



CHAPTER 5

Modern-Day Manifestations of the Scarlet Letter

*Othered Black Girlhoods, Deficit Discourse,
and Black Teenage Mother Epistemologies
in the Rural South*

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In retrospect as both advocate and researcher, I have come to understand how many beliefs go largely unexamined and embedded in a dominant discourse that place young mothers' realities in a deficit model with little to no malleability. Coming from a rural community where several classmates were parents before we graduated from high school, I often stood with and alongside peers who had to combat negative commentary and the stigma of teen parenting. I witnessed how their lives sat constantly under a looking glass and how their decisions and choices were constantly scrutinized as "wrong" or "bad" because their life trajectory did not mirror the dominant narrative. I also witnessed the differential treatment ascribed to the girls who became parents, in comparison with the boys who fathered their children: differences at the intersections of race, gender, and age that at the time I had no language for articulating in practice. This

social evaluation of teenage mothering was an experience I embraced then and that would come to further inform my desires for creating spaces for what I now call *othered Black girlhoods*.

Extending the ideas in Shange's (2019) "Black Girl Ordinary: Flesh, Carcerality, and the Refusal of Ethnography," my posited concept of othered Black girlhoods captures the social exclusion faced by Black girls located in lived experience outside of discourses of Black girl respectability politics (Madison and Muldrew 2021). This concept is further informed through inquiry, as I was able to develop more language for naming the social realities that had always existed around me. Witnessing the lack of opportunities for my peers to voice their needs, and the limited viability of their ownness to be a producer of their own knowledge and decision making, in this chapter, I capture the geographies (McKittrick 2006) of othered Black girlhoods by centering Black teenage mother epistemologies in the Teen Parent Success Program. Here, I create the necessary cognitive dissonance for key stakeholders of power in decision-making procedures associated with the policies and programmatic efforts for teenage mothers to rethink, and I question the complicity within and outside of the Black experience that perpetuates the deficit paradigm and stigmatization imposed on young Black mothers.

Rurality and Black Teenage Mothers' Locale

Shaming is isolating and alienating. It consumes its bearers in tangled webs of exclusion and othering. Rooted in symbolic rhetoric of identity and shame, Nathaniel Hawthorne's ([1850] 1947) *The Scarlet Letter* embodies the ideal of a young white woman's ability to transcend stigma and move toward liberation from social constructions, conventions, and expectations. This is a transcendence rarely, if ever, extended to the Black body, and a transcendence unreachable to Black teenage mothers, who navigate the modern-day scarlet letter by way of the physicality of the pregnant body and the hypersexualization of Black girls. Moreover, despite Black feminist scholars' and researchers' efforts to shift the deficit discourses of deficiency and depravity often used to describe Black teenage mothers, this model continues to fuel the stigmatization of being a Black teenage mother (Kaplan 1997; Ladner 1987; Moynihan 1965; Pillow 2004), denying the realities of Black girlhood and focusing solely on the negative stigma of Black motherhood.

Whereas the lives of teenage mothers are quite heterogeneous, being a teen mother is often portrayed as a singular, homogeneous identity. Collins (2015) suggested that motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting themselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment. From this study, we learned that the narratives about teenage childbearing are multiple, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory, coming together to juxtapose the discourse of power that presents the teen mom in monolithic fashion (stigmatizing the teen mom as a bad mother, not ready, irresponsible, promiscuous, immature, and a societal burden). This singular identity of a teen mom appears to the casual observer to have always existed in its present form rather than having been manufactured in the social imagination; its historical and underlying contexts are obscured. Moreover, this application is not accidental or random; it is accomplished and embedded within and through the work of social institutions (particularly education, public health, welfare, and the media) and takes on a life of its own at the structural level—a life that then imposes itself in the lived experiences of the young mother. In the United States, the predominant image of teenage pregnancy is that of an epidemic that plagues inner-city communities, which is where most research and programmatic efforts have occurred (Martin et al. 2021; SmithBattle 2013). However, data suggest that nearly a quarter of the nation's youth reside in rural areas, which are often characterized by high rates of poverty, social isolation, and constrained community resources (Martin et al. 2021; SmithBattle 2013); also, rural racial/ethnic minorities have been among the most understudied and underserved of all groups in the United States (Martin et al. 2021). The disadvantages and stigma associated with teenage parenting thus increase tensions among rural populations, who are also largely neglected in programmatic support and resources.

As posited by McKittrick (2006), Black geographies are consistent with four trajectories that inform experiences within and through locations of lived experience: the material, the imaginary, the representational, and the philosophical. Considering these four pathways of Black girls' experiences creates opportunities for centering their complexities across intersections of race, gender, place, and age. Across these geographic trajectories, in this chapter, I posit what I found to be Black teenage mother epistemologies or other Black girlhoods within spatial realities that dictated how social identity and locale shaped patterns of habitation and the negotiation of place

and space. Located in the rural South, through this study, I explored how Black teen mothers navigate the deficit discourses of teenage motherhood: the wrong-girl discourse (Luttrell 2003), the motherhood discourse (Austin and Carpenter 2008), and the good-choices discourse (Kelly 2000). I purposely sought to understand (a) how Black teen mothers navigate and challenge these discourses in and outside of school spaces and (b) how they resist the stereotyping and stigmatization they experience. Given the litany of information that problematizes the lives of Black teen mothers, it is important to understand how they defy, navigate, and work through their location within deficit paradigms. Moreover, it is consequential to document where and how they make space for themselves in places where they are often excluded.

Deficit Discourses of Black Teenage Motherhood

Historically, Black female bodies have been hypersexualized as spectacles for consumption (Collins 2000; Hill 2011; Schlyter 2009; West 1995). Social scientists who study teenage motherhood have continued to engage in the ongoing theoretical and often politicized debate around the dominant discourses of Black teenage parenting (Kaplan 1997; Ladner 1987; Luttrell 2003; Pillow 2004). With many of these discourses finding their historical roots in the hypersexualization of Black women and girls, the body politics embedded in the perspectives of Black teenage mothering find their intersectional origins in racist and gendered narratives throughout US history (Ross 2017). The idea of the Black woman as naturally and inevitably sexually promiscuous dates to the institution of slavery (Ross 2017; West 1995). This belief has been propagated by innumerable images of pregnant Black women with numerous children (Hill 2011; Ross 2017; West 1995). As an extension of the cultural trope of jezebels (ascribed to both Black women and Black girls), Pilgrim (2023: para. 11) centered the legacies of young Black girls whose histories were framed by “‘anticipatory socialization’ for their later status as ‘breeders.’” To this end, Black women and girls and the geographies they have navigated historically continue to perpetuate deficit discourses that critique and ridicule them, making Black women a scapegoat for many social ills.

