

Spring 2017

# 'You become a rock': Conceptions of motherhood and lessons of race as told and photographed by four mothers from Cape Town, South Africa

Kaitlin Abrams  
*SIT Study Abroad*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection)

 Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), [African Studies Commons](#), [Early Childhood Education Commons](#), [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), [Graphic Communications Commons](#), [Photography Commons](#), and the [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Abrams, Kaitlin, "'You become a rock': Conceptions of motherhood and lessons of race as told and photographed by four mothers from Cape Town, South Africa" (2017). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. 2605.  
[https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/2605](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/2605)

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact [digitalcollections@sit.edu](mailto:digitalcollections@sit.edu).

‘You become a rock’: Conceptions of motherhood and lessons of race as  
told and photographed by four mothers from Cape Town, South Africa

Kaitlin Abrams  
Academic Director: Stewart Chirova  
Advisor: Rumbi Goredema Görgens

Colgate University  
Women’s Studies

South Africa: Cape Town  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for South Africa:  
Multiculturalism and Human Rights, SIT Study Abroad

Spring 2017

## **Abstract**

This study will discuss conceptions of motherhood and lessons of racial identity through the lens of four women from Cape Town, South Africa. Utilizing both semi-structured interviews and photovoice, stories of motherhood are told as a journey from childhood to adulthood, in which one's experience of being mothered influences decisions in current motherhood. In interviews, mothers pinpoint conceptions of good motherhood that encompass both financial support for one's children and attentiveness, informed mostly by one's race and class background. Additionally, experiences surrounding discrimination and silencing in childhood differ between races, later informing the way that mothers chose to share lessons of race to their children. There is overall a difference in mothering not only between the races of the mother but also by the race of the child. Finally, experiences of photographing motherhood allowed mothers to focus on the day-to-day interactions that define their relationship with their children and the emotional work of mothering, as well as allowing them to reflect on often painful moments of racial socialization. This study is significant as it highlights mothering as the primary source of racial socialization, which is relevant as we begin thinking about raising the next generation in South Africa's recent democracy.

**KEY WORDS:** Motherhood, race, identity, community mothering, photovoice

*To my mother, Lea Colavito-Abrams. Your selflessness and laughter has made me into the woman I am today and the mother I want to be in the future. Also, I miss your cooking.*

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the many women in Cape Town who made this project possible. Mothers are not only the focus of this project but the source of my comfort, inspiration, and survival throughout my time in Cape Town. First, thank you to the many mothers who hosted me in their homes: Makhulu in Langa for teaching me isiXhosa and letting me snuggle in your bed while watching soap operas, Nombinqo in Tshabo for teaching me your livelihood and supplying me with endless fat cakes, Freda in Stellenbosch for movie nights and family beach days, and Salwa in the Bokaap- you're a queen. Of course, I would like to thank the four mothers who took the time to sit with me and share their life stories and experiences of motherhood, conversations that weren't always easy. The beautiful art you have created throughout this project and the sacrifices you make for your families every day are incomparable. You are truly mothers of the nation. To my advisor, Rumbi Goredema Görgens, your mind and vision of the world took this project in a direction I could not have envisioned myself, and your excitement motivated me when I had doubts. Finally, to my Academic Director Stewart Chirova, Academic Coordinator Emma Arogundade, and Program Assistant Tabisa Dayonase, thank you for your organization, support, and mentorship throughout my entire time in South Africa.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<i>Limitations</i> .....	7
<i>Existing Literature</i> .....	8
Problematizing Existing Theory. ....	8
South African Historical Context and Political Mobilization.....	10
Conceptions of the ‘Good Mother.’ .....	11
Generational Shifts in Understandings of Motherhood. ....	13
Transmission of Racial Identity.....	14
Black Women and Community Mothering.....	15
Teaching about Race.....	16
Moving Forward. ....	16
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>17</b>
<i>Semi-Structured Interviews</i> .....	17
<i>Photovoice</i> .....	18
<i>Self-Reflexivity</i> .....	19
<i>Introducing Interviewees</i> .....	21
<b>Results and Analysis</b>	<b>25</b>
<i>Influence of Mothers on Mothering</i> .....	25
<i>Lessons of Independence &amp; Supportive Homes</i> .....	27
<i>Lessons of Race: Silencing Versus Acceptance</i> .....	28
<i>“I’m a mother to everybody”</i> : Community Mothering from Childhood to Adulthood.....	30
<i>“You become a rock”</i> : Conceptions of good motherhood.....	31
<i>Pressures of (Single) Motherhood</i> .....	33
<i>“I was a mother at the age of nine”</i> : Visions of Motherhood from a Young Age .....	34
<i>Teaching Children about Race: Importance of History</i> .....	36
<i>Teaching Kids About Race: Importance of Positive Interracial Relationships</i> .....	39
<i>“We’re the educated blacks”</i> : Importance of education on racial transmission .....	40
<i>Fear for Children</i> .....	41
<i>Photography Reflections and Observations</i> .....	42
<i>Self-Reflexivity</i> .....	44
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Recommendations for further study</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Appendix A: Interview #1 Questions</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Appendix B: Consent Form</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Appendix C: Interviewee Photos</b>	<b>52</b>
<i>Katrin</i> .....	52
<i>Sebena</i> .....	57
<i>Elizabeth</i> .....	58

## Introduction

During my short stay in South Africa, I have spent time with various families in Cape Town, living with them for a week to a month at a time. While I experienced only a sliver of the way families lived their lives, it was clear that race, class, and culture had an immense impact on the structure of families and the way day-to-day life would run. What bound all households, however, was the female head, typically either a mother or grandmother. In all four homes mothers played an extremely influential and pivotal role in the family and on children specifically. Additionally, each family had different conceptions and understandings of their own racial identity. I began to theorize that the influence of the mother in the family contributed to the racial identity and relationship with race that children would receive.

Because mothers have such a huge influence on a child's understanding of race, it is crucial that we understand how mothers conceptualize their role as mothers and what influence they have on their children's racial identity and future interactions with race. Given South Africa's recent transition from a violent, racialized, and nationalist government into Democracy, it is important to understand how best to teach the next generation about race, history, and identity. This study aims to understand the relationship between motherhood and race, constituting not only how mothers understand their own experiences both mothering and being mothered, but also how they chose to impart lessons of race and identity onto their children. Much of the current literature is very theoretical; there is little personal narrative when talking about motherhood, surprising as it is both a structural and an individual experience. Because of the absence of rich personal histories, I aimed to produce an understanding of motherhood that was dynamic, intricate, complex, and artistic.

I begin the paper with a discussion of the current literature existing on historical and political constructions of motherhood, in the South African and US contexts. I also discuss the ways in which race and class influence experiences of motherhood. Addressing the gaps in the research, I then situate my research question in the current literature. Next, I discuss my methodology, explaining the strengths and drawbacks of both interviews and photovoice. I then introduce each interviewee, give a short description of their lives, and situate them in the context of their entire narrative. The next section will consist of my results and a discussion of major themes and findings. I finish with conclusions and recommendations for further study.

Overall, I find that mothers conceive of good mothering as something that encompasses both financial support for one's children and attentiveness, informed mostly by one's race and class background. Additionally, experiences surrounding discrimination and silencing in childhood differ between races in the way that mothers chose to share lessons of race to their children. There is overall a difference in mothering, often not only between the races of the mother, but also informed by the race of the child. Finally, experiences of photographing motherhood allowed mothers to focus on the day-to-day interactions that define their relationship with their children and the emotional work of mothering, as well as allowing them to reflect on often painful moments of racial socialization.

### **Limitations**

There are a few limitations to the study, namely the timeline and small subject pool. As I only had a month to complete both interviews and a guided photography project, I had to narrow my scope to only four mothers. These mothers were wonderful and gave me a wealth of information; however, I was lacking certain identities. As far as women shared, all identified as heterosexual. Additionally, most women fell into at least middle-class socioeconomic status and therefore had experiences of motherhood that were influenced by a particular access to resources and time to theorize about motherhood. Additionally, each woman had children of various ages, making it difficult for me to compare their experiences of motherhood, as all of their children were at very different developmental stages in regards to understandings about race. For example, it is difficult to compare a lesson about race given to a four-year-old with a discussion had with a 17-year-old child. That being said, the diversity in age, race, and relationship status of the women offered a lot of complexity and nuanced understandings of motherhood and race.

Another significant limitation is the lack of photos for one participant. While all mothers completed the project, only three were able to share their final reflections, either in person or via email, and I was only able to obtain photos from three of the mothers, due to scheduling conflicts. This biases the results of the final photography reflections; however, the photos obtained contribute to understandings of how the project itself was a valuable and reflective experience as well as towards the understanding of motherhood as a whole.

## **Existing Literature**

Before theorizing about motherhood it is important to define its many facets. According to Walker (1995), motherhood embraces at least three different terrains including mothering work, described as the practice of motherhood, and the discourse of motherhood, which involves norms, values, and ideas about 'the good mother,' that exist in each culture or society. Walker (1995) then adds a third dimension of motherhood, the social identity, consisting of one's self-image, positively or negatively valued, which derives from membership in various social groups. This paper will largely focus on the social identity of motherhood and self-conceptions of motherhood as informed by one's race, class, education, and upbringing. Women in South Africa may have completely different notions of motherhood than women in the United States, and these notions within South Africa may conflict on the basis of identity. It may never be possible to construct one continuous definition of motherhood, even within identity groups, over time. That said, it is important to recognize the many political, historical and identity influences at play when conceptualizing motherhood.

### ***Problematizing Existing Theory.***

Existing literature thus far has primarily focused on the experiences of Western conceptions and ideas about motherhood, neglecting that like any institution, motherhood must be examined within specific historical contexts. Lived experiences of womanhood alone are not parallel across international or even racial lines, and feminist research must take this into account (Mohanty, 1988). Focusing on white, middle-class women's experiences ignores racialized, classed, and gendered expectations, available resources, and overall community treatment for mothers over generations. Failing to recognize the importance of social context means feminist scholars do not situate themselves in specific locations which implicates how their own identities influence their subjective interpretations of motherhood (Collins, 1994, p.385).

