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# (De)Coloniality of Mothering: Race, Gender, and Mothers in Schools

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***Abstract:*** This study builds on decolonial, Chicanx, and Black Feminist Theory to explore how "mothering" as a phenomenon has been theorized and how it manifested in our respective research sites: (a) within Somali immigrant mothers in urban communities in the United Kingdom; and (b) how the role of mothers was understood and deployed in predominantly White suburban Ohio. We draw on stories from our research to argue that the modern/colonial gender system constructs ideas and possibilities of motherhood in different ways depending on the sociopolitical and epistemological locations of those engaged in motherwork. We argue that decolonial mothering includes pedagogies of collectivism necessary for healing and joy. And finally, we reflect on how the findings from our studies can contribute to liberatory practices through projects of *de-linking* from discourses of coloniality in academic spaces.
***Keywords:*** Decoloniality, de-linking, motherhood, Somali mothers, women of color, white supremacy

On March 7, 2024, Alabama Senator Katie Britt gave the Republican response to President Biden's State of the Union. Selected specifically "as a housewife," as Tommy Tuberville, her fellow senator from Alabama, admitted, Senator Britt spoke from her kitchen, making appeals to her "fellow moms" to "get in the arena" and work toward "protecting the American Dream." Deploying all-too familiar racist tropes, Britt decried open borders, illegal immigration, and dangerous cartels. As Sarah Jones (2024) writes, Britt—and the Republican strategists who orchestrated it—used motherhood as a weapon. However, toward what ends is this weapon deployed? Britt's speech performs a specific White Christian motherhood through not-so-subtle allusions to her faith and racist nativism for the purposes of furthering a White supremacist settler colonial state. That is the version of motherhood that is not only made legible and venerated but that which possesses—and has always possessed— the power to be used as a "weapon" in the political sphere. For Black, indigenous, and other mothers of color; their/our motherhood is not seen as something to be exalted, but instead targeted as sources of problem or damage.

From this premise, we draw from women of color feminism and decolonial theory to trouble ideas and conceptualizations of mothers and mothering to unpack the political projects undergirding ideas, conceptualizations, and practices of motherhood. We rely on Maria Lugones' work (Lugones, 2008, 2010) to examine the modern/colonial gender system and how its fundamental destructiveness (Lugones, 2008; Omodan, 2022) operates to construct motherhood in particular ways: it attempts to harm women generally, and in particular, those engaged in motherwork (Collins, 1994, 2009). We build on decolonial, Chicanx, and Black Feminist Theory to explore how "mothering" as a phenomenon has been theorized and how it manifested in our

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respective research sites: a) within Somali immigrant mothers in urban communities in the UK; and b) how the role of mothers was understood and deployed in predominantly White suburban Ohio. We juxtapose stories from our research to argue that the modern/colonial gender system constructs ideas and possibilities of motherhood in different ways depending on the sociopolitical and epistemological locations of those engaged in motherwork. In our analysis, we show how mothering is political (Collins, 2009) and offer a decolonial feminist intervention about how schools and educational spaces, broadly understood, exist as sites where racist and colonial tropes around motherhood happen upon and through. We discuss the implications this research has for researchers interested in anti-colonial education. Further, we reflect on how findings from our studies can contribute to liberatory practices and discourses that center pedagogies of healing and joy through projects of *de-linking* (Mignolo, 2011). In what follows we bring our two projects together. We start with the questions guiding our inquiry, followed by conceptual and methodological framing of motherhood, then, a section on findings from our respective research projects. We conclude with a discussion on how decolonial motherhood can help us imagine pedagogies of healing and joy.

## Research Questions

To explore how the modern/colonial system harms women generally, and in particular women of color engaged in motherwork (Collins, 1994, 2009), this project asks:

1. How is motherhood (re)constructed and employed in different geopolitical sites? (Somali community in the UK, suburban Ohio)
2. How do these differentiated "motherhoods" intersect with young people's educational experiences?

## Black, Chicanx, and Decolonial Approaches to Gender and Mothering

The notion of mothers in educational research commonly revolves around women's work in supporting their children's education. Specifically, how women are positioned within educational institutions and the challenges faced by mothers who are from marginalized communities. This discourse is often juxtaposed with societal norms and expectations concerning the ideal depiction of motherhood (Collins, 2009). In recent decades, there has been an increase in writings by women of color detailing the experiences of motherhood from African American (Collins, 2009), Chicana (Caballero et al., 2019), and immigrant perspectives (Abdi, 2022; Abdi & Pittman, 2024; Dyrness, 2011). In these writings, women scholars from the Global South attempt to unite mothers in various motherwork pursuits, collectively striving to combat invisibility, address inequities, and celebrate the diversity within mothering practices, thereby expanding our conceptualization of motherhood. This work is rooted in experiences and knowledge systems of Black, indigenous and Third World feminist thought and writings.

For example, Patricia Collins (1994) offers motherwork as a conceptual framework to critique conventional Western perceptions of maternal responsibilities and highlights the significance of intersecting identities, including race, class, and gender. This framework challenges established gender norms and societal expectations that shape how Black women are positioned both in the mainstream as well as in the Black community's social, economic, and familial institutions. Motherwork acknowledges that women's reproductive labor, including family care, constitutes valuable work that contributes to the well-being, including economic activity, of the

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entire family rather than solely benefiting men. This is contrary to how White feminists conceptualized their critique and relationship with patriarchy in these same institutions (Collins, 1994, 2009). These cultural practices and norms that undergird Black motherhood can be understood within the larger context of Black family and community life that have roots in African traditions (Lorde, 1984). An example is "other mothering," rooted in African collectivist epistemology, where women nurture children who are not biologically related to them (Collins, 1999; Oyěwùmí, 2016; Strayhorn, 2023).

