black mothers whom they knew to be engaged in motherwork and raising elementary-aged Black children. Study participants included: (1). women that self-identify as being of Black/African descent living in the Greater Toronto Area; (2). women who have engaged in motherwork; (3). women who have mothered elementary-aged Black children; and (4). women at least 18 years of age and competent to formally give consent for the interview.

Participants

I acknowledge the diversity within Black Canadian communities. Some African descended Canadians affirm their longstanding presence in Canada across multiple generations, whereas others (irrespective of state documentation) self-identify as immigrants, refugees, or migrant workers. In fact, I belong to a growing Black Canadian population: second and third generation Black Canadians who continue to honor ancestral bonds to our "home country," while negotiating ideas around our Canadian citizenship.

Despite the diversity within Black Canadian communities, for this arts-informed study, all 8 participants identified as cisgender women of African descent who engaged in motherwork and lived in the Greater Toronto Area. Forty percent of participants identified as second generation Canadians from the Caribbean, while 60 percent identified as first generation Canadians from the Caribbean. The stories revolve around a Scarborough cooperative housing building called, The Woods. Scarborough is a former municipality that was amalgamated to the city of Toronto in 1998. Initial recruitment for the study centered a makeshift salon located in The Woods cooperative housing building. Co-operative tenant and president, Participant A, operated the salon and had an elementary-aged daughter. Participant A distributed the recruitment flyers to her customers. Participants recruited to the study either frequented the salon or knew a mother who did. Accordingly, all study participants came from this housing co-operative or the surrounding with elementary-aged children.

By getting participants who live either in the same housing co-operative or nearby, this study was able to focus on Black mothers who drew on one another for support.

Interviews

For this study, I conducted eight in-depth interviews. These face-to-face interviews were tape recorded in their entirety. I began all interviews by self-identifying as a mother of African-Jamaican ancestry raised in east end Toronto's Caribbean community. Interviews were scheduled around participants' work and childcare responsibilities. Interviews were conducted at an agreed upon location to mitigate participant travel. All interviews took place at the participants' homes. Participants were able to move around and rearrange seating to better suit their needs. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 min.

During the interviews, participants responded to questions relating to their conceptions of Black motherhood, their communities of support, and their relationships with their children's schools. Participants shared their understanding of Black motherhood and motherwork, and described challenges they encountered at their children's schools. In their responses, participants discussed their visions for improved learning experiences for their children and explained how they set out to achieve these goals. Throughout the interview process, participants did not explicitly use the term *freedom dreams*. Nonetheless, participants' collective visions for improved learning experiences shared during the interviews aligned with the core idea of *freedom dreams*– to see beyond our immediate ordeals and produce visions grounded in love, hope, and liberation (Kelley, 2002).

Methodology and story structure

This study intertwined "the systematic and rigorous qualities of conventional qualitative methodologies with the artistic, disciplined, and imaginative qualities of the arts" (Cole and Knowles, 2008, p. 59). Guided by an arts-informed narrative methodology, this study employed Black storytelling to investigate Black Canadian mothers' reimagining of their children's education. An arts-informed narrative methodology also rendered this scholarship accessible to multiple audiences. Black storytelling, explains Toliver (2021), focuses on how people of African descent counter society's rejection of Black life. Toliver (2021) defined Black storytelling as stories emerging "from the lived experiences of Black people and communities that use Black knowledge/s as a tool to extend and author oneself beyond the conditions of anti-Blackness" (p. 4). This arts-informed study centered the everyday stories of Black Canadian mothers in Toronto and humanized their leadership experiences. The findings section of this article relied on the Black storytelling tradition of call-and-response to illustrate the complexity and richness of the work and visioning of Black Canadian mothers in Toronto. Storytelling allows me to make space for other ways of thinking, knowing, interpreting, and representing work centered on the lives of Black Canadian mothers and their children.