Focusing only on the experiences of white, middle-class women constitutes some dangerous assumptions. Collins (1987) points out three themes in white perspectives on motherhood that are problematic for black mothers. The first is the assumption that mothering occurs within the confines of a private, nuclear family household where the mother has almost total responsibility for childrearing. This narrative is not applicable for many black families who have historically been less able to support these private households and instead often practice

‘community mothering’ which I will discuss later. The second assumption is that all families utilize strict sex-role segregation in caretaking. The last assumption is that motherhood and economic dependency on men go hand-in-hand; however, not all women have a relative degree of economic security to provide for their families (Collins, 1994). Additionally, Brown (2011) points out that women of color often needed to work outside of the home, rather than their husbands. Feminist fights over whether women should work to provide for their children or stay at home are thus largely inaccessible to low-income women or women of color who often do not have the ability to choose between work or home life and instead have done domestic work outside of the home for centuries.

Walker (1995) also calls for a more historically specific understanding of motherhood that recognizes the experiences of South African women in particular. The legacy of colonialism, apartheid-era violence, and institutionalized racism has a stark impact on how generations of mothers conceptualize and carry out their role. However, Walker (1995) asserts that it is not holistic to conclude that white and black mothers experience motherhood completely differently. Claiming that experiences of motherhood are plotted strictly across racial lines assumes that black and white women have operated in completely separate and pure cultural domains without intermingling. Walker (1995) names this notion ‘difference theory,’ in which more progressive constructions of motherhood are assigned exclusively to black women and singular narratives of motherhood are assigned to each race. In fact, Walker (1995) claims that efforts to create division between mothers of different races are more driven by “political concerns to challenge white hegemony than evidence concerning motherhood” (Walker, 1995, p. 436). Walker (1995) is not claiming that differences do not exist, but rather that differences within races must be examined just as closely as those between races. Essentially, theory needs to recognize the historical complexities of motherhood as well as similarities and differences amongst mothers of different racial identities.

Unlike Walker (1995), Collins (1994) argues that motherhood does occur in specific and singular historical “contexts where the sons of white mothers have ‘every opportunity and protection,’ and the ‘coloured’ daughters and sons of racial ethnic mothers ‘know not their fate’” (Collins, 1994, p. 371). Therefore, conversations on South African motherhood must not only focus on specific raced and classed conceptions and differences, but historical shifts as well. Collins (1994) calls theorists to center women of color in discussions of motherhood,

recognizing their differential treatment and access to resources throughout history. Therefore, as we move forward with the existing literature, it is important to recognize historical differences, but also to understand that stories are both structural and individual.

### ***South African Historical Context and Political Mobilization.***

To highlight the similarities in political constructions of motherhood for both black and white South African women, Walker (1995) discusses the ways in which African and Afrikaner women were mobilized during apartheid, surrounding the idea of nationalism. They point out that other researchers argue that two formulations of ‘mothers of the nation’ developed quite differently,

whereas in the case of Afrikaner nationalism, motherhood has been conceived of as home-centred [*sic*] and an essentially passive activity, within the African National Congress (ANC) motherhood has been conceptualised [*sic*] and mobilised [*sic*] as a militant and active liberatory [*sic*] force - 'a dynamic force for change' (p.422).

However, Walker (1995) sees more similarities amongst black and Afrikaner women. To demonstrate, Walker (1995) complicates political constructions of Afrikaner motherhood, as not merely a passive act. For the Afrikaner Voortrekker<sup>1</sup>, colonial Victorian domesticity was unachievable. Frontier motherhood required “domestic competence, resilience, and engagement with the survival of the family and community,” rather than passivity (p.433). On the other hand, the rise of Afrikaner nationalism in the 1940s allowed white women to embrace their privilege, giving them access to cheap black domestic labor, and excusing them from once revered domestic responsibilities. Thus, it is difficult to tease out the exact origins and dichotomies in conceptions of motherhood between racial groups. Walker (1995) challenges readers not to assert such a contrast and to consider multiple historical factors.

Stevenson (2011) enforces ideas of a historically conscious analysis of motherhood in South Africa, also using the political mobilization of mothers during apartheid as support. Stevenson (2011) gives a narrative of the 1986 Munsieville Mother’s March in which black mothers in townships mobilized against police stopping and threatening their children on their way to school. Motherhood was politicized by organizations such as the African National

---

<sup>1</sup> Voortrekkers: Descendants of Dutch East Indian Company settlers who migrated East during the Great Trek, due to grievances with the British-colonial administration.

Congress (ANC) to mobilize women as ‘mothers of revolution.’ Thus, black motherhood began to hold contradictory ideologies;

on the one hand, black women were admonished to make the household and family their primary focus, though on the other, they were encouraged to participate in resistance activities outside the home, with the likely result of police abuse and possible imprisonment, resulting in separation from their families (Stevenson, 2011, p.142).

The idea that black mothers are active members of their community, rather than passive domestic actors, is not new to African discourse. In the pre-colonial era, there was an importance placed on motherhood and fertility which often gave women status and power in the community (Walker, 1995). This is evidenced by the lack of stigma surrounding teen pregnancy and single mothers amongst many South African black communities. Walker (1995) claims that teen pregnancies are not shameful but rather an “affirmation of womanhood” and that marriage is not coupled with motherhood (p. 431).

Motherhood has often been used as a political mobilizer for women of all races, allowing women to be involved in politics and activism while still being able to remain within the boundaries of conceptions of motherhood and womanhood itself. Motherhood is used as a powerful symbol of national unity as mothers are conceptualized as both biological and cultural reproducers of the nation (Robbe, 2015). Mothers are called to both save the nation for their children and reproduce community norms and ideals through their children. McDonald (1997) discusses how black women are expected to hold the black community together to preserve the race and gender. Through this, black women become community mothers, transplanting tradition through interventions among their community.

### ***Conceptions of the ‘Good Mother.’***

Despite Walker’s (1995) arguments against difference theory, race, class, gender, and education influence conceptions of what it means to be a good mother and the ability for certain women to achieve these goals. The prevailing ideology of motherhood seems to be one of ‘intensive mothering,’ which demands an immense level of attention and care given by the mother to her child. The ‘good mother’ is seen as one who acts as the central caregiver to her child, follows expert advice, spends significant time and resources on her child, and is selfless and emotionally absorbed (Brown, 2011). This definition is not accessible to all mothers, namely for low-income women and those without access to material resources or the time to spend

intense sessions with their child. Education is also crucial to be able to theorize about how to mother best or to research expert opinion (Brown, 2011).

These standards of motherhood are increasingly unachievable for lower-class women of color. Verduzco-Baker (2010) describes an exclusive ‘charmed circle’ of motherhood in which entry into the circle is largely inaccessible for those who without certain privileges. Due to the classed and raced language surrounding motherhood, no matter how hard these women try, they will always be seen as less than good mothers in popular narrative. Poor women of color are shamed as being lazy, hypersexual, excessively fertile, irresponsible, and greedy (Verduzco-Baker, 2010). Meanwhile, the ‘good mother’ has the social, cultural, and financial resources that are required to meet society’s standards. Despite all efforts to devote emotional care to a child, women of color and lower-class women cannot be seen by white women as good mothers because of their lack of social capital.

Because definitions of good mothering are bound up in ideals of womanhood, women of color must modify their personal definitions in order to still see themselves as good mothers. For example, when asked about their motherhood, white women may emphasize being self-sacrificing, devoted, responsible, or able to provide resources for development. This emphasis on resources perpetuates the idea that any woman can and should be a good mother in this way, that “success is the result of individual effort rather than structural factors” (Verduzco-Baker, 2010, p.28). Women of color and low-income mothers may instead emphasize positive behavioral changes or their ability to settle down. Discourses of motherhood for black and working-class communities “may not emphasize women's involvement in the day-to-day care of their children as much as their responsibilities for financial support and discipline” (Walker, 1994, p. 425). Positive attributes of their motherhood are highlighted to focus on determination, sacrifice, and survival, rather than the lack of material resources (Collins, 1994).

Thinking of oneself as a good mother can also be complicated by maternal ambivalence, conceptualized by Brown (2011). Brown (2011) describes maternal ambivalence as the “internal and external contradictions that can leave mothers feeling exhausted, overwhelmed by the responsibilities, lonely, or confused about new motherhood” (Brown, 2011, p.2). However, cultural images about motherhood rarely present these negative emotions. Therefore, when they arise, they can take mothers by surprise and lead to feelings of blame and guilt. Brown (2011) also points out how conflicting standards of motherhood can lead to this ambiguity, including

cultural norms regarding childhood, relationships with one's community and extended family, and economic resources. For example, mothers who cannot choose between work or childcare may feel conflicted between providing for their child by working or by physically being there. True to their hypothesis, Brown (2011) found that mothers with higher education and household income experience less ambivalence about being good at mothering than mothers with lower incomes and with less than some college education.

### ***Generational Shifts in Understandings of Motherhood.***

While understandings of motherhood must be historically and politically specific, they also must recognize generational shifts. By speaking with three generations of black mothers in Cape Town, Moore (2013) observes that notions of motherhood amongst black women have changed from solely cultivating a 'good provider and caring role' toward a growing emphasis on achieving personal goals and working on 'the project of the self'. Moore (2013) specifically focuses on shifts in motherhood fueled by black female mobility from rural to urban centers in the 1950s. During the oppressive and violent apartheid-regime, black and coloured<sup>2</sup> people were relegated to certain rural areas and outskirts of the city. With no place to work in these rural areas, men and husbands began to move out into informal settlements near the city in order to work and bring money back to the family. Motherhood and 'motherwork' were therefore defined primarily by the struggle for survival in these rural areas. Marriages were still a necessary part of this survival narrative, and many married due to the relocations by the state. Certain housing laws, for example, required couples to be married before purchase, due to perceptions of African women as undesirable and unstable parents.

However, in the 1970s, the Coloured Labor Preference Policy was passed, making domestic work one of the only sources of income available to women of color. This work inevitably took mothers away from their own families and children to care for the children of white families in the cities. As male unemployment increased, "motherhood was altered less by the absence of husbands than by the growing importance of other women" (Moore, 2013, p.154).

---

<sup>2</sup> Relatively ambiguous racial identity constructed during apartheid, representing those who were neither non-white or non-native. Formally, coloured people are descendants of the Indigenous Khoisan peoples, European settlers, and Cape Slaves from areas such as Madagascar, Mozambique, and India.

Motherhood was still conceptualized as the survival of one's family, but relationships with husbands and domestic work was less of a key element; motherhood now existed in more matriarchal, multigenerational households, alongside formal employment. This is also evidenced by the rise in female-headed households in the 1970s and the decline in stigma against single mothers; being single was a strategy against poverty.