Similarly, Chicana and Latinx feminists expand on Collins' motherwork as "being inclusive to Women of Color (trans and cis), nonbinary Parents of Color, other-mothers, and allies because mothering is not confined to biology or normative family structures" (Caballero et al., 2019, p. 5). Cheryl Matias (2022) theorizes that motherhood shapes the research and scholarship that women of color engage in "because it is not about living amid the duality of both identities [scholar and mother] more so than it is about accepting and forming a newly coalesced identity" (p. 247). Black, and Brown women's writing teaches us that motherhood is not universal, and women's experiences of it are shaped by structural, cultural and social context. In what follows, we review how motherhood of women of color is conceptualized in the K–12 literature through school parental engagement.

Research on parental school engagement in K-12 context, includes school choice, active involvement within the school environment aimed to influence academics and overall positive schooling experience. However, this framing of parental engagement overlooks the realities and challenges communities of color, specifically BIPOC and working-class mothers face in navigating educational institutions (Abdi, 2022; Ayón et al., 2018; Love et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2021). This is significant considering the multiple and overlapping oppressions mothers of color face (Abdi, 2022; Wilson et el., 2021). Therefore, research that considers not only structural barriers that women of color face as mothers, but also how marginalization shapes conceptions and experience about motherhood and mothering work is also important (Abdi & Pittman, 2024; Reay, 1998; Reay & Mirza, 1997).

Parental school involvement is connected to children's academic achievements (Hildago et al., 2004; Walker et al., 2005). Brown (2022) argues that Black and Latinx mothers' school engagement includes closely monitoring the racial dynamics within schools to safeguard their children, which highlights differences in perspectives between mothers of color and White mothers (see also Leath et al., 2020; Powell & Coles, 2021). Critical scholarship reconceptualized types of parental behavior that have been traditionally called parental involvement, such as volunteering and attending field trips, by documenting the ways BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) parents make conscientious efforts to engage in their children's educational experiences (Leath et al., 2020). However, mothers of color face additional problems because schools deem non-Western epistemologies and approaches to educational engagement as inadequate and hence fail to acknowledge the unique experiences of marginalized students and families (Abdi, 2022). Similarly, Allen and White-Smith (2018) argue that schools use deficit-oriented bureaucracy to restrict and regulate parental involvement rather than fostering genuine engagement with parents (see also Khalifa et al. 2018). Yet, many mothers of color work with their children at home and rely on community support to facilitate their children's school success (Abdi, 2022; Abdi & Pittman, 2024; Leath et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the literature about women of color and motherhood serves to counter deficit narratives about Black and Brown mothers. These works emphasize the resilience, transformative capabilities, and empowering influence of mothers, thereby amplifying marginalized viewpoints. The evolution of motherhood research illustrates a shift from a predominant focus on White women

and gender equality towards a nuanced exploration of intersectional oppression faced by mothers of color. Hence, Black and Chicana M(other)work calls for integrating these diverse experiences and narratives of motherhood into scholarly discussions. This paper contributes to the critical discourse on mothers of color actively engaged in motherwork and how that informs the communities we work with and our research.

## Methodology

### The "Fundamental Destructiveness" of the Modern/Colonial Gender System

In this project, we explore stories of m(other)ing, and motherwork in our research. We want to understand how mothering and motherwork is positioned in the community settings in which our research takes place to theorize the different ways in which competing ideologies of motherhood work on bodies, on children, and on the families in our research communities. Specifically, we are interested in the work that ideologies of racialized motherhood do in and through educational institutions for women of color in comparison to White and middle-class motherhood. In this study, we examine how these different conceptions of motherhood and mothering are constructed and used by institutions to discipline/marginalize women of color when they resist White and middle-class norms of motherhood. We also investigate how women of color's motherhood are only accepted when it is viewed from a place of damage or when motherhood is oriented toward serving Western neoliberal notions of education. To do this, we draw on Maria Lugones' (2010) theorizing of decolonial feminist theory and practice as a liberatory project that engages Third-world feminism in conjunction with coloniality of power frameworks (Quijano, 2000).

Lugones' conceptualization of "colonial/modern gender system" emphasizes the need to understand how conceptions of Third-World feminism need to be understood beyond the coloniality of gender frameworks. This requires historicizing "gender formation," which is central to understanding womanhood, motherhood, and the work women do in the home, in communities, and in society (Lugones, 2010; Oyěwùmí, 2016). For us, this means exploring the connection between mothering, the m(other)work of women of color, and their subjectivities outside of colonial logic. Multilayered and complex colonial structuring is thus put in conversation with the intersubjectivities of people connected to other epistemologies, ontological realities, cosmos beyond the colonial/modern logic, and organizations of knowledge and life in the research field and beyond (Abdi, 2022; Lugones, 2010). As a decolonial intervention feminist pedagogy, Lugones' theorizing of gender helps us to disrupt ideologies of motherhood and mothering work rooted in coloniality of power discourses and brings forth marginalized epistemologies and orientations of motherhood that are utilized as healing modalities.

