

I Love Us For Real: Black Mother Leadership and Early Learning Spaces

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Increasingly, literature affirms the integral role Black mothers play in cultivating humanizing learning spaces for young Black children. Such work recognizes the epistemic injustices Black mothers and their children endure in early childhood education and care programs. Despite Black mothers' prominence in their children's lives, limited research explores the ways Black mothers' leadership supports the well-being of young Black children in early learning settings. This arts-informed autoethnography draws on literature and personal stories to investigate how the author, a Black mother scholar, reaffirmed her maternal leadership while attending a child and family early learning program in Ontario.

Key words: Black mothers, Black children, leadership, early childhood education, EarlyON centres

Black Canadian communities are diverse and longstanding, with some stretching back to the beginning of settler colonialism (James et al., 2010). Despite the continued presence of Black people in Canada, a limited but established body of Canadian scholarly literature investigates Black children's realities in early learning environments (Nxumalo & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2023). In early learning settings, Black children are exposed to explicit derogation, dehumanizing actions, and pedagogies that nullify their realities and dreams (Boutte & Bryan, 2021; Hall & Berman, 2023; Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023). For instance, Black parents receive more incident reports than other parents and are frequently told that their children are responsible for altercations in early education and care programs (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023). Indeed, the literature reveals anti-Blackness—a particular disdain for Black people as reflected in laws and policies (Dumas & ross, 2016)—as endemic to early childhood education and care systems.

Much of the scholarship on young Black Canadian children focuses on Black suffering. Academic institutions and research emanating from them, by and large, depict Black Canadian children and their families as being damaged in early learning environments. Tuck (2009) advises researchers against relying on stories of damage to expose ongoing injustices. Such stories risk propagating narratives in which oppression singularly defines the learning experiences of Black Canadian children and their parents, particularly their Black mothers. In community, Black Canadian mothers are heralded as integral to Black children's well-being. Black Canadian mothers advocate for and help construct humanizing early learning spaces for their young children (Fearon, 2020; Hall & Berman, 2023). Despite their prominence in Black children's lives, Black Canadian mothers' contributions to early childhood scholarship is limited and, at times, restricted to discussions of pain and loss. Such discourses overlook Black mothers' leadership in conceptualizing and revisioning early childhood sites that not only are free from epistemic injustices but are also dynamic and life-affirming.

Given the dearth of Canadian scholarship centering Black mothers' layered experiences in early childhood education, this autoethnographic study foregrounds the leadership stories of Black Canadian women who mother

Black children aged 0 to 6. For this study, I drew on the arts to better understand my realities and aspirations, shaped by own mothering work of two young Black children in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Ontario. We, Black mothers, use the arts to investigate the world around us, make sense of it, and rebuild it (Fearon, 2023). In this study, I leveraged Black mothers' creative traditions to examine Black maternal life in Canada and imagine Black futures for ourselves and our young children. This study decentered narratives that portray Black mothers and their families as devastated by the onslaught of epistemic injustices. Instead, this article explores new futurities that center Black Canadian mothers and their children. I structured this paper, much like the study, as an invitation for fellow Black mothers to gather in community to dream, share our maternal stories, and collectively build new worlds.

Overview

This arts-informed autoethnography investigated the ways Black mothers come together to articulate and practice leadership in varied early childhood spaces. Specifically, I focused on my experiences crafting a virtual space with two Black mothers during the time I attended an EarlyON child and family centre with my 15-month-old son, Zac (a pseudonym). I begin this article by situating Black Canadian mothers within current literature on early childhood education. In this section, I include an overview of Ontario's EarlyON child and family centres. The paper continues with a presentation of the questions, frameworks, and methodologies that guided the study. Afterwards, a personal narrative grounds my investigation on Black mother leadership in early learning settings. I conclude the article by offering Black mothers a series of reflection questions to further guide our construction of early educational spaces for Black life. These wonderings also prompt early childhood educators and researchers to reposition Black mothers as leaders within learning spaces and scholarship.

Literature review

Mothering two Black children has deepened my interest in Black mothers' presence in early childhood literature. This autoethnography centered my nearly year-long attendance at an EarlyON child and family centre in the GTA. To carry out this investigation, I delved into Canadian scholarship on early childhood education and care. I was drawn to literature that upheld the lives of Black Canadian mothers and their young Black children. In this section, I prioritize literature that examines Black Canadian mothers' perspectives on early childhood education and care programs. Since the study focused on my experiences attending an EarlyON child and family centre in the GTA, this section includes an overview of the provincially funded program. Exploring current literature on (1) early childhood pedagogies, (2) Black mothers' views on early learning settings, and (3) the structure and aims of EarlyON Child and Family Centres allowed me to situate my own Black maternal narratives within the larger Canadian scholarship.