In previous scholarship centering Black girls’ critical literacies (Bettis and Adams 2005; Butler 2018, reprinted as Chapter 1 in this volume; Muhammad and Haddix 2016; Neely and Samura 2011; Richardson 2019;

Sealey-Ruiz 2016), the foundations for the relation among race, gender, and space make way for a rich critical examination into the politicized locations of Black teenage mothers. Black girls experience realities where the public domain functions as judge, jury, and subsequent policymaker (Pillow 2004). Blame is often placed on Black girls rather than on the social structures that sustain and perpetuate poverty and oppression (Collins 2000; Kaplan 1997; Luttrell 2003; Richardson 2019; Sealey-Ruiz 2016). Thus, these dominant discourses uphold inequitable structures, policies, and programs that further marginalize Black girls. By excluding the context and outcomes related to teenage pregnancy and implementing social welfare and public policies, dominant Eurocentric perspectives continue to reinforce material hardship for and stigmatization of Black teenage mothers. Consequently, deficit discourses of Black teenage pregnancy and parenthood persist as commonly negative and stereotypical. These same discourses that situate the realities of teen mothers are removed from the myriad structural inequities they face (Duncan, Alexander, and Edwards 2010; Ellis-Sloan 2014; Kelly 2000; Luttrell 2003). Forcing Black teen mothers to continue to navigate stigma (Ellis-Sloan 2014) and experience exclusion from needed support services (Craig and Stanley 2006; de Jonge 2001) disproportionately locates these girls at the center of policies that compound rather than alleviate the challenges of young parenthood (Duncan 2007).

The race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and age of women who have children in their teens all figure into a bundle of American cultural beliefs that have dominated public discourse and social policies. With a large body of research dating back to the mid-1970s, the image of teenage pregnancy has continued to be viewed as an epidemic social problem, specifically for young Black girls (Martin et al. 2021). Few studies specific to Black teen pregnancy have been positioned opposite of the possibility of dismal social consequences. The following sections highlight three of the primary pervasive deficit discourses navigated in teenage motherhood and identified in the literature centering teenage parenting: wrong-girl discourse, motherhood discourse, and good-choices discourse. By centering the pervasiveness of these discourses in experiences of young mothers, movement can be made in disrupting the weight of the realities of Black teenage mothers.

Wrong-Girl Discourse

Sociologist Wendy Luttrell (2003) discussed the role of a wrong-girl discourse on the realities of teenage mothers. This discourse has been con-

sidered one of the more dominant acting discourses for the public in the exploration of teenage pregnancy (Weis 2008). Wrong-girl discourse is embedded in social, religious, and economic conservative ideas (Luttrell 2003) and can be understood as the placement of individual critique as a means for explaining the experience of teenage pregnancy. The teenage mother is seen as being individually flawed (Luttrell 2003). Wrong-girl discourse alters the understanding that there are complex pieces that construct and perpetuate challenges present for teenage girls (Luttrell 2003). Underlying the premise of this discourse is the idea of a normative life trajectory that follows an older woman's pattern for entering into the experiences of motherhood (Weis 2008). The deficit positioning of wrong-girl discourse not only places blame on the individual mothers but also distorts perceptions of how social realities and cultural forces create situations that isolate teenage mothers and trouble their relationships (Luttrell 2003). The wrong-girl discourse thus acts upon the lived experiences of young mothers in shaping their individual perceptions of self and how they feel others perceive them.

This schema has continued to be perpetuated, as Luttrell (2003) suggested, because deviance theorists who ascribe themselves to deficit thinking in relation to teenage pregnancy have had an underlying premise that the traditional timeline for motherhood is when one is older, more financially stable, and preferably married. The underlying premise is the idea of a normal life trajectory for entering into the realm of motherhood, which negatively situates those who do not follow this norm. Pillow (2004: 63) also contributed to the notion of deviance theory in her exploration of "contamination discourse" that "circulates [around] the idea that the presence of a sexually active female student (as a pregnant student or as a mother) will contaminate the student body leading to an epidemic of immoral and promiscuous behavior." Contamination discourse, like deviance theory, inscribes teen mothers and pregnancy as an illness and/or problem, with the young mothers as the contaminators (Pillow 2004). Deviance theory thus seeks to problematize the psychological or social attributes that differentiate the girls who get pregnant from those who do not. It avoids intersectional identities and the complexity of each individual mother, creating a distraction that avoids details that also contribute to the realities of these young mothers. Attention must be given to the intersection of motherhood as it relates to self-validating and self-valuing the experience of all women and girls.

Good-Choices Discourse

An individual's choices and decisions in life often parallel a dominant narrative that dictates certain choices or realities as either good or bad. Both conservatives and liberals are said to carry the belief that becoming a mother in your teenage years is a bad choice, although each group comes to their conclusion through differing means. The tendency to criticize the choices of teen mothers demonstrates how the ideas of a good-choices discourse ultimately "fail to acknowledge the complexity of the human decision-making process" (Kelly 2000: 50) and "lead those with relatively more power in society to think about limiting or controlling the choices of those with the least power while appearing on the surface to be neutral with regard to gender, race, and class" (64).

These dominant narratives that follow a good-choices trajectory often shape and dictate the policy and programming around the sexual and reproductive rights and lives of young people. However, these narratives limit the complexities that exist in the larger social and economic realities that shape our choices and lives, specifically related to the different positions we have through descriptors such as age, gender, race, class, and sexuality. Our social and material realities can largely influence the choices we face and in what ways we choose to face them. The structured inequalities that exist in the social context of the varying choices that are a part of the decision-making process of becoming a teenage mother thus continue to be embedded in the discourse that disregards the differences that emerge in class, gender, and racial power relationships that often shape the realities lived by those who might become teen mothers.

Motherhood Discourse

Mothering is treated as a stable, inviolable category, which is self-evident, rather than as an activity, which is informed by and reflects the sociopolitical preoccupations of the time and place (Glenn, Chang, and Forcey 1994). Mothering, like most societal measures, is a socially constructed perspective that cannot continue to be analyzed in isolation. In the book *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, written by feminist scholars Glenn et al. (1994), we are given an understanding into the social construction of mothering in general terms and the ways in which social institutions over time have defined and constructed the ways in which forms of mothering are accepted as either right or wrong. From a feminist perspective, gender roles are the product of local norms and

social pressures (Durkin 1995). The idea of mothering plays a huge role in the perceptions and social pressures that shape many women's experiences (Glenn et al. 1994). As a major dominant discourse that shapes the experiences of Black teenage mothers, the motherhood discourse finds validity in the opinions that shape understandings of selves as adequate or inadequate mothers (Glenn et al. 1994). Glenn et al. centered most of their work on the issues of a socially constructed idea of motherhood on minority groups not represented in the dominant ideology. The dominant discourse of teen pregnancy is the assumption that adolescent mothers are not competent to be good mothers (Macleod 2001). It also has been argued that a teen mother is not yet physically and psychologically equipped to deal with parenthood (Cunningham and Boulton 1996) for the following reasons: she is relatively immature and less knowledgeable, displays high levels of stress (assuming that she cannot cope), and is less responsive to her baby (Durkin 1995; Macleod 2001). Within the context of this argument, there exists an underlying assumption of what it means to be a good mother (Macleod 2001), an assumption that a good mother is an adult mother.