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**Motherhood and M(other)work and Colonial/Modern Gender System**

Women scholars from the Global South argue that to understand the impact of colonialism on the social, spiritual, and economic organization of life is to examine how the introduction of European colonial conception of gender damaged many colonized communities' knowledge systems and ways of life (Lugones, 2010; Oyěwùmí, 2016). More importantly, the colonial/modern gender system has diminished women's role and leadership in many spheres of life (Oyěwùmí, 2016). For instance, Lugones explains:

> Understanding the place of gender in pre-colonial societies is pivotal to understanding the nature and scope of changes in the social structure that the processes constituting colonial/modern Eurocentered capitalism imposed. Those changes were introduced through slow, discontinuous, and heterogeneous processes that violently inferiorized colonized women. The gender system introduced was one thoroughly informed through the coloniality of power. Understanding the place of gender in pre-colonial societies is also essential to understanding the extent and importance of the gender system in disintegrating communal relations, egalitarian relations, ritual thinking, collective decision making and authority, and economies. (pp. 201–202)

Drawing on Quijano's (2000) coloniality of power, Lugones (2010) shows the connection between race, gender, and European world hegemony. Coloniality of power offers a historical theory of social classification around the globe that explains the current material and discursive realities of the Global South even after direct colonial administrative rule ended in many parts of the world. Lugones (2010) explicates:

> It also makes conceptual room for understanding historical disputes over control of labor, sex, collective authority, and intersubjectivity as developing in processes of long duration, rather than understanding each of the elements as predating the relations of power. The elements that constitute the global, Eurocentered, capitalist model of power does not stand separately from each other and none is prior to the processes that constitute the patterns. (p. 190)

With this new social classification, coloniality impacted all spheres of life, and facilitated the imposition of European conceptions of gender, gender roles, and dynamics into societies that had a non-gendered organization or were organized differently around gender lines (Lugones, 2010; Oyěwùmí, 2016). Hence, theorizing the lives and the material conditions of the women of the Global South necessitates an alternative reading of gender, and gender dynamics. This is relevant in our work as we speak back to notions of White motherhood, and mothering practices that are normalized and accepted in educational institutions. We acknowledge that a mere critique of intersectional oppression does not suffice, rather a more insightful approach is to explore the modalities and processes in which mothers of color enact resistance intersubjectively inside and outside educational institutions (Abdi, 2022). For us, it is through the intersubjectivity of women of color within community and in families that we draw from, to enact joy and healing in our work as academics from the Global South. In other words, it is through the intentional theorizing of our lived experiences as women of color scholars that we imagine liberatory practices that loosen us from the grip of White supremacy (Lorde, 1984). These pedagogies of healing are enacted within communities in research and teaching (hooks, 2014).

## Critical Qualitative Research and Intersectionality Methodology

In our effort to engage with power dynamics, and researcher reflexivity in school and community spaces, we combine intersectional methodology (Esposito & Evans-Winter, 2021) with critical ethnographic approaches (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022). Intersectionality disrupts "Western Eurocentric male-centered knowledge claims and productions because intersectional methodologies attempt to center the cultural experiences, values, and beliefs of the research participants, including the researcher herself" (Esposito & Evans-Winter, 2021, p. 21). Hence, intersectionality upholds and recognizes the various ways in which women of color produce knowledge in their everyday living and working as mothers, other mothers, and community members. In this view, intersectionality allows us to engage with our multiple and layered identities as women of color, researchers, and mothers, in relation to our research participants and context. Intersectionality is useful in our ongoing reflective engagement with conceptions of motherhood and womanhood that are measured against White and middle-class norms of motherhood.

Additionally, Lila Abu-Lughod's (1991) notion of *ethnographies of the particular* is helpful regarding the specific contexts in which ideologies of motherhood and mothering practices are produced, contested, and negotiated both by our participants and ourselves.
Abu-Lughod (1991) interrogates the power dynamics between researchers and participants as well as the cultural connections that researchers share with their participants. Ethnographies of the particular as a reflexive practice are relevant to our analysis in two ways: (1) it examines how ideologies of motherhood shift and change within communities, the larger society, and the individual; and (2) it brings forth ways in which connections and interconnections—be they historical or cultural—may be shared with participants but also with White ideologies of motherhood and mothering and how these might influence our writing and approach to research.

## Positionality and Reflexivity

Similarly, our positionality influences our approach to research, including design, analysis, and interpretation. Hence, we center epistemologies and worldviews of the Global South to counter Whiteness and White supremacy in our writing. This allows us to engage in reflexivity on embodied experiences that not only affirm our participants but also our own lives as mothers and othermothers of color in the academy (Lorde, 1984). We do this by highlighting the ways in which mundane and minute moments in which epistemologies of the Global South collide with the coloniality of Whiteness.

## Data Collection

Nimo's ongoing project with Somali diaspora mothers started with communities in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands and now includes women in two midwestern United States. As a Somali immigrant mother herself, she works with other Somali mothers to build women's networks that advocate for Somali children and families. The Somali mothers' project was initiated by a group of Somali mothers in the community as an effort to decenter school-centric norms and values that erase immigrant families' contribution to children's education (Abdi, 2022; Abdi & Pittman, 2024). The data presented here is from Somali mothers in a London, UK community, and hence is part of larger study that seeks to center Somali mothers' knowledge, epistemologies and lived experiences in the diaspora.