Black communities worldwide have long engaged in the practice of call-and-response. Call-and-response patterns characterized play and work songs and spirituals sung by enslaved Africans in the Caribbean and North America (Sale, 1992). Call-and-response is a dialogic exercise between a speaker and listener where "the speaker's statements ('calls') are punctuated by expressions ('responses') from the listener" (Smitherman, 1977, p. 104; Toliver, 2020). Indeed, call-and-response is a shared storytelling event requiring communal participation (Boone, 2003; Richards-Greaves, 2016; Toliver, 2020). Boone (2003) and Toliver (2020) noted the prevalence of call-and-response patterns in everyday exchanges in Black communities across North America. As long as there is a speaker and an audience, Toliver (2020) argued, call-and-response can occur in a conversation between a mother and her children, around the kitchen table, or in a short story. As the practice of call-and-response can be carried out in a myriad of Black communal spaces, I contend that the practice can also be found in Black mothers' stories documenting how they come together to fulfill their dreams of improved learning experiences for their children.

The creative non-fiction short story *Set it Off* represents the study's findings. *Set it Off* assumes a call-and-response structure. The story uses footnotes to reference scholarship and invite the reader to consider the ways that multiple research traditions (i.e., storytelling, literary arts, and conventional scholarly work) come together to reveal the lives of Black Canadian mothers as they envision humanizing educational experiences for their children. *Set it Off* requires the reader to reflect on and disclose their own responses to the ideas put forward by participants, current policies, literature, and previous academic studies. This format honors an arts-informed research methodology by centering research on Black mothers' stories and dreams.

Set it Off, the data-driven short story representing study findings, is informed by Black oral storytelling traditions like call-and-response and audience participation (Morrison, 1984; Sale, 1992). *Set it Off* captures pertinent information garnered from the study's in-depth interviews with eight participants and current scholarship. The representation of the study's findings as a short story engages readers in a dialogic exercise with participants and current scholarship. Readers are asked to vicariously experience what the participants have gone through and affirm them as legitimate sources of knowledge. Readers are also challenged to leverage that knowledge to enact a change in their own communities.

This study used a comprehensive analytic process, rooted in Black storytelling, for collecting and interpreting stories shared

during in-depth interviews (Banks-Wallace and Parks, 2001; Banks-Wallace, 2002). This process positions Black storytelling as central to the analysis, synthesis, and presentation of data. For this study, I built on Banks-Wallace's (2002) process to reveal the depth of participants' lived experiences. This analytic process included the following: (a) locating the interviews within the historical context and cultural norms, (b) demarcation of boundaries for individual stories, (c) thematic and functional analysis of stories, (d) grouping stories according to themes and functions, (e) comparison of story themes and functions across participant interviews, (f) restructuring participants' memories into storied accounts, and (g) reviewing stories for conspicuous absences and silences.

Locating the interviews within the historical context and cultural norms

The social-cultural-political context in which a study is conducted influences story creation, telling, and interpretation (Banks-Wallace, 2002). As such, I documented directly onto the transcripts references made by participants to specific historical events and cultural conditions, such as the history of Black students in Canadian schools, the 1955 West Indian Domestic Scheme and the 2001 Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.

Demarcation of boundaries for individual stories

In order to analyze the data garnered from the interviews, I established story boundaries that were consistent with participants' experiences as Black Canadian women. For this study, temporal and spatial boundaries were used as the guides to distinguish one story from another in each interview. These boundaries indicated when the participant talked about an event outside the present context (Livo and Rietz, 1986). Some keywords included: "At the time…" "What happened was…" "Let me tell you about a time…."

Thematic and functional analysis of stories

When determining the thematic categories, I honored participants as thinkers and prioritized key words and phrases they used to tell their stories. Identifying these key words and phrases provided me with insights into the "embodied context of the [story]teller's world" (Banks-Wallace, 2002). Understanding why specific words and phrases were chosen to describe an event or convey an idea, as well as how the words were said, was critical in ensuring the correct interpretation of participants' stories (Banks-Wallace, 2002). Some keywords included: gran/granny/grandma; friend, sister, aunt, godmother; take care, help out, support.