In Moore's (2013) interviews with three generations of black African women, they speak of one particular family of an older mother, middle mother, and young mother. All three women acted, or currently act, as the sole provider for their children, but caregiving and support was conceptualized differently by each generation.

In the oldest generation, mothers needed support from female kin because statutory rules prevented women from establishing homes in urban areas in which they could care for their children while working to support them. In the middle generation, mothers sent their children to rural kin to protect them from harm and ensure their schooling was not disturbed during the violent struggles of apartheid. The mother in the youngest generation, however, required support from kin caring for her children so she could work on the 'project of the self' (p.168).

While mothers differ when it comes to their own personal achievements and goals, all mothers in the study emphasized the need to work and support their children, often resulting in a lack of contact. Again, within the matriarchal structure, the absence of a father figure is intentional.

### ***Transmission of Racial Identity.***

Transmission of maternal identity from mother to daughter was a key feature in Moore's (2013) interviews. One woman, Xoliswa remembers her own mother's work as being essential to the survival of their family and community, and thus this became a key feature of her identity as a mother. She "saw supporting other family members at the loss of individual development as a natural part of women's work" (Moore, 2013, p.167). Survival again arises as a key theme in the narratives of many black African women, as well as the importance of imparting survival tactics onto children. There is an inevitable tension when trying to foster a meaningful racial identity for children within a society that continues to denigrate people of color (Collins, 1994). Thus, narratives and strategies for coping and survival must be passed down through generations of mothers.

Because ideas and experiences of motherhood are so bound up in race and class, it is inevitable that the way mothers transmit identity to their children will be specific to the mother's

identities. Neblett, et al. (2009) found that adolescent racial identity was strongly influenced by the racial socialization imparted by parents. Implicit and explicit messages about race allowed African-American children to form positive racial identities in the face of bias and adversity, including adaptive and protective mechanisms to prepare children to combat racism they may face. Parents who taught their children the positive aspects of race and emphasized racial pride, were more likely to impart strong feelings of closeness to other black people and to holding stronger support for black separatism. Children who receive messages about prejudice and discrimination were also found to be more likely to engage in self-exploration around the significance and meaning of race (Neblett, et al., 2009).

Mothering about race may either be intentional or unintentional, depending again on one's race, class, and educational attainment. For example, mothers who have the time to theorize about lessons about race may give more explicit lessons to their child. Lessons about race may also exist in silences. Parents who have experienced discrimination or violence, such as apartheid, may be unable to tell a sequential narrative of their trauma (Weingarten, 2004). They may believe that humans are capable of sadistic or indifferent cruelty, leading to detrimental views of the self, coded interactions and warnings to children, including dismissiveness or coldness.

### ***Black Women and Community Mothering.***

An important form of racial identity transmission is found in black community mothering. Edwards (2000) explains community mothering or 'othermothering' as the acceptance of responsibility for a child who is not one's own, representing the interdependence of the black community. Edwards (2000) discusses community mothering as an effort to set an example for other black women and girls through anything from scolding to nurturing. Not only is the black community seen as a group of relatives whose interests must be promoted at all times, but the ideal of being a mother to the community is also an identity passed down through generations of black women. Again, Collins (1994) emphasis on survival in black motherhood appears.

We are also reminded of McDonald's (1997) observations of black activism as being fueled by ideals of motherhood. Black women may believe they possess a unique empathic motivation and ability to maintain ties with poor and working-class women. Therefore, their

strategies of solidarity and collective survival are passed down through generations (McDonald, 1997). It is likely that many black women may see themselves as mothers to more than just their biological children.

### ***Teaching about Race.***

Finally, lessons about race are influenced by a mother's identity, upbringing, and her own experiences with race. Lessons about race and identity may require a more conscious effort on the part of mothers of color to prepare children to cope with systems of oppression. For example, "African American women draw upon a long-standing Afrocentric feminist worldview emphasizing the importance of self-definition and self-reliance, and the necessity of demanding respect from others" (Collins, 1994). Neblett et al. (2009) also claims that socioeconomic class structures opportunities and resources for children such that children from more affluent families may have more frequent interracial interactions at school or with their family. These interactions may prompt parents to discuss issues of race more readily. Finally, Neblett et al. (2009) theorizes that gender may also influence racial socialization as mothers may provide specific messages to their daughters in an attempt to prepare them for the world in ways that they are not doing for their sons.

### ***Moving Forward.***

This paper aims to address gaps existing in the current research on motherhood, specifically in the South African context. Research on motherhood is largely based in the United States. Motherhood as a sphere of thought and theory is largely unexplored in South African research and the literature that does exist is primarily historical and political, rather than personal narrative. This paper explores the way in which race and racial identity develops in South Africa via personal interactions between mother and child, rather than merely focusing on the structures of race and racism that are heavily researched. The goal of this research is to address these gaps and create a personal and artistic narrative of motherhood and racial identity in contemporary South Africa. The family seems to be the primary source of socialization for children, and this paper discusses how important mother-child relationships are specifically in regards to racial and identity socialization. This is important given South Africa's recent democracy and the need to

understand the ways in which gender, race, and class all intersect in how mothers will share future lessons about race.

### **Methodology**

The methodology for this research was twofold, consisting of both semi-structured interviews and a guided photography project, known as photovoice. The process began with an interview. Four women shared a unique and complex story of their lives, motherhood, and relationship with race. Women shared their processes of coming-to-age and coming to a racial consciousness. After the first interview, mothers completed a guided photography project, revealing an importance in the seemingly meaningless day-to-day chores and a specialness in small moments with children as they learn and grow. A final follow-up interview was conducted as a chance for mothers to reflect on their experiences with the project.

#### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Interviews were semi-structured; I prepared questions before each interview but the responses of interviewees guided the conversation in various directions. I utilized this method to be flexible to the responses of interviewees, feeling that I could learn more when moving with the flow of their own personal narrative, rather than creating a rigid structure. The format of the questions I chose were similar to the life-history method used by Moore (2013), which seeks to understand the individual within the context of their whole life. Questions of this nature included sharing stories about their family, relationship with their own mother, and early interactions with race. Through these lines of questioning, I sought to understand the way one's past experiences with being mothered influenced their perceptions of their role as mothers.

A strength to this methodology is its flexibility, and my ability to react and respond immediately to topics that arose within interviews. Depending on participant responses and reactions, I could see where to push a line of questioning further, but also could recognize when I should step back due to discomfort. Each interview lasted about an hour and was conducted at a location requested by the interviewee, usually their own home. This was an effort to ensure interviewees were comfortable where they were sharing their story. Interviews were thus able to take a more conversational route and participants were also able to ask me questions after the interview. Additionally, during interviews, many mothers expressed emotions of laughter,

sadness, even confusion and confliction. The emotionality and nuances are thus captured in the interviews in a way that a survey could not embody.

One weakness to this approach is that interviews were conducted in English which may have hindered some participant's ability to fully convey the meaning of their words. The fact that interview was conducted in a less familiar language for some participants could have also influenced overall comfort levels. Additionally, as interviews only offer a slice of someone's life, it is possible that due to familiarity, trust levels, and overall time, I was unable to capture all the complexities and backstories.

### **Photovoice**

The second facet of the research utilized the photovoice method. Photovoice is most commonly used in combination with grassroots social action. Activists and researchers who aim to understand the issues affecting marginalized communities from their point of view may use photovoice to show a 'stereotype free' depiction of a community when creating a social action plan. The researcher will bring members of the community together and ask them to capture photos of the most important problems affecting their community. Photos taken by someone within the community are thus selected, framed, and captioned without the biased lens of a researcher. When moving forward, a social action plan may be created with members of the community, using the photographs as visual representations of the most salient problems they face (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Co-opting this methodology, I aimed to obtain images of motherhood through the eyes of each individual mother, rather than capturing what *I* may perceive as important or relevant to each family. Participants were asked to take photos of moments, representations, and symbols of their motherhood for a week. Participants either used a smart phone or were provided with a disposable camera if needed. They were also given a series of ethical guidelines to follow when taking photos, such as not capturing images of children under 18 who were not their own. Finally, participants were asked to caption their own photos as well as explaining the importance of each in a final interview. It should be noted that only Katrin and Elizabeth were able to caption their photos and I have left Sebens's untitled but with some explanation from her final reflection. Additionally, Khwezi's photos and reflections are not included in the final paper due to scheduling conflicts.

A strength of this methodology is its ability to create pieces of art and visual representations of motherhood with limited researcher bias. Participants chose when, what, and how to photograph their daily lives. Photographs are quite individual to each family and ideas of motherhood. However, this individuality does limit these photographs' generalizability.

There is the possibility that the busy, hectic, and often stressful life of the mothers limited their ability to capture important moments as they faced them. Regardless of this difficulty, I decided to use photovoice because I wanted to create something *with* mothers who I had gotten to know. By completing the photography project together, I hoped that our final interview would represent a journey through their lives, through their thoughts about motherhood, and solidify their musings on the subject. The chance to reflect on one's motherhood and the interview process, was also a valuable gift to participants, as expressed by many in their final reflections.

### **Self-Reflexivity**

Throughout this project I have inserted myself into a different cultural context and asked women to share their lived experiences. Therefore, I must consider my own identities and their effect on interviewee's comfort levels and responses, as well as the way my background has influenced my research question itself. When doing research, Racine (2011) indicates that there is a power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee, rather than a reciprocal communication between two partners. This power balance is intensified as I place myself in a cultural context different from my own and informed by my identity as a white, American, college-educated, upper-middle-class woman. As the study of women and gender grows, Walker (1995) highlights "a fierce challenge by black women to white researchers, to reflect more critically on their ethnocentric assumptions about gender relations and identity, as well as to confront their privilege within academia," a challenge that runs throughout much of the current debate and theory on motherhood (p. 419). In this study in particular, my American identity and my position as a non-mother play a key role in my research question and analysis.

The most prominent blind spot I discovered as I began to interview women was my Western definition of motherhood. When searching for interviewees, I focused my scope on those with children of their own, focusing on the immediate family structure. While I did not specify biological or adopted status, I later realized that this definition of motherhood was narrow. When researching black motherhood in South Africa, the prominence of community

mothering became clear (Edwards, 2000). The ways in which black women defined their motherhood during interviews was largely community based, considering themselves to be mothers not only biological children, but to extended family members, children of the community, or students as well. Thus, conceptions of motherhood will be told from my lens of motherhood, whereas conceptions and definitions amongst black South African women may be much broader and thus lacking in this paper.