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Drawing from a yearlong ethnographic project exploring the educational experiences of students in predominantly White schools in central Ohio, dinorah investigates the political education occurring therein. Her study consisted of over 500 hours of participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews with 42 high school students, and countless conversations with three focal teachers. While not specifically focusing on mothers or motherhood, she draws from this data to explore how constructions of motherhood–those shared by study participants in their interviews as well as how she understood (or was made to understand) narratives of mothering–existed and were reproduced in the space.

Taking these two projects together demonstrates how motherhood as a construct works in influencing women's political consciousness, in relation to Whiteness and White supremacy. In this view, women's relationship with the institution of motherhood is dynamic and contextual as they either uphold or resist colonial structures (Collins, 2009).

**Stories from a Somali Women's Dinner Potluck (Nimo's study)**

Amina and other mothers invited my research partner and me to a dinner potluck gathering with Somali women from the neighborhood. Saida opened the door and welcomed us with hugs, the smell of spiced Somali chai boiling on the stove filled the room. Plates of *Sambusa, quraac/bur* (sweet fried bread), dates, and fruit salads were neatly laid on the dining table across the kitchen. The small three-bedroom council home was modest and immaculately neat. After introductions and short exchanges with the women, our host took us aside and said, "We want you to change into these clothes before the rest of the women arrive." She handed each one of us a three set of traditional Somali dress. The change of clothes is symbolic and oftentimes plays an important cultural role in grounding the energy and mood of events into Somali indigenous practices. Hence, by changing our Western influenced attire into traditional dress, we were also removing the explicit social and cultural barriers between us and the mothers. Moreover, our hosts were engaging with *marti soor,* a Somali hospitality practice in which an out-of-town visitor is often offered clean clothes, food, and a place for rest. *Marti soor* fosters openness and trust between newcomers and their hosts. For us, this exchange also involved a level of vulnerability and cultivated a deeper connection with our hosts. In what follows, I share stories and conversations from the potluck dinner and student focus groups. Specifically, I want to highlight an overarching theme of collectivist and community-based pedagogies that undergird Somali motherwork, and how these practices are perceived both by Somali students and school staff. Next, I offer a glimpse of how Somali immigrant mothers' pedagogies of collectivism collided with the logic of coloniality, that is, individualism espoused by the school staff as well as some of the Somali students themselves.

**Mothering, Somali Community, and Diasporic Expectations**

A major theme across the data from the focus groups was a collectivist approach to Somali motherwork, which situated the mothers in a precarious position with the school and, at times, with their own children. I found it interesting that, unlike the majority of 75 students who participated in our study, one focus group consisting of eight students (six females and two males) was critical of their parents. These students were initially unwilling to share any negative experiences about the school staff. It was only after I mentioned my conversations with Somali parents and students about the hostility toward the Somali community that these students were willing to share more complex stories of their school experiences. All students were preparing for their A-level exams.

Nimo: As you may know, I have been having conversations with other Somali students, some of your mothers, as well as teachers and school leaders. I am interested to know what you think about your parents' relationship with the school staff.

Ahmed: This is a very close community. Everyone knows everyone in this neighborhood. I guess it is a good thing that they [parents] support each other and such. Our parents support us to the best of their ability, they also expect us to do well in school.

Nimo: How do they support you?

Ilham interjected: But it goes both ways–that is if you do something that you are not supposed to do then the neighborhood *habos* (aunties) will call your mother.

Several of the girls giggled while the rest nodded with agreement.

Nimo: What do you mean?

Ilham: For instance, if they see you at the shopping center or in the street, or if you are wearing certain things, or not wearing your headscarf. Then the neighborhood *habos* will call your mum. The news will get there before you even get home. It sounds silly, but it is really frustrating. The thing is they keep a close eye on the girls. The boys are given more freedom, you know. You rarely see or hear an auntie reporting on one of the boys. But if you are a girl, even if you are not doing anything wrong, and you are out with your friends shopping, or just going to the cinema. They tell your mum, I saw your daughter at such and such a place, blah blah, blah, do you know what I mean? I really don't understand. In their mind you should be at home, you should be either doing school work or helping out at home with the chores. You have no business being outside and having fun, isteqfurallah (God forbid).

While I was not surprised to hear Ilham's explanation, as a Somali woman myself, I am very familiar with the cultural expectations that govern the lives of women and young girls. What was most interesting to me was the high achieving students were more critical of the community practices than the rest of the Somali students we talked to. A decolonial reading of Ilham's comments suggest an imposition of western norms onto Somali gender roles and community dynamics (Abdi, 2022). Hence, Ilham's story constructs Somali mothers as enforcers of oppressive cultural practices that police young women's movement and bodies. Similarly, other western assumptions at work here include the prioritization of individual freedom, space and individuality over that of the collective. In other words, Ilham's story suggests that the neighborhood aunties' insensitivities to the choices and movement of young people are uncalled for since they are not the biological parents of these youth. This is a western conception of family and community dynamic and hence challenges the collectivist ethos of Somali communal sensibilities.

As second-generation Somali British, Ilhaam and Ahmed seem to be negotiating between the school's western cultural norms and their parents' intersubjective and collectivist approaches to family and community life. This is relevant because children's experiences of school influence the mothering practices of women and family life, particularly those from marginalized communities (Abdi & Pittman, 2024; Reay, 1998). Meanwhile, another assumption embedded in this story is the construction of Somali women as gossipy, overreaching, and upholding patriarchal practices. In other words, the *habos*' (aunties') practices are conceptualized as primitive and

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measured against a normalized White middle class culture that prioritizes individual freedom and choice.