Grouping stories according to themes and functions

Banks-Wallace (2002)'s process for analyzing stories rooted in Black oral storytelling traditions calls for the grouping of participants' stories into themes. I analyzed each identified story shared by participants in the interviews separately. For each participant, I created a Venn diagram labeled with the thematic categories (communal mothering, motherline, site of power, and homeplace). These categories were grounded in Black women's framework articulated by O'Reilly (2004) in her book *Toni Morrison and motherhood: A politics of the heart*. For each participant, I titled their stories and grouped them into the thematic categories on a Venn diagram. The Venn diagram allowed me to highlight the ways a participant's story addressed multiple themes.

Comparison of story themes and functions across participant interviews

I created a master Venn diagram for the study. Similar to that of the participants', the master Venn diagram was labeled with the thematic categories. I referenced participants' diagrams and plotted the titles of each story collected across interviews onto the master chart. I highlighted stories that were emotive and addressed the questions guiding the study. I created a chart outlining how each highlighted story connected to the study themes and answered the research questions.

Restructuring participants' memories into storied accounts

Goss and Goss (1995), Stewart (1997), Collins (2000), and Banks-Wallace (2002) write of the prominent role dialogue figures in Black storytelling traditions. With the aim to prioritize participants' voice and their relationships with one another, study findings were presented as a story. The short story began as dialogue. I took direct quotes from the interviews and used creative imagination to order participants' recalled memories as dialogue. I then included description as a way to reinforce the meaning captured in the dialogue. Description also enabled me to set participants' stories within a social, political and historical context. I consulted interview transcripts and, on two occasions, reconnected with study participants for additional details.

Reviewing stories for conspicuous absences and silences

I presented study findings as a storied accounts. I read the completed short story aloud and listened for conspicuous absences and silences. I noted directly onto the written stories openings for readers, scholars and artists to talk back to these silences. I drew on the Black storytelling tradition of call-and-response to elicit audience engagement with study participants. My aim was not to recreate "actual" Black oral traditions in written form, but rather to infuse a sense of orality into the stories. In so doing, the reader, and current scholarship became active contributors in the analysis and synthesis process.

Structure of footnotes

Similar to other arts-informed researchers, like Onuora (2015), I used footnotes extensively throughout each story.

The footnotes situate the stories in the historical, political, and social context of participants' everyday life as Black mothers living in Toronto. In this short story, footnotes capture the many voices, ideas, and structures that inform Black maternal life in Canada. Footnotes are used throughout each story to invite readers to participate in an improvised call-and-response where scholarship, audience reflections, and participants' voices are placed in dialogue. In addition to referencing current scholarship, footnotes comprise poignant questions that aim to help readers further connect the story to their own lived experiences. As captured in participant stories, Black life in Canada is noisy, overwhelming, and complicated (Walcott and Abdillahi, 2019; Fearon, 2020). The use of the footnotes reflects the complexities of Black immigrant literacy learners' work and care. Visually and in content, the structure prioritizes the voices of the participants. I invite readers to engage in the call-and-response in ways that are authentic to them. Readers are welcome to read the footnotes separately from participants' stories or alongside.

The story: Set it off[1]

On a Friday night, three women piled into a 2002 silver Camry. Tania settled into the driver's seat and grabbed the wheel. Cold to the touch, she let go of the steering and huffed into her cupped hands. Clouds of warm air circled her afro: cropped sides and fluffy on top. Stacey slumped into the Camry's center backseat. Her silver hooped earrings burrowed in the collar of her fur trimmed coat. Her purse, white leather with a silver strap, laid on her lap. Lisa jumped into the passenger side. She unzipped her coat revealing a white satin blouse with a deep plunge. She turned the dials of the radio stopping at G98.7. The song "Nah Sell Out" blared from the car's speakers:

> Mi nah sell out mi fren dem
>
> Nah go dis mi fren dem
>
> Bare blessings mi sen dem
>
> Please Jah Guide and protect dem[2]

"Big tune," Lisa yelled. She banged the dashboard with both hands. The women sang along. Their arms and hips moved to the beat of the dancehall song. The car sped down Markham Road rushing to Club Liv. The dance club advertised Friday nights as free for women before 11 p.m. who wore all white. The car slid to a halt at the Eglinton Avenue stoplights. The streetlight unveiled the Camry's rust framed doors that were otherwise hidden by the night's darkness.