Intersectionality and Black Teenage Mothers' Epistemologies

Intersectionality, a concept emerging from contributions in Black feminist thought, refers to the kind of oppression occurring at the intersection of race, gender, class, heteropatriarchy, and sexuality. In "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas," Collins presented the tenets of intersectionality:

- Race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, nation, ethnicity, and similar categories of analysis are best understood in relational terms rather than in isolation from one another.
- These mutually constructing categories underlie and shape intersecting systems of power; the power relations of racism and sexism, for example, are interrelated.
- Intersecting systems of power catalyze social formations of complex social inequalities that are organized via unequal material realities and distinctive social experiences for people who live within them.
- Because social formations of complex social inequalities are historically contingent and cross-culturally specific, unequal material realities and social experiences vary across time and space.

- Individuals and groups differentially placed within intersecting systems of power have different points of view on their own and others' experiences with complex social inequalities, typically advancing knowledge projects that reflect their social locations within power relations.
- The complex social inequities fostered by intersecting systems of power are fundamentally unjust, shaping knowledge projects and/or political engagements that uphold or contest the status quo. (2015: 14)

Centering intersectionality to help identify themes of intersecting systems of power, Collins's (2015) article created time and space to highlight counternarratives of Black teen mothers. These counternarratives go beyond the telling of stories that take place in the margins to centering Black teen mothers' epistemologies through alternative points of view to create complex narratives that uncover systemic issues and stigmatizing discourses that impact realities. Intersectionality brings into view and makes visible the complex ways in which social identity categories interact to shape and affect experiences in place and space. It repositions the narrative from one that solely relies on dominant ideas to one that includes those whose voices are often missing within the Black feminist perspective. Intersectionality also challenges researchers and scholars to understand that the experiences of being a mother differ tremendously within different social identities, especially given the various new roles that the mother must take on. Thus, I used intersectionality as a theoretical tool of analysis for critical inquiry to allow for broad explorations into the lived experiences of Black teenage motherhood in the rural South.

Method

The stories of Black people are shaped by histories, geographies, and social locations (Annamma 2017; Butler 2018; Richardson 2019). In this chapter, I offer a divergent perspective from the deficit-centered norm that centers the stories of Black teenage mothers. The relations between research methodology and process are centered constantly in my experiences in the academy. I am often reminded of my unique social location as a Black feminist researcher who aims to trouble deficit-oriented discourses at the intersection of race, class, age, and gender. Collins (1986: S14) coined this

concept as the “outsider within,” which places emphasis on the privilege of Black women functioning both within the academy, as credentialed insiders, and as outsiders through decentering in the academic contexts of one’s racialized and gendered identities. Directly led by my collective interest and experience as a Black girl, sister, and friend to countless others in my community and by a lens of Black feminist epistemology, I sought to provide avenues for the knowledge of those inhabiting the experience of young Black motherhood for truth and validity of their lived experiences. Situated in a variation of intersectional realities that make their experiences unique by an array of social implications, many Black teen mothers navigate a lived experience that is stigmatized. The challenges that persist among Black mothers call for qualitative research that provides an outlet for the voices of these young mothers to be heard. In conducting this qualitative interdisciplinary research project, the narrative methodologies seemed best situated for analysis highlighting the voices and richness that emerge from within intersectional identities.

Narrative and Black Teen Mothers’ Epistemologies

For this chapter, I employed a critical narrative approach to illustrate how Black teen mothers create and experience different discursive environments. In organizing the narratives that emerged from this research project, I had to understand as the researcher that the narratives were all stories of experience that are placed within normative structures of race, gender, and class: narratives situated at an intersectional reality (Andrews et al. 2013; Collins 2015; Ewick and Silbey 1995). By operating within the constant reflection of this theoretical lens of analysis, these expressions of lived experiences illustrated how privilege, or the lack of privilege, revealed dimensions of oppression that existed in different realities (Collins 2015; Ewick and Silbey 1995). Narratives are cultural productions reflecting specific social time periods. Furthermore, the sharing of narratives is especially significant because it reveals influential social relationships, particularly those reflecting power and resistance, which often might not be evident in the dominant narratives around various issues.

Narrative analysis within this research project was a mutual enterprise. As a Black feminist researcher, I came to know that power did not exist solely in the hands of the researcher but was shared between me and the participants. The young women centered in this project and I, as researcher, were on a journey to understand what it was like to be a teen mother. Thus, the narrative relationship of researcher and participant for

this study challenged traditional power structures, demonstrating that power enters interactions at various locations and has multiple meanings. In the context where multiple stories about teen pregnancy and parenting circulate in the media, schools, and clinics and among the young women themselves, it is important to consider the stories these young mothers tell and also how and why they tell them (Barcelos and Gubrium 2014; Collins 2015). Using this methodological approach in this study, space was created to construct and reconstruct the personal stories and experiences of young mothers, situating them as the storytellers of their own narratives (Collins 2015; Connelly and Clandinin 1990). Rather than considering young motherhood in terms of right and wrong, or whether teens should be mothers, the use of narrative analysis allowed for a more nuanced approach to an overall understanding of both young mothers and their children. This includes knowing more about not only the mothers' lived experiences and reflections of motherhood but also the barriers that might exist within their education, identity development, and representation. This study highlights the relevance, capacity, and potential for disrupting deficit framing of Black mothers by amplifying their stories and voices.

Research Site and Sample

An important aspect of this study was the locale in which it took place. During conversations with local community service workers and the school social worker, both of whom reside in the same community that this study took place, I learned of the challenges that they had witnessed in their community among young Black girls who entered motherhood. These adults had witnessed their community, in rural northeast Georgia, transition into one that offered little support, programming, or initiatives centered on the issues specific to Black girls. The adults' emotion and assistance in this research study solidified my commitment to exploring these realities in a rural part of Georgia. As the researcher, I learned that support and programming initiatives were limited, if present at all, in the rural portions of the state, especially programmatic efforts that support teens who are already pregnant and/or parenting. For these reasons, I intentionally sought to highlight the narratives of young mothers from a rural area to bring more attention to how they experienced their mothering realities.

Located in a rural area of northeast Georgia, Hope County has the smallest land area of any of the state's counties. As a unified city-county

government, Hope is entrenched in intergenerational poverty. A study commissioned by the US Senate identified Hope as among the “persistently poor” counties located in eleven Southern states, making up the nation’s poorest region (Womack 2007). Counties with persistent poverty are defined by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012 (2011) as those where 20 percent or more of the population live in poverty as measured by the US Census Bureau. US Census Bureau data (2015) indicate that there are only four counties in the country with populations greater than 100,000 that have higher rates of poverty. Also, the data show that 17 percent of Hope County households live below the 50 percent mark of the poverty level, as compared with the 14 percent of national households that live below the 100 percent mark of the poverty level (US Census Bureau 2015). The Hope community, being defined as persistently poor, thus suffers from many of the challenges and issues that coincide with high levels of poverty.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021), poverty appears to lead to early childbearing, with 60–80 percent of the teenagers living in poverty giving birth to a child each year. This brings into consideration one facet of the structural implications of teenage parenting (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy 2007). Specifically for the sake of this study, the teen pregnancy rates within Hope are said to closely coincide with the economic hardship present within the county. Hope’s teen pregnancy rate was at 59 births per 1,000 teens in 2015 according to Northeast Health District, approximately 50 percent higher than the state average of 41.3 births per 1,000 teens. In the surrounding counties, the rates were closer to the state average (Sweeney and Raley 2014). These data have pushed agendas toward increased teenage pregnancy prevention efforts for the county exponentially; what has been limited, however, are the support programs and narratives from the young girls who become mothers in their adolescent years. The combination of all the data provides a rich space for inquiry into exploring the social determinants and experiences of teen mothers and how they navigate those realities in northeast Hope County. The participants in this project (see Table 5.1) were in the Teen Parent Success Program housed in the local high school in the northeast area. This program brings together expectant and current student parents to provide them with advisement and educational resources in becoming successful parents and students. This program was one of only two in the region that provided school and parenting support for girls who ultimately became mothers as

Table 5.1. Participants at the outset of the study. Created by the author.