Early childhood pedagogies

A burgeoning body of literature examines the experiences of Black children in early learning settings. Such literature documents the critical roles that policies, practices, and curricula play in the experiences of Black children and their families in early learning sites (Boutte & Bryan, 2021; Bryan, 2021; Johnson et al., 2019; Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2020). Accordingly, Boutte and Bryan (2021) call on early childhood educators to engage in a revolutionary teaching where pedagogical and curricular assurance reaffirms Black children's identities, curiosities, and creativity. In the U.S. context, Bryan (2021) maintains that Black mothers possess insights that are instrumental to understanding how early childhood educators can better support Black American children. Black American mothers, Bryan asserts, vocalize their children's learning needs, confront the myriad injustices levied against their

children, and imagine early learning spaces anew.

In Canada, a dedicated body of literature examines children, race, and education. In fact, a small but growing body of work centers Black Canadian children in early childhood environments. Scholars spearheading such research are committed to improving early childhood educators' pedagogical decisions and practices for Black children. Studies on racial socialization have long revealed that children begin to develop racial attitudes in early years (Aboud, 1988, 2008). Canadian children interpret racially codified information found in classroom materials and in their interactions with peers and educators (Abawi, 2021; Escayg et al., 2017). Practitioners and scholars alike recognize early childhood services as contributing to the formation of children's racialization (Abawi, 2021; Escayg et al., 2017). Canadian early childhood educators have been encouraged by some scholars to implement an antibias curriculum in their learning spaces (Escayg, 2018), as antibias pedagogy, developed by American educator Louise Derman-Sparks in 1989, is said to provide educators with a framework to address prejudice and discrimination and to cultivate children's critical thinking and action in early learning sites (Escayg et al., 2017; Kissi & Ewan, 2023).

However, critical early childhood scholars have been steadfast in their criticism of antibias pedagogy, noting its failure to acknowledge whiteness and arguing that it does not recognize the mechanisms of racialization, its colonial history, and its ongoing impact on children's lives (Abawi, 2021; Escayg, 2019). Many practitioners and researchers instead advance the need for antiracist early childhood pedagogy (Escayg, 2019) and culturally responsive pedagogy (Kissi & Ewan, 2023) as frameworks that attend to children's social racialization. Such critical pedagogies, according to proponents, expose the perils of white supremacy and its manifestations in Canadian society. These pedagogies call on early childhood educators to ask children direct questions about their lived experiences to interrogate the intricacies of racial identity, privilege, and power (Kissi & Ewan, 2023). Other early childhood researchers, like Nxumalo and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2023), urge early childhood educators to adopt pedagogies that foreground radical relationality with the more-than-human world. Nxumalo and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2023) call on early childhood educators to engage in pedagogical acts that foster Black children's human and more-than-human relations. This work centers three interconnected pedagogical orientations: storying abolition geographies, storying Black ecologies, and storying Black aliveness. These scholars attest that such pedagogical frameworks deepen our imaginings of the desired realities and futurities for Black children in early childhood education and care programs.

Black Canadian mothers and research on early childhood education

Few Canadian-specific studies have investigated issues of race and racism in early childhood education (Nxumalo & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2023). Although some Canadian researchers are committed to reimagining early childhood pedagogies for Black children's well-being, studies rarely explore Black Canadian mothers' experiences within these educational settings (Hall & Berman, 2023). Misogynoir directed at Black mothers (Bailey, 2021; Collins, 2002) coupled with educators' beliefs that children are too young to engage in conversations on "race" or racism (Berman et al., 2017; Boutte et al., 2011; Escayg et al., 2017) demonstrate the distinct ways gender hierarchies, anti-Blackness, and assumptions about children's well-being intersect to render Black mothers invisible in early childhood research (Hall & Berman, 2023). A few scholars address the erasure of Black mothers in early childhood research and uphold Black mothers' perspectives in their work. Such literature invites Black mothers to express the impact of ongoing injustices and violence directed at their children, families, and communities.

Stirling-Cameron et al. (2023) conducted one of the few studies to examine the impact and manifestations of anti-Black racism among young Black children and their families in Nova Scotia. Most of the participating mothers in Stirling-Cameron et al.'s study were Black women mothering Black children aged 5 years old and younger. The study

revealed that Black mothers and their young children encounter myriad racial traumas that affect their mental health and interactions with the education system. The Black mothers recounted their children's experiences with hate speech using racially abusive language, punishment, and racial profiling (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023). They also spoke to the systemic erasure of Black Canadian perspectives, histories, and futures in early learning spaces (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023).