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1   This is a revised story from my doctoral thesis.

2   Excerpt from the song "Nah Sell Out" by Khago (2011).

Stacey yelled from the back seat, "Lower the music!" Lisa, the car deejay, obliged. Her white tipped nails turned the radio dial until car horns and cackling pedestrians from outside were heard inside the car.

Stacey announced, "I found someone to help the kids with reading. Her name is Carrie Gordon, a retired teacher from back home[3]."

"How'd you find her?" Tania asked as she weaved the car through traffic.

"She goes to the same church as aunty Marjorie. You know the church– the one on Nelson Road with nuf Jamaicans," Stacey replied.

Tania maneuvered the curves of the road with one hand on the steering, while flicking the car's heater controls with the other. "How does this reading program work?"

From the back seat, Stacey looked out the window and watched cars pass through the falling snow. She answered, "The program isn't just for the kids. It's for us too. We meet up with Ms. Gordon and help plan out the program[4]. We figure out why our kids are struggling at school. She'll show us some things to do at home[5] and work with the kids too."

"How much is this gonna cost?" Tania asked.

Stacey responded, "Cheaper than if we get her to work with the kids one-on-one. Thirty bucks an hour. We can split it three-ways."

Lisa piped from the passenger seat, "I dunno if I can afford that. Things are tight as is. I might have to pick up more hours at No Frills[6]."

"I'm in," Tania interrupted. "Think about how expensive it'll be if the kids don't figure out this school thing."

Lisa shook her head. Her long box-braids knocked her brown cheeks and bunched into the hood of her coat. "Why do we have to spend all this money and time when it's the school's job to teach our children[7]?" Lisa asked.

"Yes, the schools are supposed to teach our children," Stacey exclaimed from the backseat, "But look what trusting schools to actually do their job got us. A bunch of kids who are struggling!"

"I hear what you're saying," Lisa said turning to Stacey, "But shouldn't we just keep pushing the teachers and principals to actually do their job?"

"I'm tired of begging people to do their job," Stacey sighed, "I'm tired of writing letters to superintendents and trustees about these bad schools.[8]"

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3   Who are your students' community-based educators? What areas of expertise do they hold?

4   What roles do Black mothers play in the design of your classroom curriculum?

5   How do you foster home-school relationships with Black families?

6   No Frills is a Canadian chain of discount supermarkets.

7   How do Black mothers help determine your school's mission and mandate?

8   How does your school collect, respond to, and act upon community feedback?

Tania chimed in, "I'm tired of feeling like a bad mom cuz my kid's failing everything except art and gym. We've wasted too much time and energy waiting on the school to get their shit together."

"Well," Lisa added, "I'm tired of working at No Frills just to pay bills."

"That's just it, Lisa, don't you want better for your son?" Stacey questioned.

"I do. That's the dream we all have for our kids," Lisa said.

"What's a Black boy to do if he can't read?" Tania asked not pausing for answers, "His future is what? Jail? Drugs? Death[9]? All three[10]?"

"And how many Black girls do we know that dropped out of school just to go and trick for some man?" Stacey added.

"I'm not against getting this tutor and working with her to create this reading program. I just don't see how it's fair that I have to put out all this money cuz the schools aren't doing their job," Lisa explained.

"Those people don't care about Black kids and they sure as hell don't care about us. We need to take things into our own hands[11]. We're gonna make sure our kids live that nice life," Tania said as she turned the car into Club Liv's lot. She steered the car up and down the aisles searching for available parking.

"Exactly. So ladies, are you in to hire Ms. Gordon as a tutor?" Stacey asked.

"I already told you; I'm in," said Tania.

"What about you, Lisa?" asked Stacey.

Lisa fiddled with her braids. "I'll try it out for a month," she said.

"Great," Stacey clapped, "I'll call Ms. Gordon tomorrow morning. She wants to meet the kids Sunday afternoon at the library. I'll text you with the exact time. I'll walk the kids to the library and stay there until their meet and greet is done."