As I went throughout the project, many of the interviewees asked me where my interest in this subject matter came from, namely if I was a mother myself. While my interest came from my relationship with own mother and coming to terms with my racial identity in a US context, I am not a mother myself. I believe this put me at a source of distance from mothers, as I could not relate to the emotional and physical labor of motherhood on a personal level. It is possible that this lack of understanding between us influenced comfort levels and rapport. Perhaps the mothers edited their responses to fit a mold that a non-mother could understand best.

My whiteness is also a huge factor in interactions with participants. Although apartheid has been legally abolished, its legacy still continues in the physical segregation of Cape Town as well as formal and informal power dynamics. Within interviews with women of color, my race may have affected comfort levels and how trusting black women were that I would give their stories justice. Additionally, there could have been a sense of affinity with white women that black women did not feel with me, perhaps instead feeling like more explanation of justification was required for their experiences.

Finally, my upper middle-class lens led to problematic assumptions about women from South Africa. For example, when emailing potential participants, I gave a description of the project. Included in the description, was the statement, “During that time, I will also provide you with a disposable camera, which you will be taught to use.” After sending to a few participants, it was pointed out to me that this statement assumed that women would not have their own camera or smartphone, let alone have an understanding of how a camera works. After hearing this, I decided to remove the statement; if interviewees needed assistance, I would provide a written guide, rather than merely assuming they were unfamiliar with photography. I constantly had to check my class and race position, whether it be the questions I was asking or my reactions to responses. It is also important to note that idea to use cell phone images came from participants themselves. It was my intention to provide them with cameras so as to not burden them with their

own resources and data; however, for two mothers, using a cell phone camera was more convenient. As research is a constant interplay between researcher and participant, I decided it was best to respect the direction and flow in which participants took the project.

Racine (2011) also discusses the need to express one's positionality and experience not only in analysis, but also to share with interviewees themselves. They discovered this necessity when starting their research, finding themselves hitting a wall with how much participants would share. However, when they began to openly discuss their own family background and experiences, participants were much more open; a more reciprocal relationship was formed. While research will never be completely reciprocal, I made an effort to discuss my own mother and experience of being mothered with interviewees if they were interested, hoping for a sense of reciprocity.

### **Introducing Interviewees**

Interviewees were obtained through personal relationship of my advisor or myself or through snowballing. The goal was to gather a diverse sample of mothers in terms of race, class, age of mother, and age of children. All interviewees identified as women, mothers, and from Cape Town. To protect the confidentiality of participants, each was given the option of choosing a pseudonym. Photos including participant faces were not included without explicit consent. Participants were informed that any information they did not want shared may be omitted and that they may terminate their participation in the study at any time. When interviewing, I monitored the interviewees reactions for any signs of significant distress, in an effort to protect against any re-traumatization (Adonis, 2016). Compensation for travel expenses or coffee was also provided for each session.

After interviewing mothers, I realized I would not be able to explain their motherhood, without giving a short history of their lives, situating them in the context of their entire story. Narratives are able to “bridge the gap between daily social interaction and large-scale social structures,” revealing more complex truths and lifelikeness (Ewick & Sibley, 1995, p.198). At the end of my entire interview process, it was clear that each story and journey towards motherhood was extremely individual and specific; I could not divide mothers into neat little boxes. It was thus important to tell a more complete narrative in order to give their stories justice, rather than merely extracting bits-and-pieces of data.

Additionally, all interviewees chose their own pseudonyms for them and their children. Names are not neutral; they are bound up in identity and culture. Therefore, I decided to have mothers pick their own pseudonyms, rather than assigning one to them. I wanted their name to still represent a piece of their identity that they found salient. For example, one woman may choose a Xhosa name for her children who she is raising as Xhosa. Therefore, all the names below have been altered to protect participant identity while still preserving their individuality.

### ***Khwezi***

My first interview was with Khwezi, a black, married, mother of a two-year old son, Langalahke. Khwezi was born in East London, but moved to Khayelitsha with her mother in 1989. Here, she was placed in an Afrikaans school to become more exposed to the English and Afrikaans languages. To appear more English, her mother changed the spelling of her name from its original Xhosa spelling, although she chose a Xhosa pseudonym. In high school, Khwezi became interested in drama and passionate about using performance art to speak to young people about social issues. With that, she enrolled in the University of Cape Town's (UCT) drama school. Caring for her sister who was not doing well in school, Khwezi started the Education Academy<sup>3</sup> where she works with her husband on goal-setting and youth development in Khayelitsha. When asked about herself, Khwezi said,

*Khwezi: I'm passionate about youth development and from a young age, I've just wanted to be the change that I want to see in the world. So, part of that is going for my own goals that I want to go for in life, but at the same time helping other young people get and achieve their own goals.*

Various family members and friends also live in Khwezi's home that she shares with her husband, taking after her mother who was always opening her home to anyone who needed it. Her mother raised her and her two siblings on her own; Khwezi describes her as a strong woman who was the source of her vision of being a mother one day. The push and pull between her experiences being mothered and deciding how to raise Langalahke will be important to understanding Khwezi's motherhood throughout this paper.

---

<sup>3</sup>All names have been changed to protect participants' identities.

### ***Elizabeth***

I then met with Elizabeth, a white single-mother with two adopted children, Zodwa (4) and Celiwe (2), both black girls who Elizabeth has decided to raise as Xhosa. Growing up in Durban, Elizabeth describes her neighborhood and schools as mostly white. However, with a father in the ANC and a liberal upbringing, Elizabeth was exposed to race relations at a very young age. She recalls the fear of waiting for her father to return from work, knowing he was in a banned organization, and the secrecy she had to uphold as a child.

*Elizabeth: I think once or twice I raised things [topics of race] and I got silenced. So, you learn... you would hear stuff, like you hear that, no you can't tell anyone where they live or you can't tell- you don't mention that we went to the township and you don't- 'mom's working in the township today but you don't have to tell anyone...' you're not sworn to secrecy by your parents but you're told like, its not a good idea to talk about it... So, what seemed normal to me I knew was not normal to other people. And, there was a sense of, we are not living in safe times. So I think that was a big difference from some friends of mine.*

Because of this close relationship with race and politics, Elizabeth has made it a point to continue to learn the ways in which her racial identity affects her motherhood of two black children, utilizing platforms such as Facebook forums. From our conversation, it was clear to me that adoption and intentional motherhood are key and crucial pieces of Elizabeth's identity.

### ***Sebena***

The third interview was with Sebena, a black mother living in Langa township, mother of an older son, Thabiso, and caretaker of many other family children. Sebena grew up under the care of her grandmother, staying in a home of 22 and caring for the younger children as soon as she was able. She compared her verbally abusive grandfather to her sweet, quiet, and peaceful grandmother who acted as a mother to her. It was not until she studied psychology at UCT that she came to realize the problems of her childhood, the fact of her grandfather's abuse and her overbearing responsibilities as a child. Because of this upbringing, Sebena always envisioned herself with one child, staying in a spacious home. Yet as a teacher, she also loved being surrounded by children, often hosting them after school in her mother's home, playing games and helping with homework. When her son was young, she and her husband became divorced, with him moving into a home with his new girlfriend and her being forced to live with her family

and raise her son on her own. These years were very difficult for Sebena, struggling with an increasingly distant and rebellious child, divorce, and violence at her job as a teacher.

When speaking with Sebena, what stood out to me was her ability to forgive and move forward. Coming to terms with a son in prison, a husband who cheated and left, an abusive grandfather, and racial discrimination, Sebena found it important to never hold grudges.

*Sebena: With me its like, when I have a problem with you, maybe we fight or something, then I don't want that to take long. We fight, maybe we shout each other. Then, later on if I feel like no, I did something wrong to you, then I will apologize to you now, I'm sorry I did something wrong...I don't want to lie, I shout and I shout. But I don't want to have grudges; I don't have grudges at all. And I think also with this apartheid thing I feel that there was something that happened but it's not in me. I don't know, I don't want to say I don't feel it, it is there, it is. But, I don't like having grudges. It happened then, we must proceed. Life must go on.*

This is an important part of her story that will continue to influence her motherhood and thought processes throughout this paper.

### ***Katrin***

Finally, I met with Katrin, a white woman living in Vredehoek, raising two white children, Steph (14) and Nic (17). Katrin grew up in Pretoria with her German father and Afrikaans mother. As a compromise between the two, she went to an English school and was eventually the first generation in her family to go to University, where she studied languages and then journalism. Growing up, an important tradition she shared with her family was reading with them, most likely what led to her love for books and writing. Currently a freelance writer and poet, Katrin has raised two creative children as single mother; her and her partner divorced. When talking to Katrin, I noticed an intense passion for deep thought and attentiveness to her children. Katrin spoke of the highlight of her day as the moment when she sits down for dinner with her children and they can share stories, laugh, and learn from one another. She has also thought deeply about her motherhood, while it has been difficult and stressful at times, she has learned an immense amount from her own childhood. Driving her views about both mothering and race is the way she was treated as a child,

*Katrin: I've always had a very strong sense of what was unfair and what was [not]...I was treated very unfairly, I mean, I think, by my father, you know particularly unfairly. But, that's a kind word... but also that I think that as a child I had this feeling that children were just not regarded in any way. And I felt like a complete human being with*

*all the feelings intact and there's no regard for that when you're a child. So I think I just always had this feeling of, you know, I hated being condescended to and patronized and ignored and disregarded.*

When reading her story, this connection with her childhood will be important to keep in mind.

## **Results and Analysis**

### **Influence of Mothers on Mothering**

One of the most significant observations from all interviews was the importance of one's own mother when conceptualizing motherhood. Sometimes, this was explicitly stated in interviews. Other times, the connections and comparisons were made as we spoke. Some women seemed to take directly after their mothers, not only in terms of mothering but in their approach to discussions of race with their children. Some noticed that they found their homes looking just the way their mother's had. Others made both unconscious and conscious decisions to do things differently than their parents, whether due to a negative experience or through something they had learned as they became educated adults. Regardless of the relationship with one's mother, all participants mentioned them as a source of inspiration, influence, or root cause for their own experience and decisions as mothers. Therefore, throughout each section, I will relate back statements women make about their motherhood to how they spoke about their own mothers and childhood experiences.