Much like Stirling-Cameron et al. (2023), Hall and Berman (2023) conducted a study tracing the ways anti-Blackness in early childhood settings shapes Black Canadian mothers' racial socialization practices in the GTA. The study identified Black mothers' use of the following practices to counter the anti-Blackness present in early learning spaces and cultivate their child's positive racial identity (Hall & Berman, 2023):

- messages of racial pride (messages about cultural heritage)
- racial barrier messages (messages to help children cope with racial discrimination)
- egalitarian messages (messages that emphasize shared humanity across "races")
- messages about self-worth, along with modelling particular behaviours
- exposing children to particular environments and/or "race"-related artifacts like dolls or books.

Current Canadian literature is beginning to recognize Black mothers' integral role in early childhood environments. In the field of early childhood education, Black Canadian mothers are largely defined by our grief and trauma. I am most interested in Black maternal narratives that move beyond discourses of loss and explore the complexities, contradictions, and self-determination of our lived lives. Indeed, I am curious about Black mother leadership in early childhood spaces like Ontario's EarlyON child and family centres. In such settings, parents and caregivers are required to attend programming with their young children. Alongside program facilitators, Black mothers are visibly present and active co-leaders in the learning environment.

Ontario's EarlyON child and family centres

In 2018, the Ontario government transformed its child and family programs into a comprehensive system of services and supports for children aged 0–6 and their parents and caregivers (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019). The newly established EarlyON child and family centres integrated four previously ministry-funded child and family programs: Ontario early years centres, parenting and family literacy centres, child care resource centres, and Better Beginnings, Better Futures programs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019). In their current structure, EarlyON child and family centres are free drop-in programs. Although many early childhood programs in Ontario support families, this study focuses on my experience attending an EarlyON child and family centre located at an elementary school (McLennan & Howitt, 2018). Each EarlyON child and family centre is led by a facilitator who is a certified and registered early childhood educator employed by the school district (McLennan & Howitt, 2018). Facilitators are tasked with creating rich learning environments for children while supporting and encouraging families to be active participants in their child's play-based educational experiences. Families are welcome to visit these centres regularly (days and times vary by location), as there are no restrictions on attendance (McLennan & Howitt, 2018).

The following principles guide the development, delivery, and evaluation of EarlyON child and family centres (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 3):

- *Child and family centered:* All programs and services are designed and delivered to meet the unique needs of

parents, caregivers, and young children to support their learning and well-being.

- *Welcoming*: EarlyON child and family centres provide a warm and welcoming environment based on the foundational conditions for supporting growth and long-term success (belonging, well-being, engagement, and expression).
- *High quality*: Programs and services are designed to support positive experiences and outcomes and foster nurturing relationships between children, parents, and caregivers and are based on the latest evidence and research.
- *Inclusive*: Programs and services are accessible and responsive to children, parents, and caregivers with varying abilities and cultural, language, socioeconomic, sexual orientation, and religious backgrounds.
- *Integrated*: Programs and services are developed, coordinated, and delivered cohesively with community services, school boards, early years partners, primary care providers, and parents and caregivers.
- *Community led*: Communities, educators, parents, and caregivers are engaged in designing EarlyON child and family centre programs and services that embrace and build on their strengths, address identified gaps, and meet their unique needs on an ongoing basis.

An understanding of EarlyON child and family centres' history, structures, and overarching principles supported my critical investigation of my own participation in the program. It helped me reimagine the program for Black mothers and our young children and to articulate a Black mother leadership for early childhood education.

The study

Through a data-driven short story, this arts-informed autoethnography captured the ways in which I came together with other Black mothers of young Black children to conceptualize and practice our leadership. The two other Black mothers and I were all Canadian-born women of Black Caribbean descent. I met both Black mothers attending school and events within the community. In fact, I have been friends with one of the mothers since our teenage years. At the time of the study, we were all in our thirties and attended different community-based early childhood education programs with our 15-month-old sons. This study traces my leadership experiences while attending an EarlyON child and family centre in the GTA. The following questions guided this arts-informed inquiry: How do Black mothers of young Black children cultivate their leadership practice? How do Black mothers of young Black children carry out their leadership?

Guiding frameworks

For this autoethnographic study, I drew on three frameworks—anti-Blackness, Black motherwork, and desire-centered research—to explore the ways Black mothers conceptualize and practice their leadership, especially in early childhood sites rife with injustices. These frameworks underpinned all phases of this research study.

Anti-Blackness and epistemic injustice

In the afterlives of slavery (Sharpe, 2016), Black Canadians continue to experience “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (Hartman, 2007, p. 6). Anti-Blackness is a theoretical framework that explains society’s refusal to recognize the humanity of Black people (Dumas & ross, 2016). Rooted in scholarship grounded in Afropessimism¹ and extended through BlackCrit², anti-Blackness draws attention to processes in which Black life is devalued and disdained within education systems

(Dumas & ross, 2016; ross, 2020; Watson & Baxley, 2021; Wilderson, 2018). Anti-Blackness manifests, for example, in systems that establish early childhood education and care programs as dehumanizing spaces for Black children.