Pseudonym	Age	Child
Adrianna	16	9-month-old son
Anissa	15	5 months pregnant with a baby girl
Kia	17	10-month-old son
Rianna	19	1-year-old daughter

teenagers. The program had been in place for ten years in advance of my partnership for this project.

Data Collection

For this study, from 2017 to 2018, I collected data through three different modes: two semi-structured interviews, sixty to ninety minutes each; photo elicitation; and field notes taken as a part of my participation with the Teen Parent Success Program within the high school that the girls attended. This multimodal, interconnected approach was essential to establishing shared meaning and centering the girls’ narratives.

Semi-structured Interviews

All four young women in this study participated in two 60–90-minute semi-structured interviews. In *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, Seidman (2013: 9) stated that the function of qualitative interviewing allows for “understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience.” The interviews took place on a one-on-one basis to allow the teen mothers to feel more comfortable talking about their pregnancy and mothering experiences, a very sensitive and personal topic among women in general. Face-to-face interviews were beneficial because they allowed me to pick up on social cues and other nonverbal communication that gave way to insights in the interpretation of the participants’ experiences. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, each of the young women chose their own pseudonym, which I use throughout this chapter. Additionally, I altered all other identifying information in the storage and collection of materials so the participants’ identities were protected. Each participant, upon expressing interest in the study,

contacted me through a phone call and/or text message to schedule an introductory meeting.

This meeting allowed the space needed to go over confidentiality and informed consent guidelines. The informed consent forms, which were signed by each participant prior to inclusion in the study, educated the participant on the intentions and goals of the study, as well as the fact that she was able to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Because the ages of my participants ranged from thirteen to nineteen, those who were under eighteen had to have their parents and/or guardians present during the confidentiality and consent form introductory meeting. This meeting took place in the home of each young woman and offered an in-depth guide through each component of the consent form. It also provided the opportunity to allow the women and their guardians to interject with any questions that emerged along the way. This initial consent form meeting was beneficial, as it allowed the participants to have and gain full understanding of the meaning and intention of the study and their role within it. The meeting also contributed to the relational component between the young mothers and me, as an invited guest into their personal home spaces. Additionally, these visits allowed me to engage with the entire family units, as each girl had siblings and/or other family members who were present during the introductory meeting.

After the completion of the introductory meetings, each girl scheduled her first interview. In this interview, we explored the girls' maternal journeys of pregnancy and motherhood, how they navigated relationships and managed school and work responsibilities, and whether and how they experienced perceptions and stigma in their realities as a teenage mother. In the second interview, we further explored their mothering journeys after reflecting on their initial responses and my field notes to cover areas for more insight from the first interview. This interview also incorporated the photographs that the girls had submitted as a part of the photo elicitation activity. This meeting allowed them to elaborate further on the process they experienced in selecting images to share, as well as the meaning made as they captioned their photos based on the stories they shared behind each image.

Photo Elicitation

Photo elicitation is simply based on the idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview. The benefit of using images and text simultane-

ously reduces the possible limitations as compared with those present in the utilization of a traditional interview alone (Harper 2002). Symbolic representation in the creation of narratives can emerge in different ways. For this research project and the population and intentionality of the work I sought to do as both researcher and advocate, a multimodal approach resonated most in the process of story creation. The young mothers in this project were given the access and space to explore the symbolic representation that they felt was best as they sought to share their lived experience. I tasked all four girls with gathering five photos that would be discussed at the second semi-structured interview: something that represents how you navigate through challenging situations, something that shows how you feel now as a current or expectant mom, something that represents strength, something that represents support, and something that demonstrates your future. During the second interview, I printed and brought two copies of the photos selected by the girl for the project: one copy for myself for the research project and the second copy for the girl to keep in memory of the experiences we shared together throughout the study. Each girl shared stories connected to the images she selected to share. At the close of the interview, the girl was then asked to caption the photos based on the narrative she shared during the interview.

Field Notes

Throughout the course of the study, I wrote field notes that described the young women, their environments, and conversations we had during the interview and at any other points of exchange. Beyond the interviews, I had the opportunity to conduct further observation through my ongoing role as a volunteer with the Teen Parent Success Program. I took condensed field notes during each interview and observation experience in the program's meetings and then further developed them into expanded field notes immediately after I left the location. The field notes enabled me to keep track of any patterns that emerged during the study and to maintain an awareness of my own reactions, feelings, and preconceptions during and after the interviews and during my interpretation of the data. Additionally, the use of field notes enabled me to reflect on the overall research process. Given the nature of reflective process in this study, field notes were pertinent, as I engaged with these mothers outside of the interviews, when we traveled from one destination to the next, which happened in cases when the mothers reached out to me for traveling assistance. Field

notes also allowed me to note behaviors, activities, and events that I observed within the research process. I utilized my field notes to record personal and social meanings and understandings connected to the climate, culture, and social situations that I witnessed as I progressed through my research study.

Data Analysis

As detailed earlier, the data consisted of interview transcripts, photographs, and condensed field notes that I wrote during each interview and observation experience in the Teen Parent Success Program meetings. For this study, because photo elicitation was used and integrated into the second interview, I analyzed the interview and photo elicitation data together. However, I took note of the types of photos the girls selected that were specifically connected to the ways those images were related to future endeavors in the girls' thought processes. This provided a stronger understanding of the meaning posited from the girls as their narratives were constructed. After conducting interviews with each participant, I transcribed each interview and scanned all photos into NVivo, the qualitative data management software I used. After storing all data electronically, I printed copies of each participant's transcripts and images because it was important for me to tangibly hold each transcript and have copies of the transcripts where I could write and make notations for connections that could be made. I started by reading each interview transcript multiple times to get a sense of each participant. I then reread the interview transcripts and took notes in the margins while focusing on how participants articulated their stories and what they emphasized, until I had a better understanding of the participants and their narratives. From the multiple readings, I was able to develop an in-depth participant profile for each girl. This gave me a better understanding of who they were as individuals.

After transcribing and reflecting on both sets of interview data, I moved forward with an open-coding process, which led to 182 potential codes for analysis. I then placed the codes under the tenets of my theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and of Black feminist epistemology, which allowed me to collapse codes that were similar and overlapping. I then analyzed the data using intersectionality and Black feminist epistemology to capture each young mother's awareness, as agent of her own knowledge as she reflected on her own personal lived experiences.