For example, Khwezi's relationship with her mother was influenced by the pull between the traditional and the modern, which she explains as the two cultures she walks between. Her mother, a Xhosa woman, had a very specific style of parenting, one of both support yet scolding, often fixated on the negative, and very connected to tradition. Khwezi describes her mother as connected to the Xhosa culture, in a way that sometimes limits understanding between them, especially when Khwezi wants to things in a 'white way,' as her mother describes it. There is a distance between Khwezi's vision for herself as a mother and how she perceives her mom, highlighted by the topic of discipline. When speaking of her mom, Khwezi mentions a harshness.

*Khwezi: Yeah, she's like loud. And if you do something- let's say my brother- you know she'll shout. Like, maybe or you failed a subject or whatever, she's gonna shout and tell him all the wrong things, but like, she wouldn't say, I don't know, 'maybe you'll try better next time.' Yeah, she will always choose the option of shouting first, and then afterwards be like, 'oh, ok, maybe I'll feel sorry for you.' Or, if he comes back hurt from soccer, she'll be like, 'What were YOU doing to get hurt?'*

Khwezi, on the other hand, has chosen to take a more relaxed approach to discipline, seeing discovery as a means of learning, rather than scolding.

*Khwezi: My parenting style, I think it's- I would say, it's free. We don't necessarily restrict- we let him do what he wants to do, but we're just on the sides, to guard him. Like, if he falls, I'll pick him up. And we try to say less 'no,' using the no word. So even if he picks up a knife, instead of being like 'no, don't play with that its gonna hurt you,' we'll let him experiment with it, and then we'll take it... either he's has experienced that its sharp and it cuts him and then he feels it and then we'll put it away. Now he knows how it feels. So, in that way, I would say we create space for him to experience things and expose him to as much as he would like to, but just like be on the periphery to guard him.*

There is a clear separation between the way in which Khwezi was mothered and how she chooses to mother, not as a disdain for her upbringing, but rather as a personal choice to do things differently.

Another example of childhood experiences of being mothered influencing decisions came from Katrin. Also thinking about the way she was disciplined, she decided to make a conscious choice to do things differently as a mother.

*Katrin: I think that there's possibly a strong case to be made for unconscious wishes to fix things, to make things better, to do over. To give something that you didn't have, you know to someone else...that was something that started very unconsciously and developed into a very clear, conscious, intellectual, and rational decision about how I was going to bring up my children. In retrospect I see that it fit in precisely with unconscious thoughts that had already been sewn by the fact that I was hit very severely by my father, and not just hidings, he beat me. So, I realize that, which comes back to the previous questions, whether its an ego project- you know maybe I was trying to make something right. And I feel like I did make it right actually. And that sounds like, I have no, no humility, but I do believe in a world without violence.*

Katrin's childhood gave her a very clear motivation to do things differently as a mother in some ways, but she also focused on the ways her mother mediated these hardships. Despite these differences in motherhood choices, women talked highly of their mothers, all remembering life lessons, support, care and uniqueness. All believe they had good mothers, despite that they may want to do things differently.

## Lessons of Independence & Supportive Homes

Nearly all women discussed the importance of their mother's support and lessons regarding independence for their identity and life choices. When asked what was the most important lesson mother's taught them, Khwezi, Katrin, and Sebena all discuss similar themes.

*Khwezi: The part of the thing that I've learned from her is the independence part. Like, she raised me, my sister, and my brother, without assistance from anyone. Like, on her own. And I managed to go to university and now I'm able to help her with other stuff, but like she's never wavered around trying to support us, and supporting us.*

*Sebena: I remember when I started- I think I was 18 years when I started to have a boyfriend. Yho it was a big thing, because there was lots of trees around at home and I was hiding with the boyfriend and kissing there and my grandmother came and she was shouting at me. She was, 'No. You're not allowed to do this. You are still a young girl and you are not because you are going to be pregnant!' By kissing! And, 'we don't want children at your age. You must be married and you must study, have education, before you get pregnant...' I waiting up until I was educated, up until I was married, and then I had a child.*

*Katrin: Interestingly the first thing that came into my mind was not something she taught me when I was little, it was something that she said to me, when I was, after I'd had my first child. And I was married to a man that traveled a lot, for work. And I was carrying- I was working too and it was very hard with babies, its very hard to work, you know... the thing that she said to me one day was, 'don't ever stop earning money. Don't ever stop being independent.' And she said it in a way that made me realize that she was seeing how difficult all of this was, what the temptations could be, just saying you know, well stuff work- because I really wanted to focus on the kids. I didn't want to kind of hand them over to a crèche really early; I really wanted to be a mother... But I realized afterwards that it was incredibly wise and it had insight behind it.*

It is interesting to note nuanced definitions and understandings of independence between mothers, while still noting the importance placed by all mothers on this idea. For Khwezi, independence came in the form of an education and an ability to chose her own path, later able to help her family members and mother. For Sebena, independence also came in the form of an education as well as a stable married relationship, before having children. For Katrin, independence was continuing to earn income and support herself financially, even though the 'temptations' of staying home on her husband's income were strong. All three women express independence as a crucial part of their mothering process, rather than availability towards their children, as expressed by Verduzco-Baker (2010) as a key part of the 'charmed circle' of middle-

class mothering. Being able to educate and support oneself spans age and class for mothers interviewed; not working is not an option.

### **Lessons of Race: Silencing Versus Acceptance**

Early interactions with racial identity were found to be split across racial lines for the four mothers. The two black mothers, Sebena and Khwezi, both described specific experiences of discrimination or interactions with whiteness that led to a lesson about race from their mothers. In both cases, their mother's were accepting of 'the way things were,' asking them not to question the racial status quo that existed during apartheid.

*Khwezi: I went to go visit her at work. And she was a domestic worker at the time, and she was working for a white couple. And I went with my cousins, we were waiting for her, like two of my cousins. And we were going outside, and I think one of my cousins scratched the [white employer's] car. Wow, that guy, he came out, he didn't ask any questions. He slapped every child that was there. And I was crying, and then my cousin flew one side... And afterwards, my mom just said, 'Why'd you guys scratch the umlungu's<sup>4</sup> car. 'Cuz you know how umlungu's are...' I suppose the thing was about, 'Be careful how you are around white people and their stuff. And now you guys got me into trouble.' But she's never said direct things around race. But I think she's got a general sense of respect around white people, which is an old kind of, an old generation kind of respect in the way they see white people.*

*Sebena: But what happened one time when we were together, yeah we were taking train. Then, she said, "No, no, you are not allowed to go in this carriage, because its for the whites." But we were asking her, 'why whites?' 'No we can't sit together because they are superior to us. We are in a lower thing.' 'Why because we are the same.' 'No no, we can't. It is like that. You can't ask, you can't argue.' And I think with the older, like my grandmother, she accepted that. She told herself that it is like this then there is no change, there is nothing that we can change in this... She didn't want us to question it, not at all...I think she was too scared. Or she wanted peace peace peace all the time whereas there's no need for that.*

Both black mothers experience racial violence and discrimination, from a horrifying slap in the face, to a lesson about being lesser. These two explicit experiences of overt, violent racism should be contrasted with less explicit interactions with race for Elizabeth and Katrin.

For both white mothers interviewed, interactions with race were frequent, yet less explicitly brought up by parents. In both stories, there exists a tension surrounding whiteness and apartheid. For Elizabeth, whose father was in the ANC, interactions with different races were

---

<sup>4</sup> *Umlungu*: isiXhosa for a white person

much more frequent. However, there existed a necessary silence about these interactions, due to the banning of the ANC and the illegality of such relationships.

*Elizabeth: You don't mention that we went to the township... you're not sworn to secrecy by your parents but you're told like, its not a good idea to talk about it...I just remember dinner time, if my dad was late, we were all sitting there waiting. Just my mom was like, 'no one's gonna eat; we're just gonna sit here.' And we would just sit there. And you get really stressed. So, it wasn't just this sense of silencing, like overt silencing, but the sense of an ominous presence. So, what seemed normal to me I knew was not normal to other people. And, there was a sense of we are not living in safe times.*

While relationships were formed with people of different races, Elizabeth could sense that these relationships were not normal for a white family. From our conversation, I observed that lessons about race may have been associated with fear and stress, a certain danger involved and thus a necessity to be silent about race as a child.

Silences also defined Katrin's racial upbringing, but quite differently. When I asked Katrin if her parents taught her about race, she responded,

*Katrin: Not a thing. Not- she didn't- we never spoke about it directly, which does not mean that race didn't come up because I was white and I lived in South Africa. And the only way in which race ever came into my realm, into my life was through the- never kind, never good, never pleasant things that were said in my family about people who were black..., and my parents would make comments that were racist or judgmental. And I remember always being a little bit startled because it was something that I had never thought about before.*

Here, race came up in family discussions in purely negative comments, never a lesson about what race was or how it defined social life. Silences existed in the absence of an explanation for these comments, leading to discomfort for Katrin as a child.

All accounts reflect a racial tension, whether explicit or implied. Parents, a namely mothers, made it clear that race was an issue around which there was social unease and unrest, something to be avoided or afraid of. From a young age, all mothers were aware that there was an ominous presence, something that was not right; there was something to fear. Whether it was an interaction with discrimination or a silencing, these lessons mean something for their motherhood today. The two explicit experiences of overt, violent racism fuel lessons of race for children. The two black mothers interviewed each shared distinct and harmful interactions with their race at a young age. However, the white mothers, while still recognizing racial discrimination, lacked direct experiences with such racism. This influences each approach to

teaching children about race. For white mothers, there seems to be a lot of fear surrounding race and their children, as I will explain later. For black mothers, there seems to be an emphasis on positive reinforcement and moving forward, far from past experiences of violent racism. Perhaps this fear from the white women stems from the unknown, the knowledge that racism is there but the lack of personal experience to impart on children. Perhaps black mothers take a less fearful approach to race as they have the tools to help their children navigate and avoid those experiences.