Anti-Blackness takes on many forms including epistemological ones. Epistemology refers to knowledge systems and rules concerned with what can be known and how, what ways of knowing are considered valid, and who can be a legitimate and authoritative knower (Beagan et al., 2024; Zaidi et al., 2021). Research into epistemic injustice, the practice of discrediting people as knowers based on their social identity (Fricker 2007), continues to gain popularity within the field of education. Fricker (2007) described two categories of epistemic injustices:

- *Testimonial injustice*: the refusal to properly acknowledge a person's assertions and beliefs because of irrelevant features of their social identity or condition
- *Hermeneutical injustice*: society's lack of the interpretive resources to make sense of important features of a speaker's experience, because members of their social group have been marginalized in meaning-making activities. (as cited in Del Pozo & Rich, 2021, p. 91)

Given these definitions, an epistemic approach to anti-Blackness provided a useful framework for the intimate investigation of my experiences at an EarlyON child and family centre with my 15-month-old son.

Anti-Blackness as a framework also offers Black people a site for resistance in a society that “attempts to dehumanize, oppress, suppress, and annihilate Black [lives]” (Evans-Winters, 2019, p. 23). In these fugitive spaces, Black mothers gather and imagine new realities for ourselves and our children that differ greatly from the current harmful one (Dumas & ross, 2016; Watson & Baxley, 2021). While anti-Blackness offers a lens to explain the positioning and treatment of Black people in society and schools, Black motherwork highlights the tools and tactics Black mothers use for resistance and survival within this anti-Black world (Watson & Baxley, 2021).

Black motherwork

Ruddick (1989) argued that the work of mothering “demands that mothers think” and that “out of this need for thoughtfulness, a distinctive discipline emerges” (p. 24). In Canada, feminist thinkers politicize mothering as resistance work. Canadian scholars document the preserving, nurturing, and healing aspects of Black motherwork (Fearon, 2020; Onuora, 2015; O'Reilly, 2004). Collins (2002) has defined *motherwork* (p. 373) as the work and care Black mothers carry out for children who may or may not be biologically or legally theirs. This framework thus prioritizes communal definitions of kinship. Black motherwork, according to Morrison, Collins, and other Black feminists, is an act of resistance, is essential to Black women's fight against racism and sexism, and propels our ability to achieve well-being for ourselves, our children, and our community (O'Reilly, 2004). Motherline, an aspect of Black women's motherwork, centers communal learning and cultural knowledge systems; it and homeplace, a site where the agency of Black mothers and their children is nurtured, are integral components of Black motherwork (Fearon, 2020; O'Reilly, 2004). Black motherwork is arduous labour but especially necessary in sites marked by anti-Blackness (Watson & Baxley, 2021).

Because this study positions Black mothers as leaders in early childhood settings, I heed Watson and Baxley's (2021) call to ground Black women's leadership in motherwork. Watson and Baxley suggest that elements of Black motherwork—power, identity, and survival—are essential in reframing the praxis of educational leadership. A Black motherwork framework was integral to the investigation of my experiences at an EarlyON child and family centre. The framework enabled me to fuse scholarship on Black motherwork with that of leadership in an early years setting. Ultimately, a Black motherwork framework provided insights needed to interpret and articulate how I, a Black woman mothering a 15-month-old son, understood, practiced, and leveraged leadership in my daily life.

Researching for desire

Tuck (2009) has long called for a moratorium on research that centers Indigenous and Black suffering. She invites Indigenous and Black scholars to reenvision research for desire in our communities. Tuck urges us to resist the need to solely document the effects of oppression on our communities and instead consider the long-term repercussions of thinking of ourselves as broken. For many Black Canadians, research on our families has historically been damage centered, intent on portraying us and our children as defeated and broken within educational systems. Echoing Tuck's apprehensions, I am unsettled by hooks's (1990) admonition to Black mothers to "only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain" (p. 152). In academic circles, McKittrick (2021) notes that racial violence and oppression are often starting points for how we attend to Black life. She writes, "It is as though Blackness can only ever be a site of violation" (p. 9).

Tuck (2009) challenges scholars to craft our research in ways that document desire instead of damage. Heeding her suggestions, for this study, I used a desire-based framework to counter the positioning of Black mothers and our children as damaged in early childhood education and care programs. Desire-based research appreciates the complexities, contradictions, and self-determination of Black maternal life. This framework defies the lure to serve as "advertisements for power" (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005, p. 312) by documenting not only the painful elements of Black mothers' social realities, but also our wisdom and hope. This axiology, Tuck explains, accounts for the loss and despair, and the hope, visions, and wisdom of lived lives and communities. As a framework, desire enabled me to honour the layers of my own motherwork and understand that "all people remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others" (Gordon, 1997, p. 4).