## Gossipy *Habos* (aunties) or Agents of Care/Love

I was interested in how the community's cultural practices, norms, and ways of being translated into the educational experiences of the Somali students and their families. In particular, how mothers navigated Eurocentric norms around schooling and mothering in order to support children's education and overall well-being. I was also sympathetic to the young female students' frustration. So, at the dinner party, I broached Imaan regarding the neighborhood aunties practice of calling home. Imaan laughed but then with a serious tone explained:

> Some of it is true, and I know that the children may not like it. Specifically, the girls, I understand that. And some of these women do not have good intentions, they just like to gossip. But I tell them, the ones that call home really care about you guys. The others will talk behind your back instead of calling your mother. It is the right thing to do, because if you see my children out there, I need to know. So, I can make sure they stay on the right path. Here, the kids are told that you are free, and you can do whatever you want and your parents don't have a say. I think that is the difference between how we see it and how the children see it. You probably know this from back home. When I was growing up, it was normal for any adult to correct you if you were misbehaving in the streets. We did not like it, but we understood they cared about us …. As a mother, I appreciate it if one of the mothers tells me that my child is out there with other children who can be a bad influence. Or if my child is somewhere they are not supposed to be, then I want to know that, don't you want the same for yourself? It is because we care about each other. I think that is a good thing, don't you agree? [Translation].

Imaan's counter-story offers a different reading of the neighborhood aunties' actions. She perceives their actions as an ethic of care embedded in Somali communitarian culture. In other words, the women in the neighborhood rely on one another providing an extra set of eyes to watch each other's children to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all children. In this view, the neighborhood aunties are an important part of a care and support system. This is consistent with the African epistemology that considers children as part of a community and not the property of their biological parents (Abdi, 2022; Oyěwùmí, 2016). Imaan is challenging the logic of modernity, where interconnectedness and interdependence are whitewashed by illusive individualism. Similarly, it highlights how everyday interaction and relationality in community life are rife with practices that counter the coloniality of power and being. This echoes Lugone's (2010) theorizing of decolonial feminist practices, in which colonized women's daily work in family and community provides the impetus needed for intersubjectivity, for resistance, and community building. Hence, while the neighborhood aunties may seem a nuisance to Somali youth, we argue that their reliance on interdependence and collective agency represents decolonial feminist practices. For example, Suad, who was listening closely to my conversation with Imaan, provided the following explanation:

> The children do not understand why we challenge the school. Some of our children feel embarrassed when we speak up for ourselves or speak as a collective. For example, I was on the phone with a mother of another child,

> whose student was having trouble with the science teacher. My son was sitting next to me, and he said to me "mum why do you and the other mums are always creating trouble at the school? You know when you come to the school as a group and challenge the teachers it reflects on all of us. I just want to get on with…. I don't want to hear about what people are saying about Somalis, can't you be just like other parents? So, I had to explain to him that it is important to us to help each other, it is part of our culture, besides they see us all Somalis. I asked him: Do you think they will see you differently if we act like other parents? No they will not, so why lose our culture, and why lose our voice. It is all we have now, and we have to use it. [Translation].

This conversation shows how Somali mothers are actively teaching their children knowledge that challenges the school's Eurocentric socialization and norms. Suad is also resisting her own erasure as a racialized and gendered colonial subject. She is centering on Somali traditions that value interconnectedness beyond biological relations. By insisting on using her voice to advocate for all Somali children, she is challenging the coloniality of gender. Instead, she is drawing on the conception of motherhood that encompasses guiding, nurturing, protecting, and provisioning for all children in the community (Abdi, 2022; Oyěwùmí, 2016).

These stories demonstrate Somali mothers' pedagogies of collectivism. This is evidenced in the mothers' prioritizing communal interdependence and interconnectedness (Lugones, 2010) despite the resistance they face from their children and school staff. The stories also demonstrate a constant struggle to protect Somali children from the everyday harm perpetuated by colonial structures of school, including deficitization of Somali communal ethos. This is relevant for us, as mothers and other mothers of color in the academy, because it directly speaks to our own struggles against these same colonial structures in our lives and work (Lorde, 1984). Hence, embodied reflexivity allows me to see the connection between my own colonial subjugations as a fellow Somali woman, and that of the mothers in my research, while at the same time acknowledging my participation in aspects of middle classness as an academic, who gets to write about these women's lives (Abu-Lughod, 1991). Yet, we, as women of color, are harmed by oppressive elements of White motherhood practices that are normalized in schools. In what follows, we explore how the construction of (White) motherhood is deployed and utilized in a suburban school. We demonstrate how White motherhood was central in the production and reproduction of Whiteness and White supremacy in a suburban school and the discursive violence it caused for people of color.

## Mothers in White Suburbia: Reflections and Reproductions of Whiteness and Coloniality (dinorah's study)

As part of a larger study focused on the schooling experiences and politics of youth in predominantly White schools, I engaged in ethnographic observations in both a small-town working-class school and an affluent suburban high school in central Ohio throughout a full academic year. In addition, I conducted 42 semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews with students across both sites. Interview excerpts below focus on the imagery and discourse participants deployed with regard to mothers in the suburban school community: mothers with little to do, engaging in gossip and online advocacy, and part of a "Stepford Wife" culture. Ideas around moms emerged solely in the suburban community, demonstrating the ways that motherhood, or conceptualizations thereof, holds particular prominence in this context. And, we argue, how

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ideologies and dynamics undergirding these perceptions reflect and reify White supremacist, classist, hetero-patriarchal, and ultimately, colonial structures.