### ***“I’m a mother to everybody”*: Community Mothering from Childhood to Adulthood**

When asked who they are a mother to, both Katrin and Elizabeth mentioned the names of their biological and adopted children, respectively. Conceptions of motherhood amongst these two women were familial and centralized to one’s immediate family. However, for Sebena and Khwezi, motherhood extended beyond the immediate family. Their answers to that question sounded more like,

*Khwezi: I’m a mother to so many people... So, I’m a mother to the Education Academy<sup>5</sup> kids, so that’s like 65 kids, 65 young people. I’m a mother to my sister and my brother, and sometimes I feel like I’m a mother to my mother.*

*Sebena: Ah, I’m a mother to everybody.*

These sentiments reflect the current literature on black community mothering or ‘othermothering’ as explained by Edwards (2000), Moore (2013), and McDonald (1997). For black mothers, conceptions of motherhood seem to extend beyond the home; motherhood involves interactions with children in the community, extended family, and all those who need care. The survival of the black community seems to rest on the work of black community mothers, such as Khwezi leading 65 local young people, who she considers her children. towards their education and goals.

The roots of this mothering style seem to come from childhood; both Khwezi and Sebena grew up in large homes, their mother and grandmother constantly caring for other family members and children.

*Khwezi: I get this sense of caring about people from [my mother]. Like, since I’ve been probably from the age of like 8, 7 years old, I don’t remember not having another family*

---

<sup>5</sup> Pseudonym applied

*member live in our house. At one point I remember, we only had a three-quarter bed, and there'd be six people sleeping in that bed. And there'd be different people coming in and out of our house, and she's just like been supportive... It was just another way of showing me, even if I don't have any money, I don't have to be rich to be able to help people. I can still do it. It's not only moment, but it's the resources that you have in the moment that you help them.*

Khwezi remembers many moments like these throughout our interview where her mother extended her motherhood beyond her three children. Interestingly, Khwezi points out the lack of material resources necessary to extend motherhood in this way, perhaps differently than the resources she uses to mother her son. And now, Khwezi finds her home looking similar to her mother's.

*Khwezi: But like now, I'm thinking about it, we've also never just been on our own with our child. There's always been someone else. And they've been with us because we're helping them in one way or another... And we started a non-profit organization and now we've got like sixty kids that depend on us.*

In a similar way, Sebena's taken on the role of mother for many others in her family, including the children of her cousins and mothering the child of her son after his mother moved away.

### **“You become a rock”: Conceptions of good motherhood**

Mothers all had unique answers when asked what it meant to be a good mother, many involving access to resources in either material, temporal, or personal forms. For Sebena, time spent caring for the child and providing for him was most important to being a good mother. Often times she would spend all her hours home from work cooking dinner, bathing the child, washing nappies and clothing, and so on, without help from her partner. While she had to work, being the one that attended to him whenever possible was what it meant for her to be a good mother.

*Sebena: I was always with my child when he was small. I was- also I was working and looking after the child... Then I went to stay with my husband but I was bringing my child every morning here to my mother, to look after, because she was coming from work, she was staying with the child then I would go to work... I didn't want my mother to do anything except looking and feeding. I will cook food; I didn't even want to have the Puriteen<sup>6</sup> and stuff like that, no. I told myself I was not raised with that, it's vegetables. So, I was reading and singing for the child. And, I don't know, I think there was that bond*

---

<sup>6</sup> *Puriteen*: Probiotic supplement for children

*between me and the child. Because I didn't want my mother to raise my child, didn't want because I was raised by my grandmother.*

Sebena's reasoning for spending this time with her child and being the one to provide him with the resources, was that she did not want him to be raised by anyone else. Finding it painful to be raised by her grandmother and other family members, it is important to Sebena that a child is raised by their own parents and to have a bond with their own mother. A good mother is physically there for her child. However, it is clear that the need to work and earn income made this a difficult balance for Sebena when her child was young.

Sebena also expressed a need for a mother to hide emotionality, in order to be strong for her children. Growing up, her grandmother always spoke in kind, peaceful words, despite verbal abuse from Sebena's grandfather and intense struggle for resources. Sebena, also feeling the stresses of single motherhood and a not-present husband, carried this ideal of silencing her own pain to benefit her child.

*Sebena: When you are a mother you- I think really, you become a rock. Sometimes there are things that you pretend you don't feel them, the pains that you pretend as if you don't feel them. You want to be strong for your child. You don't want to break before your child is there and is educated... Because even when I see him [ex-husband] with this girlfriend then it was hurting me; sometimes I will see him with the girlfriend while I was with Thabiso driving. Then I will see them. Then I will have tears in my eyes, but I don't want to show Thabiso that there is something. And he will say, "there's my father! There's my father!" I say, 'No, no. He's going to come to us. He is coming. Don't worry; he is going to come.'*

For Katrin, a close interpersonal bond with her child was also important to being a good mother, including responding to their needs as they arose and being in tune with their emotional state.

*Katrin: Attentiveness. Real attentiveness means that you are able to see the child that you are looking after- whether its because you adopted them or gave birth to them, as a person, in their own rights, with their own particular makeup, and personality, and drives, and desires, and needs, and secrets.*

Both the similarities and contrasts between Sebena and Katrin reflect current literature on conceptions of good motherhood. Sebena's focus seems to be on providing for her child with food, clothing, and adequate space by working full-time. While this is important for Katrin, her highlight is on attentiveness of her child, the same 'intensive mothering' discussed by Brown (2011). This intensive mothering appears to be informed mainly by class in this scenario. Sebena

must spend more time working and thus less time directly interacting with her child, thus she emphasizes devotion, sacrifice, and responsibility as defining good motherhood (Verduzco-Baker, 2010). For Katrin, the ability to financially provide for her children seems to lead to definitions of motherhood that are more focused around attentiveness and being the central caregiver (Brown, 2011). For both, however, neglecting one's own emotional state is a key narrative; both felt as though their needs, emotional and physical, must be put aside for the care and emotional well-being of the child.

### **Pressures of (Single) Motherhood**

Clear from all interviews was the intense pressure that all mothers were under to do the best for their child, often with little assistance from a partner, and some without familial support. From the sleepless nights during the infant years, to the pressures of divorce, sons in prison, or lack of resources, motherhood is an intense and difficult job. All mothers spoke of the times in which they were overwhelmed, outnumbered, and under pressure in different ways.

*Khwezi: I'm sure particularly in our culture, because the mother is seen as the primary caretaker. So, for example, every weekend he goes to Khayelitsha, and regardless of who take him to Khayelitsha, my mom's gonna talk to me. Lindo brought him, maybe he's the one that didn't brush his hair? Why can't he take responsibility?...And its probably going to take a bit of time that everyone takes the responsibility of how kids turn out, because if the kids not disciplined they'll just be like, 'yeah, its because him mom has been soft with him.'*

*Sebena: to raise a child, is another thing. Its so- its too much. I think it was too much for me because there were lots of children around me and I've got my cousin's children that I was looking after. So, its- my life- I think it was- it went up and down. I think its just, it was a struggle then ok, struggle and ok. But, what I can say, I'm surviving?*

*Katrin: So, if they were crying I try to figure out what was wrong with them and respond. Ok, so its not because I was so clever, its just because it was the thing that worked best for getting me to be able to cope, because I was really a nervous mother. I was a wreck at times and I wasn't sleeping enough and so on.*

*Elizabeth: So at the moment being a good mother is about making sure I have the resources to cope, because I'm kind of out of my depth with two. Parenting without relief is quite hard. So, for me, good parenting at the moment is about making sure there's backup.*

These struggles are magnified for Elizabeth, Sebena, and Katrin who all identify as single mothers. For example, Elizabeth with two adopted children, often mentions being 'outnumbered'

and requiring backup resources. Sebena also discusses the intense pressures of single mothering, often placing blame on herself for her son's behavior and eventual road to prison.

*Sebena: So I think, there is no formula in raising childrens. It's really- I don't know what to say. Sometimes I want to blame myself because of that what I did that let him to go to his father. But also, I wanted his father to have his role... I blame myself because if maybe, I think, if he was with me, staying with me, now he should have been a lawyer, because he wanted to be a lawyer.*

The stresses expressed by all mothers both contribute to and complicate Brown's (2011) concept of maternal ambivalence. For Sebena, the struggles of single motherhood led to feelings of guilt about how she was raising her child and for the person he became. She places an immense amount of blame on herself for what she feels she was not able to provide for him, despite the endless hours she spent caring for him. This mirrors Brown's (2011) conclusions of working-class women's conflictions between providing for their child and physically being there. For Katrin, stresses of motherhood led to guilt about bringing innocent children into a stressful and potentially violent society, one that they don't deserve. Her narrative complicates Brown (2011) as she expresses a guilt for bringing children into the world, but her confliction is not fueled by her working status but rather her own stress as a mother. Maternal ambivalence seems to take various forms, highly dependent on context.

Overall, there is an expression of relative responsibility of mothers compared to fathers from all interviewees, speaking to the way in which parenting is still largely experienced as a singular burden on women. Perhaps at times, many women may feel like single mothers, despite their relationship status.

### ***"I was a mother at the age of nine": Visions of Motherhood from a Young Age***

All four women mentioned personal experiences of motherhood from a young age, or ideas they had of themselves as mothers from childhood. Again, these were heavily reflective of the household in which they grew up. For Sebena, experiences in the 22-person household gave her an intimate idea of motherhood at an early age.

*Sebena: And I started very early also to cook; at the age of 9 I was cooking. I was cleaning and also there was my auntie who had two children and she left them. Then I had to look after those children and I was the only one who was busy carrying and then after school I had to take them on my back and put them on my back and feed and clean and bathe or everything...I didn't see it when I was doing it; I didn't feel anything. But I*

*only felt that it was not nice, it was not a good thing. I was a mother at the age of nine. Then it was really- I felt so bad. And even now, I don't want children who are taking care of the children. It make me sad, really.*

Because of the overwhelming size of the household and the lack of aid given by her grandfather, Sebena and the older girls of the household had to pitch in and help care for the children, cook meals, and so on, perhaps leading to her feeling like she missed out on a childhood. Sebena expresses a type of invisible mothering, one that she did not notice until she looked back on her experiences, realizing a motherhood that was not explicitly named a such. Thus, her youth influenced the way she envisioned herself as a mother in the future. Perhaps this fear of having children raise children as she did, leads to her desire to help raise her son's child, instead of her young son raising a child without help.

*Sebena: Yes I wanted [to be a mother]. But, I wanted to be a mother of one. But, with me, I think I wanted to have, not to adopt as such, to have children, to have a home for children, that doesn't have homes, like doesn't have parents. I think when I started to be a teacher, it was ok because it was nice, I had that. I was a mother of forty-something children in my class, then I was feeling good. Then when I stopped teaching, then I was lonely. Then there was a gap. Then also what I did, I collected the children around in the area... I had books, so they were using all this and I was helping with homeworks...like it was a school.*

Her interactions with motherhood from a young age gave her a clear vision of the life she wanted for her child, one in which he would know and interact with his mother and would not have to bear the responsibilities of adulthood as a child.

