



# Center for Critical Race Studies in Education at UCLA

## Research Briefs

December 2021 • Issue No. 20

### #BLM Mamas' Motherwork: Conceptualizing the Critical Race Socialization of Black Children

Janay M. Garrett  
University of Pennsylvania

In this research brief I outline what I call the *Critical Race Socialization* (CRS) of Black Children, inspired by my master's thesis, a qualitative project exploring how Black activist mothers aligned with the #BlackLivesMatter movement resist racism through childrearing (Watts, 2018). This theorizing of Black motherhood through CRS is fashioned from key threads of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), Pedagogies of the Home (Delgado Bernal, 2001), Oppressed Family Pedagogy (Hughes, 2005) and the Cycles of Socialization/Liberation (Harro, 2000).

My aim is to offer a conceptualization of racial socialization that is informed by CRT in: (1) centering the narratives and knowledge of Black activist mothers as experts of their own experiences; (2) naming the pervasiveness of racism (and intersecting forms of oppression) in the lives of Black mothers (3) theorizing Black Motherwork as activism; and (4) asserting how the work of Black mother organizers can be understood as transformative, liberatory and developmentally responsive.

#### COMING TO THE WORK/POSITIONALITY

When I began this work in 2015, I was not yet a mother. However, my graduate school experience aligned with the rise of the #BlackLivesMatter movement—a movement that continues to inform social and political discourse, culture, and policy. By participating in #BLM movement work, I found myself moved by Black mothers who were mobilizing others with their children in tow. Now, as a Black Chicana Mother-Scholar, I am in constant tension about how to guard the hearts and minds of our children and cultivate joy while equipping them through my own practice of CRS, to move through the world in healthy and informed ways.

#### BRIEF REVIEW OF KEY LITERATURE

The mechanisms by which Black families in the U.S. context prepare and protect their children for/from racial discrimination is not a new conversation. Racial socialization scholarship dates to the 1980s (Hughes et al., 2006), with most literature exploring racial messages transferred from parents to children and the protective nature of these messages in mediating the toxic effects of racism. Hughes et al., (2006) names four central components of racial/ethnic socialization: (1) cultural socialization; (2) preparation for bias; (3) promotion of

mistrust; and (4) egalitarianism (p. 748). Anderson and Stevenson (2019) expand this definition through the lens of racial literacy to include the “explicit teaching and implementation of racially specific emotional regulation and coping skills that can be observed, trained through a lens of competency, and evaluated in specific interventions” (p. 65). Racial socialization then, can protect Black caregivers and children from the consequences of racial stress and chart a course towards healing.

## CRITICAL RACE SOCIALIZATION

Critical Race Socialization (CRS) is a term I generated to describe how Black activist mothers engage racial socialization uniquely, to resist institutionalized racism. These mothers socialize their children towards liberation (Harro, 2000) by (1) explicitly discussing and critiquing institutionalized racism, (2) developing tools to resist and heal from the toxic effects it has on their lives, (3) building communities aligned with their politics of liberation, and (4) actively countering the mis-education (Woodson, 1933) of their children in schools and society at large.

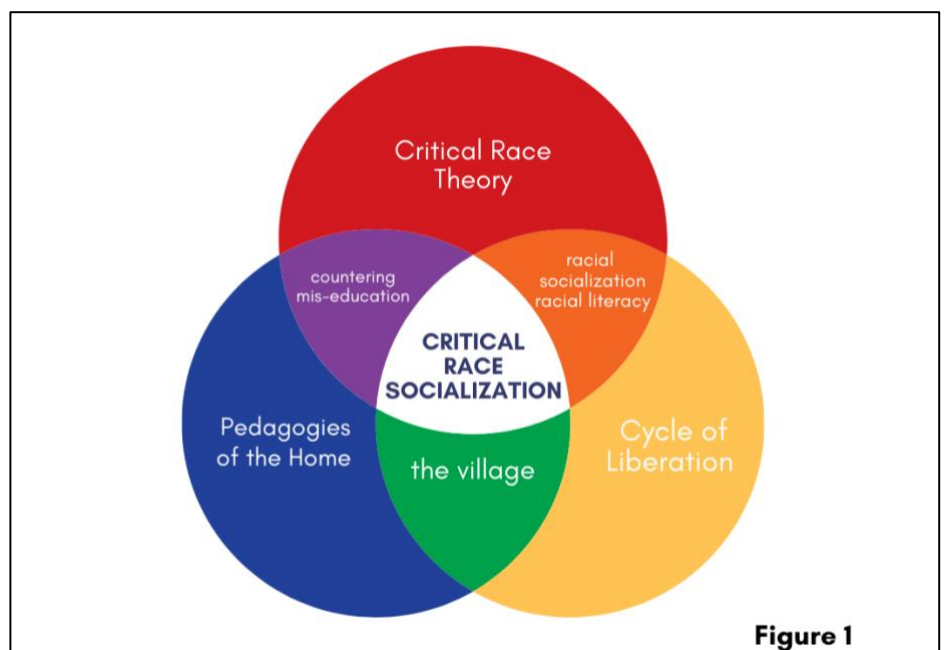
In the formation of CRS (see Figure 1), Critical Race Theory was chosen as the most salient framework because of its activist