Analysis of the Interviews Using Intersectionality

The ontological stance of intersectionality can be used as an analytical tool. As such, it “can be conceptualized as an overarching knowledge project whose changing contours grow from and respond to social formations of complex social inequalities” (Collins 2015: 5). As an approach to understanding different realities, intersectionality divulges an analysis that emphasizes the intersections that function within and through the lived experiences of its participants (Collins 2015).

Thus, I used an inductive data analysis process to answer my research questions. The purpose of this project was to explore the narrative experiences of Black teenage mothers’ lived experiences in navigating deficit thought around teenage pregnancy and motherhood. I explored two questions through this study: (1) How do the narratives of Black teenage mothers problematize deficit discourses? (2) How are the stories of Black teenage mothers demonstrative of their resiliency?

There are two ways to inductively analyze narrative data: holistic analysis and categorical analysis (Josselson 2011). The holistic analysis approach required me to understand the text in whole for each participant rather than looking solely for similarities and differences across cases. I used a mixture of the two and integrated the findings in the end, first using holistic analysis by developing an in-depth profile for each participant. This approach allowed me to see how the girls navigated stigmatizing discourses, and ultimately informed my identification of themes of analysis across the girls’ intersectional experiences.

Analysis of My Field Notes

Field notes require a description and also an interpretation about the meaning of people’s actions through the researcher’s perspective; however, the researcher must be mindful of the hegemonic implications of power that could emerge through the interpretation of their own notes connected to their area of study (Collins 1986). Similar to the analysis process for the interviews, I read my field notes multiple times to get a sense of the experience from the lens of a Black feminist epistemology and then an intersectionality theory lens. I then analyzed my field notes for codes and themes related to my research questions. In the end, I integrated the field notes into my overall interpretation of the lived realities and mothering counterstories of the Black teenage mothers in this study.

Legitimate Voices: Centering Othered Black Girlhoods

Summarily, through this study, the girls' narratives offered insight into their engagement with deficit discourses. In this section, I introduce each of the girls in more detail. Following their introduction, I move into the findings of the project, which center the negotiation of deficit discourses that each of the girls worked through differently given their spatial locations within school, community, and personal spaces. After uncovering their experiences in working through stigmatizing discourses, I then move into findings from my second research question, which highlights self-defined resiliency as articulated in the girls' experiences as Black teenage mothers. These narratives of defined resilience inform what emerges as primary themes of consideration in the future direction of scholarship centering epistemologies of Black teenage mothers.

Meet Kia

Me having a child actually, it was like a turning point. It made me look at life different and, you know, made everything important, like now you have a reason why you need to graduate.

Kia is easygoing, generous, and benevolent. As an active participant in the Teen Parent Success Program at the local high school, she enjoys talking, laughing, and sharing with others about her goals, thoughts, and feelings. Sitting directly across from me during my first visit to the Teen Parent Success Program, Kia smiled and offered a confident greeting of hello to me as a visitor in the space that has been and continues to be a support for her in her mothering journey.

Meet Rianna

My daughter's the one that makes me outgoing. If it wasn't for her, I would still be in my little cage. When I had my daughter, it made me more motivated. It's like, alright, God is like, "You might need this right here to make you kick on forward because, without this, you might go downhill."

A true example of fortitude, as a current student in a GED program, Rianna had received the information for my study from some recruitment materials I had left with the program coordinator. This program, which targeted men and women ages fourteen to twenty-four, also focused on providing work life skills and fundamental development and educational opportunities for youth, as well as individuals connected to the juvenile

justice program. I remember the strength in Rianna's voice as she introduced herself and shared her interest in wanting to participate in the research project.

Meet Adrianna

Being a mother . . . at first, I never thought I would . . . could be a mother, would be a mother. I was like, "I don't know how I'm going to do this." But now, it's like . . . I have someone depending on me. I know being a teen mom does get challenging, it does get hard, but you have to be strong for you, your family, and also your child.

A powerful force in a small frame, Adrianna speaks with confidence and drive. Upon further unpacking my research study with the local school social worker in charge of the Teen Parent Success Program, I was immediately informed of Adrianna as an ideal person for my project. The social worker had shared how Adrianna had naturally fit in as a group leader in the program during the current school year, assisting in planning and organizing events and meetings for the other teen mothers. She also stepped up as an advocate of the Teen Parent Success Program: if she learned of any girls on campus who were pregnant but not aware of this support offered through the school counseling office, she would tell them about it.

Meet Anissa

I want to be the best mother that I can be.

Soft-spoken and shy in her interaction in group spaces, Anissa described herself as "kind" and "caring." As the only participant in the study who was currently still expecting—five months pregnant with a baby girl—Anissa provided a perspective that stood out among the data, as her narrative was more demonstrative of perceived expectancy of teenage motherhood rather than lived reality. I met Anissa during one of my first visits to the Teen Parent Success Program meetings; she had come in a little after the other girls were already seated.

Research Question One: Challenging Deficit Discourse

My first research question in this study was to learn how the counternarratives of Black teenage mothers challenged deficit discourses. In the cri-

tique of societal representations of teenage motherhood emerges an effort to redistribute the power relationships that shape and reinforce deficit-positioned narratives that often limit these girls' experiences. When narrators tell a story, they give narrative form to experience. They position characters in space and time and, in a broad sense, give order to and make sense of what happened, or what is imagined to have happened. Thus, it can be argued, narratives attempt to explain or normalize what has occurred; they lay out why things are or have become the way they are. Deficit perspectives of a group are often based on a series of stereotypes and misrepresentations related to individuals, families, and communities in disadvantaged areas. Moreover, no consideration is given to macroeconomic or societal contexts affecting these areas. The use of a narrative approach in this research made allowance for these different heterogeneous components to be highlighted. Using "instead of" inquiries to emphasize the strengths of the participants in this research allowed me to produce anti-deficit research that does not promulgate the current narrative, but instead stands in opposition to it. In this section, I suggest the benefits of that type of research when applied to the experiences of those who navigate deficit social discourses, which are imposed on them just as much as on individuals in and outside of the four walls of the school.

What we learn of teen pregnancy is that discrimination against pregnant and/or parenting students is strictly prohibited by Title IX, the federal law banning sex discrimination in public schools, but it is still widespread nonetheless, especially through the function of deficit thought and discourse. Pregnant and parenting adolescents experience unique challenges as they transition to and navigate within early parenthood. In this study, I found how important it is for school administration and staff to acknowledge this distinctive intersection of adolescence and parenthood. By law, adolescent parents are allowed to continue school while pregnant and return after their child is born.

However, many pregnant and parenting adolescents find it challenging to stay in traditional high school settings during and after pregnancy, partly because of experiences of stigma from peers and school personnel. Fortunately, for three of the four participants in this study, these common realities for teenage mothers were not a part of their narrative, although they all alluded to the deficit thought and stigma that played a role in their lives. Sometimes even the subtlest forms of discrimination can be enough to push pregnant teens out of school, both literally and figuratively. Deficit-positioned narratives that were navigated in the narratives of Kia, Rianna,

Adrianna, and Anissa occurred at different levels: as an individual, through the familial dynamics, and through communities surrounding the teenage mothers' reality. The levels can be correlated to the three dominant deficit discourses that foreground teenage pregnancy: wrong-girl discourse, motherhood discourse, and good-choices discourse.