Autoethnography

Autoethnography helped me to reveal and then grapple with intimate accounts on the ways that I, a Black mother and researcher, partnered with other Black mothers around leadership in early learning settings. In her article "For Loretta: A Black Woman Literacy Scholar's Journey to Prioritizing Self-Preservation and Black Feminist-Womanist Storytelling," Baker-Bell (2017) describes the fundamental features of autoethnography. Referencing Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2014), Baker-Bell contends that autoethnography:

- uses the researcher's personal experience to detail and critique beliefs, practices, and experiences
- acknowledges and esteems the researcher's relationships with others
- uses deep and careful self-reflection/reflexivity to identify and interrogate intersections between self and society, the particular, the general, the personal, and the political
- shows "people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles"
- balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity and strives for social justice and making life better (p. 531).

In this study, I adopted multiple positions simultaneously within the research process: participant, researcher, and audience. As a method, autoethnography enabled me to deeply reflect on, from these varying perspectives, Black mother leadership in early learning spaces.

Although this autoethnography centers my own experiences attending an EarlyON child and family centre, participants not active in this autoethnography do feature in the study. Thus, it is important for me to be especially careful of the way the two other Black mothers are represented in the research. I took the following steps to

safeguard their privacy and confidentiality:

- I shared a copy of the manuscript with the two Black mothers to ensure that I did not disclose identifiable information they did not want others to know about them or that might have professional and/or personal implications.
- The two Black mothers read, reviewed, and approved the manuscript throughout the publication process.
- The two Black mothers were part of the review process and provided critical feedback on the manuscript.
- The two Black mothers approved the publication of the manuscript.

Methodology

Arts-informed research and Endarkened storywork

This qualitative study intertwined “the systematic and rigorous qualities of conventional qualitative methodologies with the artistic, disciplined, and imaginative qualities of the arts” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 59). Guided by an arts-informed narrative methodology, this study employed Endarkened storywork to investigate the leadership work of Black women who mother young Black children. Age criteria for this study were based on the EarlyON child and family centres’ mandate to only serve children aged 0 to 6. Endarkened storywork, Toliver (2021) explains, focuses on how Black people “consider the sacred, nurturing ideals of story and storytelling” (p. xx). Indeed, we are a “storytelling species” (Wynter, 2001, p. 30). In her book *Dear Science and Other Stories*, McKittrick (2021) asserts the transformative capacities of stories and storytelling. Referencing Dina Georgis (2013), McKittrick writes, “The story, too, has the capacity to affectively move us and, at the same time, incite a listening practice that is neither disengaged nor wanting to master what it sees and hears” (p. 8). An Endarkened storywork framework required that I, a Black mother and researcher, listen to myself, other Black mothers, and the world around me, honouring the connections among the story, storyteller, story listener, cultural traditions, and spiritual relationships (Toliver 2021, pp. xviii–xxxv).

In leveraging Endarkened storywork, I established a scholarly space to uphold Black mothers’ storied lives and traditions, which continue to be overlooked in early childhood research. Endarkened storywork provided me with the methodological grounding to present study findings in a creative nonfiction story, “I Love Us For Real.” The story captures the ways I partnered with two other Black Canadian mothers to establish an alternative learning space for us to develop and enact our leadership. Through a series of WhatsApp messages, the story illustrates the complexity, richness, and, at times, contradictions of Black mother leadership in early learning spaces.

Analytical process

The creative nonfiction short story “I Love Us For Real” represents the study’s findings. The story is presented in the form of a series of messages in WhatsApp, a free instant messaging and voice-over-IP service. “I Love Us For Real” challenges and subverts prevailing colonial knowledge systems by centering and legitimizing Black ways of knowing, or, as McKittrick (2021) aptly notes, signals ways of “Black livingness” (p. 186). The data-driven story focuses on my journey to reconceptualize Black mothers’ work as leadership in early learning settings. For this autoethnography, I relied on personal memory, journal writings, WhatsApp messages, and current scholarship. These sources furnished pertinent information necessary to recount narratives about Black mother leadership in early childhood education programs. Presenting the findings as a short story allows me to engage with readers in a dialogic exercise. As with other Black stories, “I Love Us For Real” invites readers to feel, respond, and be moved

(McKittrick, 2021). Readers are to vicariously experience what I have gone through and affirm my Black mother identity as a legitimate source of knowledge. Readers are also challenged to leverage that knowledge to enact change. Black storytelling is a process sustained by intervention and wonder (McKittrick, 2021).