dimension. At the time, I was asking myself: “If a person considered activism as central to their parenting, what does it look like in the home and what does it mean for their children in the context of society?” CRT’s commitment to understanding and transforming society specifically around racialized power, addressed this question (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In the “Pedagogies of the Home” component of the model, I merged Oppressed Family Pedagogy (OFP) (Hughes, 2005) and Pedagogies of the Home (Delgado Bernal, 2001), to illustrate multiple pedagogical practices Black activist mothers might embody in parenting. While I wouldn’t conflate the two frameworks, given their distinct sociopolitical importance, OFP, discusses how power and privilege manifest within a family’s dynamics and how individual family members might simultaneously resist and

reinforce the status quo (e.g., navigating xenophobia in society, but also patriarchy within the home and amongst family members). The connection between OFP and Pedagogies of the Home, is the naming of mothers as leading this work and the homespace as a site of knowledge production, rest, restoration, and healing.

## CRITICAL RACE SOCIALIZATION MOTHERING IN ACTION

CRS is a conceptual contribution to existing work on racial socialization and racial literacy in its naming of the ways Black activist mothers: (1) proactively curate spaces for their children to make meaning of racialized experiences in schools and society; and (2) plainly teach critical, informed and developmentally responsive racially specific coping skills. Black



**Figure 1**

activist mothers practicing CRS not only socialize their children in the four central ways identified by Hughes et al., (2006), but also prioritized their learning of how to not only socialize their children in the four central ways identified by Hughes et al., (2006), but also prioritized their learning of how to *read, recast and resolve* oppressive encounters (Stevenson, 2014; Watts, 2018). In discussing racial literacy, I am reminded of the story of Amber and her son Daniel. In the following vignette Amber describes preparing her son to advocate for himself through unpacking racial encounters together: “I...want him to be able to call it when he sees it. I want him to be able to see it and be comfortable...responding to it...us having those conversations, I think equips him to be able to do that” (Watts, 2018, p. 90). In this passage “it” refers to racism as enacted by white teachers and peers.

Black activist mothers enact CRS in a community of biological and chosen family, or *the village*, with the goal of creating affirming spaces for Black children (given most mainstream organizations like Boy Scouts of America were designed to exclude Black children). *The village* is entrusted to care for children, reify endorsed racial socialization practices, and compliment areas of identity development divergent from mothers’ own lived

experiences (Watts, 2018). Illustrative of the power of *the village*, is the story of Lynn and her daughter Maya, who is Afro-Latina. Lynn discusses the multitude of people who supported her in raising Maya, including nurturing her racial-ethnic identity development. Lynn describes her parenting as a practice of decolonization and disruption of ageism, in raising a leader she wants to talk to and work with someday (Watts, 2018).

Each mother interviewed described their homes as a space for their children to process racial encounters and racial stress, with an understanding that other aspects of identity shape the unique ways their children might experience racism (i.e., gendered racism). Countering mis-education then, looked like supplementing schooling with an at-home teaching and learning of Black history, literature, media, art, or popular culture. It also involved frequenting Black-only spaces and introducing children to activism. CRS propels me towards a line of inquiry about Black Motherwork and discourses of maternal labor as love (Collins, 1994).

### FUTURE DIRECTION(S) OF CRITICAL RACE SOCIALIZATION

In the future, I look to deepen the connections between mechanisms of racial socialization taken up by activist mothers and positive

health outcomes for mothers and children (Anyiwo, et al., 2020). I am also moving towards utilizing Motherwork (Collins, 1994) to describe the fullness of Black activist mothers’ labor, with CRS being one component. Described as “work for the day to come,” Collins’ (1994) conceptualization of identity in motherhood for Black women is defined as a tension between self-definition of personhood, and a sense of collective identity, with attention to cultures of resistance.