The following summary provides a coaxial analysis of how Kia's, Rianna's, Adrianna's, and Anissa's narratives challenged these different levels of discourse in their experiences of teenage motherhood.

Motherhood Discourse

Arguments for traditional familial deficits tend to focus on the perceived deviance or dilapidation of the Black family and the image of the ideal mother, which typically is not applied to the teenage mother. The young mothers in this study, however, challenge the very idea that they are inadequate in their ability to mother effectively. Each mother in this study had connected with different familial and community resources to ensure that she provided the best possible parenting experience for her child. One of the themes resonating across all participant narratives conveys the study participants' realization that prior to becoming pregnant and having a child, their adolescent views of self, love, sex, romance, and life's general demands were not like the reality of meeting the challenges of being a new parent. The young mothers described motherhood as rewarding, enjoyable, and oftentimes difficult. When asked to discuss their experiences of motherhood, the girls revealed the complexities of negotiating single parenthood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Kia shared how she navigates and challenges the motherhood discourse:

I can hear somebody say, "Well I won't have a baby 'til I'm married." I know, they're probably not referring to me, but it's like, it's hitting home because I'm a teen parent, and you know, things happen. So, it's like, it wasn't planned for me to get pregnant while I'm in school and stuff.

Kia demonstrated the way she must manage the motherhood discourse but also pushed back on its imposing nature as she asserted, "things happen." The counternarratives put forth by Kia, Rianna, Adrianna, and Anissa not only demonstrate the diversity of thinking among these young mothers but also affirm how self-aware they are, while challenging stereotypes of who and what these students represent as young mothers. The complexity of their thinking as current and expectant mothers providing the best for their children challenges the idea of a universal way of being a

mother and caring for one's child. In negotiating the dominant narrative of the motherhood discourse, these girls' truths and motivations of mothering dispel the narrative that would deem them inadequate to provide and care for their child.

Wrong-Girl Discourse

Perceived low ambitions in life are a large proponent of the wrong-girl discourse that stigmatizes the realities of teenage mothers. As a deficit discourse often applied to girls who become mothers in their adolescent years, and more directly imposed on girls of color, the wrong-girl discourse was demonstrated at several different points throughout the study as the girls navigated schooling and community stigma and perceptions of their new identity. The quotes in this section demonstrate the ways Rianna and Anissa navigate the wrong-girl discourse and also push back as they speak out against its stigmatizing function. In her narrative, Rianna shared, "Some of them think it comes from the parent. So, like, 'Your mom didn't teach you, you know, about sex ed.'" Rianna's intellect is challenged as individuals blame her for her experiences as a teenage mother. She went on further in her narrative to challenge this notion, through reinforcing the fact that she was aware of what and how to access contraceptive care.

Anissa shared a similar narrative around how she experiences the wrong-girl discourse:

Because a lot of people make mistakes, everybody's entitled to them. People changed. 'Cause when they found out I was pregnant, they changed dramatically. They stopped talking to me, they just walked past me, they didn't say anything else to me. (Anissa)

Anissa immediately challenged the notions of this stigmatizing discourse as she shared that "a lot of people make mistakes." She seeks to redirect the gaze of her reality as a flaw that she inhabits. Thematic connections across all the narratives in this study demonstrate the way one can see the mothers challenging the deficit idea that their motherhood would end their educational endeavors and future aspirations. The mothers in this study, however, showed that teen mothers indeed possess high aspirations and goals, as all four girls could name both future educational and career plans that were even more of a priority given the conception of their children.

Through this, we learn how limiting the positioning of their counter-narratives from the wrong-girl discourse can be. In the traditional dominant narrative of blaming and problematizing the realities of teenage

mothers, the real truths of the girls in this study are silenced. To broadly state, blame, and negatively position that all teen mothers possess low aspirations and are morally wrong because they have entered motherhood within their teenage years would be to mislabel the mothers in this study.

Good-Choices Discourses

Another stigmatizing discourse in the experience of teenage motherhood attributes an individual's success or failure to the individual decision-making process as the determinant for how teenage mothers and their actions are viewed as either right or wrong, good or bad. This discourse is utilized to ease the conscious of the accuser of a teenage mother as a way to problematize the choices of the girl rather than the girl herself. Very closely connected to and represented by the wrong-girl and motherhood discourses, the good-choices discourse deems the very fact that these girls decided to have a child as wrong. However, the counternarratives of Kia, Rianna, Adrianna, and Anissa suggested that their decision to keep their child was the reasoning for the growth, motivation, and successes they have continued to experience.

In the following quote, we hear Adrianna challenging the stigmatization she feels in her choice to become a teenage mother: "Just because you're young doesn't mean your future stops." Like the other young mothers in this study, Adrianna constantly has to challenge the idea that her decision to be a teenage mother has been a bad choice. The four girls' choice to be a mother, from their own lived truth, has been a positive decision because they have redirected and committed to accomplishing their personal and professional goals. As another predominant discourse on teenage pregnancy centered on poor outcomes, one gleans from this study that the relevance, capacity, and potential of an intersectional narrative approach for self-representation provides the needed counternarratives to these dominant negative teenage pregnancy discourses.

Research Question Two: Conceptualizing Resilience

My second research question in this study was to explore the ways the counternarratives of Black teenage mothers were demonstrative of resilience. The girls in this study provided examples and stories of how they felt they were able to overcome the challenging realities of their new or expectant motherhood. The girls' examples almost always juxtaposed their

strength and progress against a negative assumption that they would not be able to work through or overcome their situations or circumstances. Their stories also always included both internal and external sources on which they relied that were key to their own understandings of being resilient. These internal and external sources were very essential in assisting them as they worked or were working through hardships. More specifically, three of the teen mothers acknowledged belief in a higher power, and all four teen mothers referenced family and community support, confidence in oneself, and self-determination as being key in the development and demonstration of resilience. Like the suggestions offered by the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents (2008), in understanding the resilience and strength of these Black teen mothers, I had to first acknowledge their experiences from their own lived truths and then recognize the oppressive and discriminatory practices that affected their daily lives.

The quotes in Table 5.2 center the ways Kia, Rianna, Adrianna, and Anissa view their own definitions of resilience as centered on their experi-

Table 5.2. Resilience at the intersections. Created by the author.

Pseudonym	Sample Resilience Narrative
Adrianna	"Being a mother . . . at first, I never thought I would . . . could be a mother, would be a mother. I was like, 'I don't know how I'm going to do this.' But now, it's like . . . I have someone depending on me. I know being a teen mom does get challenging, it does get hard, but you have to be strong for you, your family, and also your child. "
Anissa	" Quitting means that you're not trying. But if you stay and you keep going and keep going and pushing yourself to make something out of yourself, then at the end you will get your reward for it."
Kia	" Me having a child, actually, it was like a turning point. It made me look at life different and, you know, made everything important, like now you have a reason why you need to graduate."
Rianna	" My daughter's the one that makes me outgoing. If it wasn't for her, I would still be in my little cage. When I had my daughter, it made me more motivated. It's like, alright, God is like, 'You might need this right here to make you kick on forward because, without this, you might go downhill. '"

ences as a teenage mother. The resilience expressed in these four mothers' narratives emerged strongly within the intersections of who they shared themselves to be. The boldfaced words demonstrate and counter the ideas represented in the stigmatizing discourses the girls combat in their experiences of teenage mothering. These quotes show how each mother defines her own understanding of resilience in her own words, a central piece of the value of this research.