As with my previous work, this study used a comprehensive analytic process, rooted in Endarkened storywork, for collecting and interpreting stories (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2001). This process positions Endarkened storywork as central to the analysis, synthesis, and presentation of data. For this study, I followed Fearon's (2020) arts-informed analytical framework. I used this analytical framework to transform the depth of my memories into the creative nonfiction short story "I Love Us For Real." This analytic process included the following:

1. Locating my journal within the historical context and cultural norms.
2. Demarcation of boundaries for individual stories.
3. Thematic and functional analysis of stories.
4. Grouping stories according to themes and functions.
5. Comparison of story themes and functions across journal entries.
6. Restructuring my memories into storied accounts.
7. Reviewing stories for conspicuous absences and silences.

"I Love Us For Real"

In this section, the ideas and curiosities emerging from the study are presented in "I Love Us For Real." The story's title is an homage to Oscar-winning comedian and Black mother Mo'Nique, who recently called for a Netflix boycott. In 2018, Mo'Nique disclosed on social media that Netflix had offered to pay her significantly less than other comedians for a forthcoming special (Abraham, 2023). On Instagram, Mo'Nique penned an impassioned post appealing to Black people worldwide to follow her lead and stand in solidarity against Netflix. In follow-up interviews, she dared us all, especially Black mothers, to "say no to the colonizer, no to the downpressor" (hooks, 1990, p. 24) and imagine worlds beyond anti-Blackness. Mo'Nique's public actions further repositioned Black mother leadership as collective work that elicits "an urgent breath of excitement, arouses muscular tensions, and develops the imagination" (Fanon, 2004, p. 174). Included in her calls for the boycott, Mo'Nique reminded Black mothers and their children "I love us for real."

Like Mo'Nique, the story "I Love Us For Real" does not objectify nor romanticize Black mothers and our leadership. Instead, the story illuminates the complex ways Black mothers imagine emancipatory worlds despite the climate of anti-Blackness. The story comprises three excerpts inspired from WhatsApp messages I sent to a group chat with two other Black mothers. Each WhatsApp excerpt is date/time stamped and documents collective reflections on Black mother leadership for early childhood education. I invite readers to engage with "I Love Us For Real" in ways that are authentic to them. Readers are welcome to read the WhatsApp excerpts aloud or quietly and in the sequence presented or not. The excerpts are structured as pedagogical prompts that inspire us to interrogate Black mother leadership in early childhood settings and engage in liberatory action.

April 4, 2019, at 6:03am

I'm glad we started this WhatsApp group.

I love being a Black mama, but it isn't easy.

Each day we're reminded about the hate we and our children face.

I mean how can we not be afraid—nonstop media coverage about dismal achievement outcomes for Black children. Never ending stories of Black children being policed in schools and neighbourhoods.

Will this be our only reality?

This world really doesn't wanna see us win.

It's too much to handle alone.

All we have is each other.

We might not know which way to go, but we'll figure it out.

We'll do what needs to be done for our children and for us too.

I'm exhausted. I want to finish school and get this degree. But how do I do the school thing with an almost two-year-old? And I'm going back to work full time?

You did it with two boys at home. No, really, how did you do it?

Some days, I feel like the world is just waiting for us to burn out, crash out, and drop out.

It's almost like they want us to forget about our joys.

But we really are out here soaring.

Your wedding day is coming up.

You're moving into your new place.

You're back in school. Finally, you're making moves towards securing that cosmetology certificate.

And you, you're starting your social media reign with your new YouTube channel.

I'm cheering for you both. Shit, I'm cheering for myself. I love us, for real!

May 15, 2019, at 7:22pm

I've been going to the EarlyON centre near the house.

Lots of mamas are there with their children.

I'm the only Black mama.

The facilitator smiles at me.

But I know she's not really into me. To be honest, I'm not that into her either.

I don't care to fit in.

I'm not there to make any new friends. I just want to get out of the house with Zac.

I'm new to the neighbourhood, so I asked the facilitator about spots I can visit with Zac.

She listed some places.

I saw her handing out coupons to visit popular sites, like the zoo and the science centre, at a discount. She didn't give me one. I can't even bother to argue for one. I acted like I didn't notice.

Thanks for the information about those government subsidies.

I didn't even know the path to secure a speech and language pathologist or a physiotherapist for our children.

Ima keep going to therapy like you said. My therapist is a Black mama too. She just gets it.

How's couples therapy working for you? How does it even work?

I got the list of emergency housing you sent. I passed the information on to my friend.

She really needs a place for her and her daughter.

You deserve all the praise cuz we all benefit from your insider knowledge in social services.

I'm thinking of starting a social media account. Maybe Black women would be interested in my journey as Black mama grad student with a toddler.

Can you give me some tips? I see how popular your YouTube series is going.

June 4, 2019, at 1:21pm

I'm going back to work full time next month, and my childcare arrangements fell apart.