### CONCLUSION

The various ways Black caregivers have attempted to raise, protect, and love their children in a society built on institutional racism are valid and important. Emergent work on Black Motherwork, and Critical Race Parenting (DePouw & Matias, 2016) offer humanizing frameworks to understand the work Black mothers take up. In the midst of racial uprisings and the Covid-19 global crisis, Black women’s intergenerational Motherwork, including the Critical Race Socialization of their children, continues to transform material conditions that function to limit the fullness of Black life. Today, this looks like emphasizing how Covid-19 disproportionately impacts Black children, fighting for #policefreeschools or occupying abandoned homes to resist racial capitalism (Hahn, 2020). Black mothers at the frontlines of the pandemic and picket line

exemplify the intimate overlap of Motherwork and activism.

## REFERENCES

- Anyiwo, N., Palmer, G. J., Garrett, J. M., Starck, J. G., & Hope, E. C. (2020). Racial and political resistance: An examination of the sociopolitical action of racially marginalized youth. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 35, 86-91.
- Brown, C. S., & Anderson, R. E. (2019). It's never too young to talk about race and gender. *Human Development*, 63(1), 1-3.
- Collins, P. H. (1994). Shifting the center: Race, class, and feminist theorizing about motherhood. In *Mothering* (pp.45-65). Routledge.
- Delgado Bernal, D. (2001). Learning and living pedagogies of the home: the mestizo consciousness of Chicana students. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14(5), 623- 639.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York University Press.
- DePouw, C., & Matias, C. (2016). Critical race parenting: Understanding scholarship/activism in parenting our children. *Educational Studies*, 52(3), 237-259.
- Hahn, R. (2020, May 12). *These Moms Fought for a Home—And Started a Movement*. Vogue. <https://www.vogue.com/article/moms-4-housing>
- Harro, B. (2000). The cycles of liberation: Cycles of socialization. *Readings for Social Justice*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Hughes, S. (2005). Theorizing oppressed family pedagogy: Critical lessons from a rural Black family in the post-Brown South. *Educational Foundations*, 19, n3-4: 45-75.
- Hughes, D., Rodriguez, J., Smith, E. P., Johnson, D. J., Stevenson, H. C., & Spicer, P. (2006). Parents' ethnic-racial socialization practices: a review of research and directions for future study. *Developmental Psychology*, 42(5), 747.
- Watts, J. M. (2018). *The Critical Race Socialization of Black Children*. California State University, Long Beach.
- Woodson, C. G. (1933). 2000. *The miseducation of the Negro*. Book Tree.

**JANAY M. GARRETT** is mama to Janai, James II and Joie Garrett, daughter to Elizabeth Moppins, Granddaughter of the late Gregoria Calderon and Irma Teeters, great granddaughter of the late Villanueva Magdalena Cordova and Chaney Mae Watts. She is a 6<sup>th</sup> year PhD candidate in the Interdisciplinary Studies in Human Development Program at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education and an Assistant Dean of Student Affairs at Yale College, where she serves as the Director of the Office of Gender and Campus Culture, Alcohol and Other Drugs Harm Reduction Initiative and as staff advisor to the Women's Center. With a focus on the developmental transition to motherhood, Janay's research agenda explores how Black birthing women who are first-time mothers story their transition to motherhood.

Center for Critical Race Studies in Education at UCLA

1032B Moore Hall  
Los Angeles, CA 90095  
ccrse@gseis.ucla.edu



### MISSION STATEMENT

The Center for Critical Race Studies in Education supports interdisciplinary, collaborative, and policy-oriented research on issues critical to Communities of Color.

**Center for Critical Race Studies in Education Briefs.** An ongoing series offering research on critical issues facing Communities of Color. Editors: Daniel G. Solórzano & Magali Campos. Co-Editors: Lorena Camargo Gonzalez, Gabriela Corona Valencia, Cindy Escobedo, Alejandra Magaña Gamero, Brenda Lopez, John Pak, Audrey Paredes, Mary Senyonga, and Yadiria Valencia.

This Brief Series was made possible in part through funding from the offices of the Dean of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies (GSE&IS). For more information please visit us at [www.ccrse.ucla.gseis.edu](http://www.ccrse.ucla.gseis.edu)