For Khwezi, seeing the strength in her own single mother made the question of a partner less relevant to her childhood visions of motherhood. When asked if she always wanted to be a mother, she explained,

*Khwezi: Yes. But the strange part, is that I always thought that I would be a single mother. And I think it's probably because I saw that my mom could do it on her own. And I thought that's the only way, or it's even the best way...I always envisioned myself being a single mom and not with a partner. I think its probably because how I grew up without a father, and I kind of knew how my mom- I mean she was hurt by what my dad had done to her, but also how like he wasn't- like we keep in touch now- but like he wasn't present. He wasn't present in any father role. And I didn't see that as an obstacle.*

Although she did end up becoming married to a husband who she describes as very supportive and hands-on, her conceptions of motherhood did not rely on this male figure. Khwezi and Sebena differ in the ways their childhood influenced their visions of motherhood. For Khwezi,

seeing her mother handle single-motherhood of three children created a vision that this was possible and realistic for her to strive for. For Sebena, seeing her grandmother struggle without assistance from her grandfather was crucial in envisioning herself as a mother of one child, who she wanted to have enough space and attention to live in a way she was not able to.

For Katrin and Elizabeth, specific visions of motherhood were seemingly always present, but perhaps less concretely explainable. Katrin speaks about a lack of personal exposure to babies when she was younger and an absence of any ‘baby fantasies,’ yet somehow “*I kind of always knew what I wanted to do was be a mother.*” Similarly, Elizabeth always knew she wanted to adopt, from the age of 11 or 12. Her drive to adopt, however, also seems unexplainable, she describes her confusion surrounding biological children, “*I’ve never like wanted my own kids. Like its never occurred to me that that’s- I mean biological. I actually sometimes find it a bit weird like, this sort of obsession...But I always wanted to be a parent.*” It is interesting to note the ways that all mothers envisioned motherhood differently, yet the bond that they all share was a seemingly innate vision of themselves as mothers one day. These visions of motherhood also express an absence of Brown’s (2011) maternal ambivalence. Ambivalence, guilt, and loneliness are not expressed in pictures of motherhood in the future.

### **Teaching Children about Race: Importance of History**

Interactions with race during childhood, as well as reflections on how they were taught about race, influenced mothers when making decisions on how to approach the subject with their children. For Khwezi and Elizabeth, representation was an important factor in teaching their children about their blackness. The goal of representation is to use exposure with TV shows, toys, and books with black children in them to reinforce positive identity characteristics with blackness, rather than perpetuating forced internalized oppression.

*Khwezi: I was aware at a very young age that the world showed me white people... the other program that he watches, its not really race dominant, its got- the lead kid is a black kid and then its like cars, talking cars or dogs. So that’s cool, its remained race neutral, but then also the lead character...So, we’re also conscious that he has to see himself in the things we expose him to. And we would like him to like speak two languages. So, I speak isiXhosa to him; its very important that he doesn’t only speak English, just because that’s the language you need to know in the world to survive, especially in South Africa. So, consciously, I speak isiXhosa to him... we’ve just decided to like come together and form an isiXhosa playgroup. So in the playgroup then it’ll be only isiXhosa and that way they can immerse themselves into the language.*

*Elizabeth: [My mom] bought some outfits for my girls and one of them was this little, had a little white girl on the front. And I was like, 'Mom I'm never gonna let her wear that. I don't dress my kids in white children...' So, yeah, so there's issues of representation that I take quite seriously, Like, the dolls, I just. If we're given- we've got one white doll, little red head, and yeah, all of the others are animals or children of color imitations. And, yeah, I think that's really important. And the library is stacked full of books, with representation being critical.*

For both of these moms, it was important for their children to see themselves in a world that wasn't just white; for Khwezi it was due to the influence of whiteness throughout her life from a young age. For Elizabeth, it seemed to stem from wanting her children to tap into their blackness, despite the fact that she is white. The exposure approach requires access to materials such as books, the ability to choose what clothing a child wears, and so on. Naturally, it is informed by class and the opportunity for mothers to spend time and money preparing the material resources necessary to expose their child to black media.

Positive black role models were also crucial aspects of racial transmission imparted by Khwezi and Elizabeth. Khwezi spoke of teaching her son about important historical figures, such as Mandela, empowering her son through that history.

*Khwezi: I'll say to him, 'You are black. It means you have greatness within you. You are a descendent of amazing men like Nelson Mandela, like Malcom X, like Kunta Kinte.' And I'll say- I'll do the basic thing of like positive reinforcement, that it doesn't mean he's less of anything. And that he can still be- like it doesn't mean nothing. Its just the color of your skin... The only person that he needs to compare himself with is himself. So, the color of his skin won't determine his destiny.*

Historical context is an important consideration for Elizabeth as well, but with the added challenge of explaining the racial differences between her and her children. To impart a sense of positive blackness, Elizabeth has chosen two black women to act as mentors for her girls. Interestingly, the women she chose represent what she describes as a 'French Blackness,' or a marginal blackness. For example, one mentor is a Zimbabwean black woman, married to a white man. Her intentions behind these mentors are to give her children positive black role models who also understand being on the periphery of mainstream Capetonian blackness. Elizabeth also teaches her girls about the history of a family such as theirs in South Africa, wanting them to understand not only why they may face stigma, but also that their family would not have been able to exist safely in the past. One particular lesson stands out,

*Elizabeth: I've told her things like, in the old days our family wouldn't be allowed to all live together and there were times where everyone had to live in their separate, like just get the crayon box and be like, 'see these blue crayons, they'd have to live in that section, and these orange crayons would have to live here, and you can't have them all together.' And she'd be like, 'why? What if we just put them in the box?' And we'd be like, 'Wow. In the old days you could never just mix them up.'*

Lessons such as these enforce the importance of children understanding the racialized history of South Africa, but also mark the importance of viewing oneself in a positive light despite these obstacles that may seem absurd to a child.

For Sebena and Katrin, topics of race came up in less planned ways, yet nonetheless emphasized honest historical explanations in their approaches to race. Due to Sebena's approach to conflict and grudges, as explained in her introduction, she used a very similar style when teaching her kids about race. Despite the racial histories, Sebena feels as though her children should not have to face the obstacles she and older generations went through, that they should have an honest understanding about the history, but know that things are different now.

*Sebena: What happened past, they need to know. I want them to know there was this past, but the past it must not affect them. The past already affected their parents and their great grandparents. But I don't think this is going to affect them. They must know that there was this but they must leave it to the elders or, they must know it's a history that this is what happened.*

Sebena's reasoning for this approach was that she did not want the burdens of the past to affect the lives of her children, for whom she strove to create a positive and loving environment.

Katrin's approach was based on moments of explanation, allowing her children to raise questions about race and identity, and answering them honestly as they arrived. Interestingly, she also took a historical approach to questions, noting the ways in which apartheid left legacies on social conditions.

*Katrin: I think Nic came home one day and said that [his friend's mother and her friend] had been in the same war together. And then he said to me, 'What war are they talking about?' And then I explained to him about the ANC<sup>7</sup> and the armed struggle<sup>8</sup> and all of that sort of thing. So I remember talking about those things, it's kind of came quite easily into our life, but more historical rather than social... It wasn't like a question of, you know, why does this person do this or why does this person look like that? That sort of stuff was, didn't occur to them, it was more historical things. Like, why are black people*

---

<sup>7</sup> ANC: African National Congress

<sup>8</sup> Struggle for independence from the oppressive apartheid regime, ending in 1994

*always walking, you never see white people walking, why is that? So that's like a whole interesting conversation about urban design and the way in which apartheid in such a way to keep black people out, and so on.*

It was unclear if she felt this needed to be left in the past and not affect her kids, like Sebena. Katrin's reasoning for this approach was that the subject of race should not be broached unnecessarily, as children should form their own understanding of the world without her influence.

As expressed earlier, experiences surrounding race as a child may influence the way mothers approach race with their own children. For Sebena, violent and stark interactions with racism as a child may lead to her desire not to burden her own children with this fear. She has seen what racial violence could look like and feel like, perhaps feeling that the worst has already happened, and that it is better to focus on moving forward with her children. This contradicts Weingarten (2004) who theorizes that mothers who have experienced violent racism may be unable to share narratives of their trauma and thus lead to silences or coldness with their children. This is not expressed by Sebena, who chooses to speak of her history, but as something that has happened in the past to move forward from.

For Katrin, not having direct experiences with racism, there exists a fear for her children that reflects a tension from childhood. Perhaps it becomes easier for her to address the topic as it arises, rather than creating the ominous presence of race that seemed to always exist in her childhood. Lessons instead surround respectful interactions with all races and politeness.

There is also a potential shift here due to generational differences. The mass media culture we exist in now may lead to media exposure as a key form of approach for young mothers in lessons about race, that did not exist for an older generation such as Sebena's.

### **Teaching Kids About Race: Importance of Positive Interracial Relationships**

For Elizabeth and Katrin, a key aspect of their mothering surrounding race involved enforcing positive and polite interactions with different races, namely that their children treat people of color with respect. Katrin, while she avoids many rules about the world, made it a point to stress the humanness of all people with her children.

*Katrin: I did have rules about that- you know, you can never be unkind and speak rudely to anybody, it doesn't matter who they are... I know its preconceived ideas about lessons that I needed to transfer in terms of what I would see as bigotry or- I'm not putting that*

*very well. I didn't have- I didn't feel I had dogma to convey to them. I didn't have these ideas about, you know, only men and women have sex and they only have sex after marriage. Or, you know, black people are equal but white people or more intelligent- I had none of those sorts of things. My whole approach, my whole way of being has always been, very, we're all human and we all mess up and the most important thing is to just do the right thing and be kind and good.*

For Elizabeth, enforcing these positive relationships stemmed from a desire for her girls to understand Xhosa respectability norms as well as to be able to tap into their black community. Elizabeth works on respectability with Zodwa's relationship with their nanny, asking her to call her Aunti out of respect, as well as wanting her to learn Xhosa enough that she can respond politely to Xhosa people who ask her questions.