Throughout interviews, I asked students to describe their community and specifically to think of how they might describe it to outsiders. Jade, a Black female student, described the overall culture of the suburb by foregrounding race and gender; specifically, by centering Whiteness. She says:

> Jade: [This suburb is a] very, very conservative, very White, very suburban area. Are you familiar with the movie Pleasantville? [...] Very Pleasantville-y. Very Stepford wives. Cliquey. Everything's perfect on the outside, but the people aren't perfect on the inside. Very much a place that likes to keep up appearances. A[...] it's racist. [...] it's very subtle. Like the attitude is there. Absolutely. (Interview, 2017)

Robbie, a White male student, described the suburb as having some benefits such as being an area of affluence and having good food options. Yet, when discussing the drawbacks of living there, he specifically named the ways mothers exist in the space. He says,

> [P]eople gossip a lot because … a lot of these families around here, um, like the father usually brings in the income and then their mom's like a housewife and a lot of the time they don't necessarily have a whole lot to do. There's a Facebook group called [redacted] where all they do is gossip about stuff and there's times where I know my friends have been brought up in it because they cut off a mom [on the road] or something. So they took a picture of the license plate and posted it on this Facebook group [...] There's a lot of gossip and cut throat talking behind backs. (Interview, 2017)

Robbie's interview excerpt points to the gendered dynamics of the stereotypical household in this community where the dad is the breadwinner, and the mom is a stay-at-home mom, and he credits this dynamic as the reason that mothers "don't necessarily have a whole lot to do" and why "people gossip a lot" in the community. The example he gives are moms who are active in online community spaces and use those spaces to "gossip" about kids. While Robbie might be painting an unflattering and/or invalid picture of moms in the suburbs, his comments nevertheless point to a perception of how mothers exist in space in the eyes of the young people of the community.

Madison, a White female student, also shared an example of suburban moms via their advocating of particular agendas via the online space. She shared the following excerpt to illustrate the overall culture of the school-community wherein it is okay to "pick on the little guy," which, in this instance, was the school's band. She shared,

> Madison: There was one time where there is like this [Suburb] Twitter or something and a lot of kids from our school follow it and they said something like,[...] '[O]ur football team lost because our marching band was really awful' and something like that. [...]We get a lot of hate from the football players especially.[...] They say the band's not entertaining, [that] we're pointless and should be a show band sort of thing. There was actually a petition at one point. Like there's a Facebook page called [redacted].. It's full of all these [suburb] moms and they're making a petition to sign it to get us to change into a show band and stop being a competition band [...]People were signing it, which was unfortunate, but nothing happened about it to enact it. (Interview, 2017)

While not explicitly racial, the instances Robbie and Madison share construct a particular image of moms and of the work they do: having very little to do, gossiping, and using the online space to advocate particular agendas via a petition. It is important to note that much has been written about how, for White people, race is 'unmarked' (Frankenberg, 1997) and that White people are socialized and quite astute at operating in ways that are color-blind to racial processes (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Thus, while not explicitly stated, Whiteness as the default must always be examined. Recalling that the suburb is predominately White, Robbie and Madison's constructions of the generic [suburban] mom is a White mom who is in a heterosexual marriage and stays at home. Further, framed through the lens of Jade and through a lens that sets out to notice and document how race and coloniality function in and through suburban schooling, we see how race functions through the keeping up of appearances and with the time to engage in such labor.

Below, I draw from my fieldnotes and analyze my sole personal interaction with suburban mothers in the suburb: through the visitor sign-in table at the suburban school. These were the only times I interacted with parents, as they were not the focus of the study. That said, each time I made my way into the school, I engaged with whatever mom volunteered that day. It was always moms– dads were never the parent volunteers on the day of my visit– corroborating students' perceptions of moms as more involved than the stay-at-home parents. The following field note touches on one such interaction.

The [school] door is opening as a previous visitor exits (what seems like an Indian American, an older gentleman, perhaps someone's father), and I pick up the pace to make it in before having to buzz the intercom. Success. I open the door and make my way toward the folding table that is usually "manned" by a parent volunteer. Parents here sign up for 2-hour shifts to sign visitors in—this takes away this task so the admin staff can be freed up to do other things. What a great idea, I think. And it immediately makes me think of the (im)possibility of this at a poor school. Would parents have the opportunity—would they be precluded because they need to work? Here, it has always been women, moms specifically, that are volunteering. I'm betting lots of moms here are SAHMs and have the flexibility/privilege/luxury of being able to volunteer. I make my way to the table and see a well-put together middle-aged woman at the table. She has dark curly longer than shoulder length hair, makeup is done but "natural", she's wearing a bright White fitted t-shirt top and some sort of capri pants that are olive colored.

| | |
|---|---|
| Me: | Hello… |
| Parent Volunteer: | Hi. You're here to see someone? |
| Me: | Yes. I'm visiting a teacher's classroom |
| | She seems a little flustered and taken aback. I sense a bit of suspicion in her tone. |
| Parent Volunteer: | You're visiting a teacher? Does she or he expect- |
| Me: | Yup, she knows I'm coming. I'm a regular here. (Smiling. I turn to the name tag on the table and ask without looking up) What date is it today? (I ask, but know the date and fill it in and put the name tag sticker on). |
| Me: | Thanks! |