This research provided opportunities for the participants to articulate not only the ways in which adolescent motherhood had been difficult but also the ways in which they have demonstrated resilience, on their own terms, in the face of this life-changing event. In this way, the interviews and the use of photo elicitation served not only as opportunities for the four girls to discuss and share their experiences but also as a counternarrative, because their strengths were illuminated as well. The girls' counternarratives within this study also accounted for their resilience as defined by Walsh (2006), who asserted that resilience can be seen as the process of identifying or developing resources and strengths to flexibly manage stressors to gain a positive outcome, a sense of confidence or mastery, self-transcendence, and self-esteem, all of which can be seen within each individual girl's story. The findings from the counternarratives of all four participants support those of previous resilience research (Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents 2008), which has foregrounded that resilience emerges in spaces of challenging situations or crises, all realities to which Kia, Rianna, Adrianna, and Anissa can attest.

Black Teenage Mother Spatialities

The radical act of spatial creation centers a potentiality for the (re)imagination of one's own worlds (Cahill 2021). Spaces, without interruption, allow the Black girl imaginary to thrive boundlessly. Hunter et al. (2016) posited that Black girl place-making actualizes as sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance, which propels social interaction both intrinsically and extrinsically. The silence around the lived experiences of teenage mothers in dominant narratives, the plight of these mothers, is both hidden and simultaneously hypervisible in the negative discourses that emphasize solely negative circumstances and realities. Their social location at intersections of identity persist, muddled in stigmatizing discourses

within both external and internal perspectives. In drawing attention to the narratives of pregnant and parenting teens, in this research, I made space for powerful tools of illustration and representation in Black teen mothers' own realities to be named by them and not by an other. This section captures major themes that emerged across all the narratives that will be helpful as we all move toward future implications for this work in recognizing spaces for Black teen mothers' need for attention to hypersexuality and Black girls' body politic, intergenerational support, and access to programming and adequate spaces for resources.

Black Girls' Respectability Politic: Negotiating Spaces for the Body

The concept of body politics, specifically connected to the experiences of Black girls, emerges from a Black feminist tradition of taking and acknowledging the political nature of women's bodies within society. Black feminist researchers have often centered the narratives of Black women and body politics as impactful and oppressive realities in the experiences of Black women and Black girls (Combahee River Collective [1997] 2015). Stigma was experienced differently, as their growing bellies physically made visible their future realities. For all the participants, this heightened gaze upon their changing bodies, while the girls were still navigating different social settings (e.g., schools, church, community spaces), proved to create more challenging internal and external tensions and conflicts. Adrianna shared her experiences in navigating the body politics of her pregnancy after having to switch from an obstetrician-gynecologist to a midwife because of the stigmatization she felt she had experienced from the doctor:

We found a midwife, and um, ever since I went there, I give them their props. They're awesome. They took good care of me while I was in labor and . . . were there when I delivered my son. She was so sweet and helped me a lot. And they always, every time I went in there, they was like, "Just because you're young, doesn't mean your future stops." And so, they, they pushed me forward.

All four girls shared stories of having the experience connected to the physicality of carrying a child heightening the ways in which they experienced stigma in different spaces. This stigma followed them within school and community spaces and was something that grew over time as they progressed through their pregnancies.

Black women and girls' bodies are often on display for critique and ridicule and utilized as scapegoats in public discourse. This gaze is often

exacerbated through assumptions of hypersexuality in the lived experiences of both Black women and girls. With roots in anti-Black messaging, this subconscious/conscious gaze often influences how Black women and girls experience perceptions of their sexuality. Through this research, one sees not only race and gender at play but also the increasing interaction of the role of the physical body on the realities of these young mothers in the spaces that move in and throughout. This theme is important to note, as another layer of deficit discourse is added to the experience of a Black teenage mother. This research highlights yet another way, the performance of the body as spectacle in public places, that can be damaging to those who must navigate these spaces. More directly, the portrayal of Black girls as even more sexually promiscuous, amid the already pervasive narrative in the adultification of Black girls, created traumatic spaces where the shifting physicality of these girls' bodies called into question the way they navigated both internal and external stigma at the intersection of being Black, teen, and mother. The assumed hypersexuality of the mothers in this study showed itself as mutually stigmatizing in both internal and external exchanges of their body politic. This theme resonated in the narratives of all four girls and is important in understanding how they experienced and navigated their lives. By openly confronting the hypersexual stereotypes of Black teenage mothers, we all can disrupt the narratives that problematically situate their experiences. In the same vein, we can also move toward dismantling the centuries of anti-Black harm that has been inflicted on Black women and girls through these stereotypes, with direct intentionality on the body politic of Black girls.

Intergenerational Support: The Power of Familial Spaces

By and large, from this study, I learned that teen mothers want to do what is right for themselves and for their children. Because they are teens and parents, they need strong support networks and a comprehensive array of resources to help them parent effectively while working toward becoming self-sufficient adults. The findings of this research demonstrate, in several places throughout each girl's narrative, that the most valued support is rooted in the intergenerational relationship between mother and daughter. Each girl spoke directly to the maternal guidance and support she had received from her mother upon learning of the pregnancy, although most of the girls acknowledged that there was initially some fear and worry of the responses they would receive from their mother.

Like the traditional responsibility of motherhood, in this study, the major theme of intergenerational support emerged from the maternal relationship present within each girl's narrative. This support was present in the relationships between mother and daughter and between grandmother and granddaughter. An example of this is seen in Kia's narrative as she shared about her familial support from her grandmother:

The support system I have, it's like, um, if I, if I think things get tough or if somebody feel like, "Okay, you need a break," they offer. It's not like I need [to ask] when I need something. Like my grandma, when she sees that I'm tired and she sees that I just want to go to sleep, she offers to get the baby. I don't never have none of my family or either my baby daddy. His side, they don't never be like, "Oh yeah, it's hard to be a mom." Like, they don't, like, throw that up in my face. They just support me.

Kia's narrative demonstrates the importance of the support she receives from her grandmother without judgment. This highlights how some means of support, if embedded from a negative and/or judgmental perspective, might be more damaging than helpful. What is important for Kia is knowing that her grandmother recognizes her efforts to do the best she can. In the moments of feeling overwhelmed, her grandmother stepping in and being helpful is what is most important to Kia. This type of support provides the needed autonomy to parent for your child but rest in the comfort that support is nearby if needed.

Empowerment for a teen mother to take the reins, to find ways to make things work out, and to do the responsible and right thing as defined by her also emerged as important in this study. With that said, all may not agree on what the right thing is. Most needed are support systems in place that reaffirm the young mother in an array of deficit discourses that do the opposite. Teen mothers, like all mothers, need individuals around them who reinforce the idea to trust that things will work out, because one way or another, they will. They may not work out how the girls had initially planned, but they will indeed work out. Adrianna contributed to this tenet of support for teenage mothers:

Well, my mom is always here, always. No matter what the situation is, she's always here, and she's just like saying, "You give me my strength," and always saying, "You can do it. Never give up." She powers me, and my son does, too.