I got the EarlyON facilitator to play with Zac while I cotched myself in the corner calling every childcare centre in the city.

Just when I was about to give up, I found an available spot. We'll visit it later this week. What things should I look for? I'll also ask the EarlyON facilitator too.

Y'all ever wonder what our children will become when they're all grown up?

I watch Zac play at the EarlyON centre, and I just dream.

Right now, he loves the paint centre and the sandbox.

Maybe he'll be an artist or an engineer or both.

The EarlyON facilitator still doesn't really pay any attention to us.

We still show up though.

I wonder what we'll be in the next phases of our lives.

I'm grinding through this degree. When Zac sleeps, I work on my dissertation.

These days, I barely sleep. Thanks for helping me out with my doctoral research project. You really did come through by agreeing to the interviews.

I'm so proud of you for starting your eyelash boutique, now that you have your cosmetology certificate.

We, Black mamas, stay keeping a side hustle. We can't depend on one paycheck to do what we need to do for our families.

Of course, I'm subscribed to your YouTube channel!

All of us went back to school and started new ventures with our babies.

It's a lot of work, but we're out here living our dreams or at least part of it.

Yeah, it benefits the kids. I mean, a happy Black mama benefits the world. Let's be honest.

Story insights

This section situates insights garnered from the storied findings "I Love Us For Real" into the larger Canadian scholarship on Black life. The goal of the section is not to find themes across the storied excerpts as required by traditional qualitative methods. Instead, in this section, I use the story "I Love Us For Real" to deepen my connections with other Black mothers and literature. Namely, I put "I Love Us For Real" in conversation with bell hooks's ideas on Black motherwork and leadership. In so doing, I further illustrate the ways Black mothers of young Black children carry out their leadership in early learning spaces, some of which they create as alternative spaces.

Black mother leaders work together to craft homeplace for ourselves and our children

Black motherwork scholars understand homeplace as integral to the work Black mothers lead. Such literature traces Black mothers' longstanding tradition to partner with other Black mothers to establish homeplace in private spaces. Black motherwork scholars use personal narrative to further conceptualize homeplace as a site that attends to the complexities of Black maternal life. In the chapter "Homeplace as Resistance," hooks (2015) opens with a personal narrative foregrounding Black mothers' imaginings of homeplace across time and place. Through a series of confessional anecdotes, hooks recounts childhood visits to her grandmother's house. hooks invites readers to accompany her as she reflects on childhood memories and articulates new meanings of homeplace. Homeplace, hooks explains, is a site led by Black mothers where the agency and humanity of Black women and our children are nurtured. Homeplace is not limited to a single location and instead is an ever-changing site where Black mothers and our children "assert an aesthetic and critical presence" (hooks, 1990, p. 205).

In "I Love Us For Real," my Black motherhood journey shaped my understandings of leadership and homeplace. The EarlyON child and family centre, as captured in "I Love Us For Real," was not a life-affirming place for me. I did not form meaningful relationships with the program facilitator nor with the other mothers who attended the program. The program facilitator did not offer opportunities for me to share storied accounts of my life as a Black mother. Instead, with two other Black mothers and longtime friends, I reimagined the WhatsApp group as a homeplace. We constructed this homeplace as a virtual early learning space for Black women mothering young Black children. This collective work characterized our Black mother leadership. In the WhatsApp group, we, Black Canadian mothers, crafted a dynamic site where we cultivated our relationships, leadership identities, and ideas. The WhatsApp group offered us a place to promote varied perspectives, discover new realities, and construct other worlds for ourselves and our children.

As documented in "I Love Us For Real," we came together as Black mothers to revel in and confront the complex realities of being Black Canadian mothers with young children. For example, in the WhatsApp group, we helped each other access health services, pursue higher education, and start small businesses. We celebrated milestones, like weddings and academic achievements. We accepted difference—in our upbringing, status, profession, and

perspectives—as further sustaining “the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting” (hooks, 1990, p. 205). As shown in the story, the EarlyON child and family centre did not “provide multiple opportunities for families to become comfortable spending time together and forming relationships” (McLennan & Howitt, 2018) as the Ontario Ministry of Education claimed the centres would. Alternatively, the WhatsApp group evolved into an early learning site where Black mothers of young children swapped tales of what McKittrick (2021) describes as “the wreckage and the lists and the dance floors and the loss and the love and the rumours and the lessons and the heartbreak” (p. 7). Ultimately, as a Black mother leader, I reimagined the WhatsApp group as an alternative early learning site grounded in Black mothers’ epistemologies. Together, my fellow Black mothers and I successfully established a homeplace for Black mothers and young Black children beyond the confines of the EarlyON child and family centre.