Tania pulled the car into a spot at the back of the lot. "Good. I don't care who recommends her, you can't trust just anybody to be alone with the kids," Tania said. The women puckered their rouged lips, raised their penciled brows and nodded in unison. Tania pulled the key from the parked car. From inside the old Camry, the women watched a line of people in white, standing amongst mounds of snow, waiting to get into Club Liv before 11 p.m.

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9   "What kind of mother/ing is it if one must always be prepared with knowledge of the possibility of the violent and quotidian death of one's child? Is it mothering if one knows that one's child might be killed at any time in the hold, in the wake by the state no matter who wields the gun?" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 78).

10   "All I know is my father always tells me the dudes who act hard in this town all end up one of three ways: broke sitting under a tree, in jail, or dead" (Charlamagne Tha God, 2017).

11   "As Black women's lives require complex negotiations and the mediation of contradictions, the capacity for leadership has been shown in our ability to create strategies for survival and advancement..." (King and Ferguson, 2011, p.10).

Story insights

Communal mothering and freedom dreams

Set it Off recounts the experiences of three Black mothers as they rethink the educational opportunities afforded to their children. Grounded in endarkened feminist epistemology, this study drew on storytelling to help reclaim Black mothers' cultural, historical, and spiritual identities (Dillard, 2000; Toliver, 2021). The creative non-fiction story, *Set it Off*, centers the ways that a group of Black Canadian mothers came together to heal and uplift themselves and their children. The story captures the ways that the mothers care for one another's children. As depicted in *Set it Off*, participants shared personal narratives highlighting the central role of communal mothering arrangements in the lives of Black Canadian women and their children. An established body of literature attests to the pivotal role of communal mothering in the lives of Black children (Wane, 2000; Onuora, 2015; Fearon, 2020). Such scholarship describes communal mothers as formal or non-formal arrangements to care for children (Wane, 2000; Onuora, 2015; Fearon, 2020). Participants characterized these forms of parenting as revolutionary as they oppose the dominant idea that biological parents, especially mothers, should be the sole child rearers. In *Set it Off*, the mothers entrust each other with their children's wellbeing, safety, and learning. The mothers work together to establish learning spaces in the school and community where each other's children are affirmed and supported to achieve their goals.

The three mothers, in the story, lament the injustices they, along with their children, face in the public school system. Extensive research by James and Turner (2017) and Maynard (2018), amongst other Black Canadian thinkers, documents anti-Black violence inflicted upon Black Canadian students and their families. Study participants shared narratives archiving how they and members of their women-centered networks used communal mothering to create spaces where Black children are able to heal from injustices endured in the public school system. For example, in the story *Set it Off*, Stacey takes the lead in organizing a tutoring program for the mothers and children within her network. The children, who are labeled by teachers as struggling readers, continue to underachieve academically despite their mothers' interventions at the school and district levels. Stacey, with the support of a retired Jamaican teacher, dreams of establishing a reading program that will act as a homeplace for both the children and mothers within her network. Stacey urges her friends to draw on their collective dreams to help her design and implement a program for their children to foster literacy skills, support high academic achievement, and nurture their wellbeing outside of the school.

In *Set it Off*, Stacey challenges her friends to imagine new learning possibilities for their children within the community. Despite the financial and time constraints, the friends agree to

co-create a reading program where Black mothers are upheld as leaders in their children's learning. The mothers understand their leadership as part of a larger movement dedicated to improving the learning outcomes of Black children. In his seminal text *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Kelley (2002) warned against presenting social movements as a series of targeted campaigns. Instead, Kelley (2002) urges scholars to focus on the collective radical imagination that conjures and sustains visions of freedom even in challenging times. Imagining a new world without oppression requires Stacey and her friends to "understand the mechanisms or processes that not only reproduce subjugation and exploitation but make them common sense and render them natural" (Kelley, 2022). Stacey and her friends denounce the school's dehumanizing conditions as well as revel in the possibilities of creating a new community-based learning site for their children. In so doing, the mothers are able to "see the future in the present" (Kelley, 2002, p. 9).