First-time mothers might need extra guidance, education, and support, as well as acceptance and reassurance, but as these findings suggest,

teen mothers should be approached from a nonjudgmental perspective that also makes the necessary space for empowerment and autonomy. All the girls in this study were able to glean and have this support from their mothers and grandmothers. Because these research results are consistent with previous findings (Kelly 2000; Luttrell 2003; Pillow 2004) indicating that adolescent mothers most often rely on their own mothers for support, encouraging the healthy development of this dynamic and process is essential. This study also revealed that in addition to the adolescents' mothers, other family members, such as siblings, grandparents, cousins, and uncles, and those a part of kinship networks are also depended on for support. Kia, Rianna, Adrianna, and Anissa shared about moments when they were unsure and scared of the unknown, and they attributed the most important support they received to their ability to navigate this portion of their narratives more effectively; this needed care included familial, school, and community supports.

Access, Resources, and Programming: Collective Care and Community Spaces

The findings of this research confirm that very few schools offer adequate support, particularly on-site day care, and other forms of programming that would enable teen mothers to attend and participate fully in regular public schools. Creating a positive climate in all areas of the school setting is imperative to facilitate teenage mothers' engagement and connectedness with the school and ensure that they feel involved and invested in achieving their short- and long-term goals. Pregnant and parenting teens seldom are asked what resources and types of support they feel are important for reaching their desired level of educational attainment. I noted this in this study in the narrative of the school social worker, who was instrumental in ensuring that this type of support existed for the girls in her school via the Teen Parent Success Program. Importantly, as mentioned earlier, this program is the only one of its kind in Hope County for teen mothers enrolled in the public schools. The findings suggest that this frequently omitted step of support and programming can be instrumental in allowing teen parents access to programs that can help them strategize their needs and goals. As three of the four participants emerged from the Teen Parent Success Program at the local high school, this theme emerged in their narrative as a key part of their mothering realities.

Adrianna shared how the program provided the support and help she needed: “When I came to school, I didn’t know that it existed. I didn’t think people would, like, help somebody like this, but I met the, the head leader of the group, one of our school counselors, through a good friend.” Adrianna highlighted how she never thought supports would be present for teen mothers. Feeling alone in the parenting journey is something that resonates for almost all the participants, and in the presence of this support program, they have been redirected to a healthier space of creating a plan of action for moving forward in their motherhood.

Another key theme in the role of access, resources, and programming that emerged for all four girls was access to and information on community supports. In addition to familial support, and encouragement within academic spaces, the participants relied heavily on community resources, such as aid from the WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) program, Medicaid, and welfare. The participants demonstrated across all narratives that they were unsure at times about what questions to ask an educator or healthcare provider, as well as how to comply with the advice they received on caring for their infant. As portrayed by some of the participants’ behavior in this study, when they were asked to share their feelings and queries related to being a new parent and caring for their infant, they often felt distant, unresponsive, or unable to verbalize their thoughts and emotions. These actions through a deficit lens would ground them as lazy, ill-prepared, or bad mothers. Thus, the reality is that adolescent mothers need more to feel understood and supported by key stakeholders who can provide age-appropriate instruction and welcoming opportunities for the adolescents to voice their concerns and frustrations with being a parent.

As a part of the Teen Parent Success Program, three of the four participants in this study garnered access to these resources through workshops and community site visits. Traditionally, for other teen mothers, these experiences are often challenging due to many of the negative perceptions and deficit thoughts around their realities as teenage mothers. All the participants spoke about how access to these types of community resources and information was an extremely necessary component of their success as teen parents.

Rianna, the sole participant not connected to the program, was also able to get support by reaching out and connecting to other resources and programs she researched and found through internet searches and her GED program. These included information on skills that linked her to basic women’s healthcare, access to social services, and learning basic

principles of parenting offered through different organizations within the community. Rianna shared her experience in navigating some of these resources:

I needed a ride everywhere, like WIC office, to her doctor's appointment. And she was so little, and I'm like, How am I going to do that? Not knowing that if I called the back of her health card, I could get a transportation ride.

Rianna had to utilize different means to create the types of support she needed for both her and her daughter. Being removed from the structured program that the other three girls had access to, however, made this process more challenging for her. This finding thus suggests that the presence of more organized programmatic efforts directly in place for pregnant and expectant teenage mothers is a necessity in creating more inclusive environments that seek to support this population. Like intergenerational support, this means of support for these young mothers needs to be guided with limited judgment and intentionality, which was often the opposite of the way each girl shared in casual discussion of their experiences in navigating social services and other community supports. These programs and relationships with key stakeholders that can provide this type of support are essential in the successes of the teen mothering experience. Access to support programming and resources could also give these young mothers tools necessary not only for the needs of the child but also for the mother.

Seeing All of Us: Theorizing Black Teen Mother Epistemologies

A Black teen mother epistemology is needed for the affirmation of Black teen mothers' lives and voices. Recognizing the strength that comes from spaces co-created with and for Black teen mothers means moving toward alternative knowledge claims in which connections can be made between actual lived experience and advancements in supporting, caring, and loving *all* Black girls. Rooted in and extending Collins's (2000) dimensions of Black feminist epistemology, Black teen mother epistemologies also rely on centering these mothers' lived experiences as criteria for meaning, the use of dialogue, the ethic of personal accountability, and an ethic of care and include recognizing the role of Black girl geographies as central to the material, imaginary, representational, and philosophical pathways in

and of Black teen mothers' experiences. A centrality of geography and locale in Black teen motherhood creates opportunities for the complexities across intersections of race, gender, place, and age. In the present study, theorizing Black teen mother epistemologies demonstrated the possibilities of understanding the social location of Black teen mothers and how their funds of knowledge and viewpoints offer a more accurate and valid perspective in the ownness of their own empowerment and resilience. It also created space for unmaking the pervasive discourses that implicitly and explicitly consume the spaces that move within and outside of the communities in which these girls reside.

As participants in one of only two school-embedded teen parent support programs across the state, the girls in this study staked their claim in their own space and place-making both within and outside of the program. Their narratives highlighted their resilience and created space for their Black mothering stories to be central as they navigated deficit, stigmatizing perspectives of teenage motherhood. This study holds implications for practice, theory, and future research. Themes from the study revealed implications for school and community programming to support and empower Black teen mothers. The study also centered why the stories of Black teenage mothers matter and why we all must create more space for valuing lived experience and ways of knowing for those navigating multifaceted intersections of oppression and stigma. This study exposed the pervasiveness of the deficit paradigm that shapes many social realities for people in society, while simultaneously highlighting the resilience—specifically Black teenage mothering resilience—despite those barriers. This is important in helping researchers, school support staff, and other helping professionals understand and center, through their own voices, how and what these young Black mothers feel they need to thrive across all spaces. More directly, through counternarratives, the Black girls in this study pushed against the dominant discourses that seek to limit and silence their voices at the intersection of what it means to be Black, girl, and mother.

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