Black mother leaders reimagine the margins

In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (2015), hooks reflected on Black life at the margins. She gathered songs, memories, and storied accounts to make apparent the ambivalence of a Black citizenship that racist political economies construct for Black people. According to hooks, in small-town Kentucky, the railroad track marked the separation between the margin and centre. Black women and girls crossed the tracks, leaving the margins, to work in the centre as maids, caretakers, and sex workers (hooks, 2015). Although those in the centre depended on Black women’s labour in the services sector, Black women were prohibited from full participation in social life (hooks, 2015). hooks wrote, “We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town” (p. xvii).

hooks (2015) described marginality as more than a site of deprivation. In fact, she upheld the margin as a site of radical refusal and resistance. The margin is a space where Black mothers create possibility in the face of negation. It is at the margins, these spaces on the edge, that homeplace exists. As depicted in “I Love Us For Real,” I attended the local EarlyON child and family centre daily with my 15-month-old son. Contrary to its mandate, the program failed to provide me with a “warm and welcoming environment” to support learning and well-being. In “I Love Us For Real,” I worked with two other Black mothers to establish a private WhatsApp group as homeplace. This homeplace lived in the margins and sustained me in my struggles against anti-Blackness. Indeed, my daily trek to the EarlyON child and family program required me to leave the WhatsApp group, my homeplace, to enter a formal early learning site.

At the program, I was reminded that Black maternal life occupies the edge. I was not fully integrated into the social life of the program, nor did I have full access to its resources and services. My marginal position at the program allowed me to develop a particular way of seeing Black maternal life. hooks (2015) explained that marginality provides us opportunities to “look both from the outside in and from the inside out” (p. xvii). As a Black mother leader beyond the EarlyON child and family centre, I discerned useful knowledge from those who negated my existence. I reported information back to the WhatsApp group determining ways it could benefit our families. In the WhatsApp group, we shared learnings within our networks to help other Black mothers navigate systemic forces of oppression and create desired realities for ourselves and our children. At the EarlyON child and family centre, for example, I gained insider knowledge into the expectations and structures of childcare programs. Such information proved essential as I visited childcare centres across the city, determining the best one for my son. Black mother leadership for early childhood education involves navigating multiple worlds, at the margins and the centre. Through Black mother leadership, I reimagined the margins as a radical site where Black mothers are responsible to one another and our young children.

Conclusion

In Canada, a dearth of scholarship examines Black Canadian mothers' experiences in early learning settings. This arts-informed autoethnography explored the varied ways that I worked with other Black mothers to reimagine our leadership beyond the prevailing systems. This study affirms the integral role that Black mother leaders play in establishing spaces that center Black mothers and young Black children. As showcased in "I Love Us For Real," these spaces offer Black mothers opportunities to develop and practice their own leadership amid the ongoing dehumanization of Black maternal life. Black motherwork scholars maintain Black women's use of stories and storytelling to make sense of our lived experiences (Fearon, 2023; Onuora, 2015; Toliver, 2021). This study demonstrates the ways I used stories to understand my own Black mother leadership as acts of collective work that, at times, exists at the margins. This study demonstrates the need for early childhood educators in child and family spaces to engage Black mothers as skilled leaders. Embedding early childhood education programs in larger understandings about Blackness, leadership, and power, we can honour the knowledge and work of Black Canada mothers.

I began this article by writing directly to fellow Black mothers of young Black children. As I close this article, I once again speak directly to fellow Black Canadian mothers. I invite Black mothers of young Black children to join me in a critical self-reflection. By engaging in such a reflexive act, I challenge us to reassert ourselves as leaders in educational spaces, existing at the margins and in the centre. How might you, as a Black mother, partner with early childhood educators to foster Black children's human and more-than-human relations? How do you define and cultivate your own leadership? How do you collaborate with other Black mothers for your children's well-being, and your own? How do you want to collaborate with early childhood educators in the educational space? What commitments must all those in the early learning space make to facilitate you sharing your stories, experiences, expectations, and identities? How might early childhood educators partner with you and other Black Canadian mothers to establish humanizing learning spaces for Black children? Reflecting on our leadership and relationships, both within and beyond early childhood learning spaces, further prepares us to dream of and construct educational spaces for Black mothers and our children.

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- 1 In her book chapter “On Black Education: Anti-Blackness, Refusal, and Resistance,” ross (2020) presents Afropessimism as “a meta-theory that identifies this condition as permanent, one that will never be undone in this current world” (p. 8). ross explains that if the relationship between blackness and humanity is a permanent antagonism, the goal of an Afropessimist project is to “destroy the world” (Wilderson, 2018).
 - 2 According to Dumas and ross (2016), BlackCrit is grounded in the idea that anti-Blackness is endemic and is central to how we all make sense of the social, economic, historical, and cultural dimensions of human life.

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