I could tell she wanted to know more information, but I didn't offer anything extra, only the bare minimum. [...] I walk away and make my way to the classroom, hoping the parent volunteer doesn't ask questions. (Fieldnote, 2017)

This field note highlights ideas regarding the privilege in suburban schools to have a volunteer-led sign-in table. Prior to this study, my experiences in schools were mostly made up of urban schools where the responsibility of signing parents/visitors fell to office staff. As I reflect in

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my field note, a parent volunteer system is an almost impossibility in high-poverty schools where families most likely necessitate dual-incomes and do not have the time off during the school day and where many parents of color experience the school as a hostile and unwelcoming space (Dyrness, 2011). My own racialized subjectivity is also present in this field note. I noted a sense that the suburban White moms viewed me as "suspicious"—a sense I felt throughout my time at the school from parents, teachers, and students. While this can be partly attributed to my position as a researcher, my otherness was compounded by my racial otherness in this suburban school community that was predominantly White. While the interaction above can, on the surface, be seen as benign, as recent instances in the media remind us, people of color are very aware of White people and often specifically women surveilling and policing public and private space. While this field note mostly captures my own feelings around the interaction, they point to a sense that more information was wanted of me–that I had to make myself legible in this space. This field note also captures my refusal to be accommodating and comply.

As a Chicana mother scholar, these feelings of not belonging and of being surveilled showed up consistently throughout my time conducting this research. This 'otherness,' however, allowed for a specific approach to my ethnographic observations as I was able to note how Whiteness demarcated who did and did not belong in the school space through an embodied location. I write elsewhere (sánchez loza, 2020) about how these requirements for belonging served a policing function in the school space among students; however, the field note above points to the ways that adults were not immune to hegemonic norms around race, gender, and mothering. Moreover, my non-belonging allowed students who felt similarly to share more candidly with me the ways that hegemonic ideas around gender, race, and politics were policed in the macro and micro socio-cultural processes of the school. In this way, my ethnographic approach to the particular arose not solely from the identity categories to which I belong but from a decolonial feminist approach to centering marginalized students. Viewing the site from the lens of the White, male, heterosexual, cisgender student might have resulted in data that was unremarkable. However, centering the experiences of Jade for example, allowed me to "see" and make sense of the terrain in the suburban school. As I write in the field note, I also experienced this otherness when navigating the school's halls and this solidarity in otherness was a point of reference in interviews with students like Jade, other students of color, and White female students who transgressed gender norms.

While Robbie and Maddie were not students of color and did not experience the school as an othering space racially, they offer important perspectives on motherhood. Their excerpts corroborate hegemonic notions of White motherhood with White moms and their mothering approaches as the default in this suburban space. Importantly, they were both critical of moms in some ways similar to Somali students' critiques in the vignettes above. This points to the way patriarchal notions of womanhood—and the maligning of moms in general—exist as facile tropes to employ. We argue that this highlights the globality of a modern colonial gender system that harms all women. No woman comes out of this colonial gender hierarchy unscathed and thus points to how investing in this system is a losing proposition as moms can just never be enough and never quite get it right—even White ones. Fathers were absent in interview transcripts in the suburbs and if present, mostly presented in positive ways (as the breadwinner, as entrepreneurs, etc.). That said, in the colonial modern gender system, mothers of color are differentially positioned and possess the least amount of power in the hierarchy. And, while I do not know what it is like to "mother" in this suburb as a mother of color, the brief encounter at the sign-in table points to potential microstructures that include, exclude, welcome, and deter mothers of color from engaging more frequently and more completely in the suburb space.

Both students' stories and Dinorah's experiences in this suburban school seem to suggest that White mothers actively engage in practices that reproduce and uphold Whiteness and White supremacy through a series of policing and surveillance actions. Our findings speak to the destructive nature of these practices that target and harm anyone whose actions are perceived to challenge the normalization and hegemony of White cultural norms.

## Conclusion and Discussion

Taking together the stories from our research sites encourages us to think deeply about the ways in which coloniality shapes women's mothering and work and perceptions thereof. Specifically, we are interested in how race, religion, immigrant status, and class complicate motherhood and mothering work and the implications for research and practice. To do this, we first offer a discussion of our findings, where we think through the various ways that motherhood as a construct was utilized in two vastly different research settings, namely an urban working-class immigrant Somali community, and a predominantly affluent suburban school. Then, we explore what these findings can teach us in pursuit of liberatory projects that center pedagogies of joy and healing from the wounds of Whiteness, White supremacy, and colonialism. Eventually, we want to imagine life on our own terms as academics, as mothers, and as women of color. In other words, this and similar research, we hope to offer ways to undertake the process of de-linking (Mignolo, 2011) from the grip of coloniality in our living and working in the academy.