A site of resistance

Set it Off takes place in a rusted 2002 silver Camry. While driving to a local dance club, three Black mothers organize to improve the learning experiences of their children. In the story, Stacey positions her friends as fellow mother leaders. Stacey offers to share the cost of hiring a tutor and invites her friends to help design the reading program for their children. *Set it Off* attests to participants' beliefs that the Black mother's realm of work is not limited to children, but also extends to the care of other Black women. *Set it Off* explores the ways that motherwork promotes a generalized ethic of care where Black mothers are accountable to other mothers and their children in their community. This expanded form of care positions Black motherwork as activism.

Black motherwork as activism, Collins (2000) acknowledges, challenges "prevailing definitions of political activism and resistance" that upholds public, official, visible political activity over unofficial, private, and seemingly invisible spheres of social life and organization" (p. 202). *Set it Off* captures the pivotal role of dreams in Black women's activism. Stacey and her friends recount the ways that they sought to reform their children's school. For example, the women wrote letters to school superintendents and trustees, and met with principals and teachers. Stacey and the mothers understand the creation of a reading program as helping them realize their dream of creating humanizing learning experiences for their children. *In Daring to Dream: Toward a Pedagogy of the Unfinished*, Freire et al. (2007, p. 4) explain, "as human beings, there is no doubt that our main responsibility consists of intervening in reality and keeping up our hope." Although the mothers face everyday oppressions, they continue to draw on their own dreams and alternative visions to guide their activism. In so doing, the mothers collaborate with one another to create a learning site that acts as a homeplace for their children.

Conclusion

Love (2019), author of the book *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, calls for learning spaces to embrace Black children's full humanity. Love (2019) identifies the collective memories and dreams of children and their parents as fundamental to establishing educational freedom. In fact, to achieve educational freedom for Black children, Love insists that parents must tap into their imagination, determination, boldness, and urgency. For generations, Black Canadian mothers have come together to demand freeing educational spaces for their children. This arts-informed study showcased the ways that a group of Black mothers drew on their radical imagination to reconceptualize their motherwork and organize educational opportunities for Black children.

I began this article with an account from my childhood. I used the personal narrative to situate myself within the research and introduce my own family's experiences with freedom dreams. My mother continues to advocate for community-led learning spaces for Black children. Much like Stacey in the story *Set it Off*, my mother encourages Black mothers and their children within her network to participate in affirming learning spaces that exist outside of the school. The mothers featured in the story *Set it Off*, along with my own mother and aunt, engage in a longstanding tradition of using dreams to usher new worlds for our children.

This arts-informed study provides Black mother scholars with a framework to reimagine the ways we engage in educational inquiry. By grounding this study in Black traditions of storytelling, I explicitly challenge research ideologies that valorize objectivity and hierarchical relationships between the researcher and participants. Additionally, this study showcases to scholars the possibilities of using the arts to center Black mothers' humanity, creativity, and healing in research. I draw on the Black dialogical tradition of call-and-response to prioritize Black women's engagement in the knowledge creation process. Call-and-response allowed for participants, the researcher, current scholarship, and readers to come together and deepen their understanding of Black life and imagine better futures for Black children.

This study also showcased the need for Black mothers to take the lead in creating learning spaces for Black children. The study revealed the importance of establishing educational sites for Black children within schools and in the community. By positioning freedom dreams in a larger understanding about Black motherwork, we honor the knowledge and leadership of Black Canadian mothers in their children's educational lives. Black Canadian mothers' reimagining of educational spaces for their children recognizes Black motherwork as collective practices of freedom. I close this article by offering school-based educators a series of reflection questions to support their relationships with Black Canadian mothers: (1). How do

educators come to understand Black mothers' visions for their children? (2). How might educators leverage Black mothers' dreams, knowledge, and stories to inform curriculum, policies, and professional development? (3). How might educators partner with Black mothers to improve Black students' learning experiences? (4). How might educators address inequities existing within their schools? (5). What policies and procedures facilitate the collection and use of community feedback?

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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