## Findings

### On Policing, Surveillance and Struggle for Decolonial Motherwork

Our findings show students of vastly different backgrounds experiencing mothers' policing through gossip as restrictive of youth's freedom and choice. One modality of policing is motivated by protecting and maintaining White supremacy and enacted through a wide range of surveillance tactics and exclusionary practices by White mothers. For example, White mothers leveraged their power to discipline and punish by advocating for the dismantling of the school band. Conversely, Somali mothers' policing entailed upholding collectivist and sometimes patriarchal norms. From the outset, both groups of mothers seemed to be underappreciated by youth in their communities, highlighting society's disregard for women's educational work. However, to equate the mothering work of working-class immigrant Somali women to White affluent mothers is to essentialize gender and power, while at the same time hiding the nuanced ways in which coloniality of power privileges some women and oppresses others (Lugones, 2010). For this reason, it is pertinent to understand women's work, including motherwork to reflect larger discourses of modernity/coloniality that are either upheld or resisted from particular social and epistemic locations (Grosfoguel, 2002; Mignolo, 2011). Hence, the coloniality of power helps us understand what motivates the policing and surveillance practices of women in these two different communities. Dinorah's own discomfort under the suspicious White gaze demonstrates how the production and reproduction of Whiteness requires discursive violence. For instance, Elizabeth McRae's work (2018) highlights the nuanced and subtle ways that White women uphold Whiteness and White supremacy in the Southern United States. She explains:

> White women guaranteed that racial segregation seeped into the nooks and crannies of public life and private matters, of congressional campaigns and PTA meetings, of cotton and household economies, and textbook debate

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> and daycare decisions. Their work shored up White supremacist politics and shaped the segregated state. White women were the mass in massive resistance. (p. 4)

McRae's (2018) work helps us understand and contextualize the marginalization and criminalization of Black and Brown parents in Western schools. McRae (2018) explains that White women segregationists were not confined to the South but rather were part of larger coalitions in the North, Northeast, and West Coast communities that opposed desegregation of schools in the U.S. McRae's work delineates various tactics and practices that White women developed to uphold Whiteness by moving away from larger discourse that legislated racial equality and instead focused on the ".... multiple locations where racial segregation had been and would have to be maintained–dating etiquette, teacher training, public health policies, sexual customs, civic organization, and in the stories people told." (McRae, 2018, p. 5). Similarly, in our research, when upper middle-class White mothers in a suburban school yield their power to regulate their communities' behavior and conduct through gossip, volunteering, and rallying for the dismantling of school programs, we see it as a form of sustaining White supremacy in schools.

Meanwhile, the communal pedagogies of Somali mothers are motivated by collective resistance to the subjugation of coloniality of gender and power. Lugones (2010) teaches us that the decolonial feminist practice of women from the Global South happens in women's everyday work that values interdependence and interconnectedness over individualism and disconnection. Somali mothers' gossiping about the youth can be understood through Somali communal ethos, which is concerned with collective wellness. As Black, Muslim, immigrant, and working-class Somali mothers understood the challenges of raising children in an anti-Black and anti-Muslim society (Abdi & Pittman, 2024; Lorde, 1984). This is evidenced by a sustained struggle against school culture that deemed Somali culture as primitive while promoting individualism and personal choice as civilized (Lugones, 2010). These Somali mothers' pedagogies are positioned to insist on preserving the humanity of their children by delinking from colonial school cultural norms. We argue it is through everyday women's work in families and communities that provides possibilities of theorizing ways to de-link from colonial structures that isolate us from communal connections and interdependence. As demonstrated by the Somali mothers, these include *marti soor,* the practice of hospitality and generosity extended to neighbors and visitors alike, as well as creating communal spaces of healing and joy through food, traditional dress, and stories. Inspired by Somali mothers' decolonial motherwork in this study, we reflect on the implications for our work in the academy as women scholars from the Global South.

## On Pedagogies of Delinking, and Decolonial Motherwork

Finally, to center marginalized communities' epistemologies in our research and teaching means to engage in liberatory pedagogies that focus on care, healing, and joy. To do this, we borrow from Mignolo's (2011) concept of de-linking from the coloniality of power to highlight care, healing, and joy as pedagogies that affirm our humanity in the academy and, by extension, that of our communities and our students. So, what does it mean for us to engage in pedagogies of de-linking? First and foremost, de-linking requires us to acknowledge that we, the Global South, are the majority of the peoples of the world, despite the hegemony of coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000) and being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) that have sought to erase our epistemological and ontological realities in order to have complete control of our lands, resources, bodies, and labor. To de-link means to engage in pedagogies of refusal. It means to take our traditions, systems of thought, cosmologies, and the spirit world as starting points and not as an asterisk in our research,

writing, and teaching (Tuck, 2009). It means to insist that our epistemologies and ontologies are worthy of theorizing and being placed on equal footing to that of Western thought not just in response to colonial oppression but as comprehensive and complex systems of thought that have provided solutions to life for generations (wa Thiong'o, 1986).

Just like the Somali mothers in this research, for us to de-link means to prioritize pedagogies of collectivism that center healing and joy in our classrooms. It means to imagine a classroom where we stand on equal footing with our White students despite the external and institutional erasures we are subjected to as women of color (Matias, 2022). It means to share stories like the ones in this research with our students and fellow researchers. So, they can engage with epistemologies of the South as legitimate forms of knowledge that provide humane solutions to a world wounded by colonialism and Western hegemony. To de-link in our pedagogies means to value every life across the globe and to challenge the coloniality of being that hierarchized human life based on race, religion, and geography. And, instead, to lean on our human spirit that craves liberation and dignity as we do our work in predominantly White institutions. Finally, to de-link from coloniality means contributing to building and sustaining communities invested in humanizing the academy. It includes advocacy and mentorship of students and faculty from marginalized communities, as well as sharing our experiences and struggles in the academy. De-linking means embracing collectivism as a framework to work towards healing and joy in all we do including the academy.

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