*Elizabeth: I think one of the insidious vestiges of apartheid is speaking down- is class now. Like, speaking down to nannies and in a lot of white families, the kids don't see the colleagues because they're at work and unless their friends who are of other races, they might just be in a white family, white extended family, white friends, white neighbors come 'round. And the only black people they see are helpers, or the guy that fixes the washing machine, or whatever. So, I think that being in a multiracial society is not enough. You still have to make sure that those power relations are explained. So, I think that is where I'm at with my four-year-old.*

Again, lessons from a tense childhood fuel rules about politeness and respectful interactions with black people from white mothers. There is perhaps a form of reparation here, to make up for interactions during childhood or lessons learned from their mothers about blackness.

### **“We're the educated blacks”: Importance of education on racial transmission**

Khwezi's approach to race as a mother is very different from the acceptance of racial discrimination that her mother holds. She explains this difference in terms of her education status.

*Khwezi: We're the educated blacks. We read. So, its like, you can't take these things for granted. Well, we don't... I suppose the difference between [my mother's] generation and my generation is that we have received better opportunities than they have so, I finished university, she didn't reach Matric. So, I'm more able to read information now and make my own choices. And I'm more able to observe cultural practices that I know of, and question them. But she's still at a point of, she doesn't question them. Because she doesn't know anything else, beside that.*

Rather than critiquing her mother's approach, Khwezi understands their difference in terms of her own exposure to racial theory and consciousness as a result of the educational opportunities

she has been afforded. This speaks to the different eras in which mothers have to raise their children, an especially important difference for black mothers. For Khwezi's mother, assuaging whiteness may have felt like the only option, but for Khwezi approaching blackness head on becomes more important. This may also be explained by the imminent threat of white violence experienced by Khwezi's mother and that Khwezi saw firsthand when visiting her mother at work. The ways in which apartheid has influenced black mothering in particular should be further explored.

The ability to self-educate was crucial for Elizabeth, consciously and constantly trying to understand the ways race interacts between her and her children.

*Elizabeth: In terms of dealing with race as a mom, I feel like the best I can offer is consciously educating myself in an on going way, and consciously seeking out- I mean I consciously seek out men as well, because they don't have dads... But, I don't aspire to sort of mainstream black identity for them. I don't think its accessible. So, maybe its- yeah. Its gonna be an embattled identity.*

To do so, Elizabeth must spend time coming to terms with her own whiteness, the segregation she experienced as a child, and how the racial lines between her and her children need to be walked carefully. To do so, Elizabeth utilizes platforms such as a Facebook forum called *Not Just Hair*, which acts as a space for adopters to understand the ways in which hair and race interact with identity and care. This requires time, attention, and intentionality. Similar to Katrin, lessons of basic respect and decency exist for Elizabeth, however there is a specific concern for black children expressed by Elizabeth that perhaps Katrin does not need to consider when raising white children.

### **Fear for Children**

Something that I did not expect to uncover were latent motivations for the way mothers teach about race. I merely aimed to observe how lessons were taught and perhaps how that was influenced by one's own racial upbringing. However, one solid reasoning stimulated lessons of race for many mothers: fear for one's child. For instance, promoting a positive Xhosa identity for her girls and positive relationships with other black people was not only for empowerment and respect, but also safety for Elizabeth.

*Elizabeth: It's actually a safety issue, even at her age. I really feel like she needs to learn that it's not fine to be rude... if she were being bullied at school, for example, presumably*

*by white kids, who is she gonna turn to? If she's been rude to the janitor who's black, can she call on him? Like, maybe she can, maybe she can't. So, I want her to see that there's community but that she must tap in, and that she can't assume that community is there.*

Ensuring that her daughter can safely navigate her blackness is important for Elizabeth, especially as a white adopter, which will influence Zodwa and Celiwe's relationship with blackness.

Interestingly, safety also became an issue for Katrin, as her daughter, Steph, began dating a black woman. Asked by her friends how she felt about the situation, Katrin tried to examine her biases, asking herself if there was really anything that made her uncomfortable. She couldn't uncover anything until one day when she drove past the girls holding hands on their way home from school.

*Katrin: And I suddenly realized, like something pulled in my stomach and I thought well, fuck... And I realized the thing that had made me feel like that was because I was fearful, not for any reason other than that these two, little girls, had no idea about the world that they live in. I feel so emotional talking about this. They're so completely involved with this idea of having a girlfriend, of having a partner a loved one, of exploring this latent desire to be partnered, that they had no idea the world that they were walking in, in uniform, a black girl and a white girl walking down the street holding hands... I don't know if I must talk to her because I don't want her to become afraid. I don't want to transfer my fear onto her. But, I want her to be safe and I want her to be aware that by doing this completely harmless and innocent thing, that they were making a radical statement in a white suburb in Cape Town in 2016, and that they can't be unaware of the statement they're making.*

Interestingly, fear is specifically addressed by white mothers and surrounding black children. There is a fear and expectation of possible racial violence that black children may experience, thus needed allies, or black friends of white children. For white mothers, racial violence is again this presence that they have not encountered intimately, but that from childhood they know exists.

### **Photography Reflections and Observations**

Sitting down to talk with mothers can give a wealth of information, of historical background, of rich family stories. I was able to listen to the ways mothers theorize about motherhood from a very young age and pick up on what was important to them. I could compare and contrast their oral histories. However, the photography gave the topic something different. Photographs were controlled completely by the mother and were very distinct between each

mother. Photographs were able to show day-to-day patterns, the intricacy and nuance of the seemingly mundane, and the ways in which one's childhood continues to affect experiences of motherhood.

One of my main observations about reflections on the photography was the focus on the children, and the absence of mom in all the photos. One interesting insight given by Elizabeth in her final reflection was that to photograph motherhood is to photograph children. Mothers were often not in the frame, which may be telling about the often selfless nature of motherhood. The absence of documentation of mothers can be connected to the tendency for mother's emotional labor to remain undefined, unexplained, and unrecorded work. Emotional labor is defined as the labor involved with dealing with other people's feelings and can exist within the home or in the workplace in more formal settings such as a hospital. However, since women often carry the burden of the emotional labor of the home, including dealing with children and maintaining a household, the work is often unseen or considered unskilled labor (James, 1989). This unseen work is evident in the lack of mothers within photographs, and also narratives given by mothers of the work they do that is often unseen by outsiders, sometimes not even recognized by themselves.

Each woman focused on distinct themes and moments in their photography. For Elizabeth, photos surrounded the chores of motherhood, moments of bonding between her and her children, and moments in which she was proud of the work she had done as a mother. She speaks of one photo in particular that stands out, one of her daughter admiring and checking herself out in the mirror.

*Elizabeth: She will stand for hours checking herself out, dancing in the mirror, watching her body, so yeah, so far it looks like she has excellent body positivity which is like my main aim in life so I'm really pleased about that... Then there is that proud mom moment where I'm photographing her looking at herself and she's having a moment of self-love and in that moment and in that moment she's raced because I've worked for that.*

Moments of pride in both oneself and one's child are key elements to Elizabeth's photography. She also reflected on the convenience of taking photos of things like children not eating, which encompass her daily life and exist regardless of race. Finally, she highlighted the effort she took to include herself in photographs, often not easy.

Pride was also an important thread throughout Katrin's photos. Katrin reflected on the process of watching her teenagers grow into their own people and letting go as a mother. Many

of her photographs show children arriving at home or rushing out of the house, highlighting a daily ritual of letting go for Katrin,

*Katrin: But the interesting thing was that most of the pictures of them are of the comings and goings, which is such an integral part of teenage-hood and such an important part of the mother's process of letting go. So it was enormously interesting for me to reflect on that...on all our partings and comings together every week, and how the times with them gone, as opposed to them here, are increasing almost daily now... I may have been tempted to attempt pictures beyond the mundane, pictures more alluring and interesting, but again, I found the prosaic nature of our comings and goings, our rushing around, symbolic of this time in our lives.*

This focus on the importance of the seemingly mundane arises in many mother's photographs, the daily, simple interactions with children are the often the most important part of a mother's day.

For Sebena, most photos surrounded moments of reflection on her own life as a mother and childhood experiences with being mothered. Often her photos center around moments where she felt unfairly burdened as a child, leading to efforts to raise her children differently. For example, a photo of a child carrying another baby reminded her of the times she had to do this as a child and the effort she made to never let her children raise other children. Her photos also encompass a lot of pain, moments where she felt she was to blame for the decisions she made for her child.

*Sebena: There was also a picture of- it's a puzzle... it was not a puzzle as such but the way it is the card, its like a puzzle... as if now there was something missing. Because here was one puzzle that was not there. It was not attached and it shows the empty space... I always sometimes feel like I didn't do good. I don't know, like that puzzle disturbed me because I said there's sometime missing that I didn't do.*

Another moment photographed included a child separated from their parents, representing the ways in which her son was left out of the conversations and decisions she made with her ex-husband in the past. Like other mothers, Sebena's photos encompass a day-to-day interaction with motherhood, but also a constant reflection on pain and struggle.

### **Self-Reflexivity**

Again, my identity influences my analysis and interpretation of these results. The research process of Western feminists tends to interpret the lives and oppression of international people and of 'third-world women' with a colonizing lens. Mohanty (1988) states that Western

feminists tend to homogenize the experiences and oppressions of third world women, thus colonizing the “fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races, and castes in these countries” (p. 335). Therefore, as a feminist researcher from the United States, it is important to recognize how I may have done this in my analysis.

First, my analysis of these four women must be seen as an account of four participant’s perceptions and experiences of motherhood and racial identity. It is not a conclusion about the situation or experience of South African women as a whole, or even of women of different racial groups as a whole. To assume so would be to focus on structure without relaying individual political impact on women (Mohanty, 1988). The information I received also may have been biased based on the questions I chose to ask. For example, phrasing a question like, “how were you taught about race?” assumes that someone *was* taught about race. Therefore, answers may have been edited to fit what participants thought I wanted to hear as a researcher discussing issues of race.

### **Conclusions**

Overall, interviews and photovoice revealed key themes of motherhood and racial identity. A common thread throughout narratives were the differences in mothering black and white children, mostly due to mothers’ early childhood interactions with race. White mothers expressed a fear of racial violence and discrimination, but always surrounding black children. Thus, lessons of race from white mothers stressed positive interracial interactions as a means of both respect and safety for their children. I argue that this stems from the ominous presence of race during their childhood, yet a lack of personal accounts to share with children. Black mothers more often stressed that history was in the past and instead focused on positive black role models for children or the idea of moving forward. I argue that this is due to close interactions with racial violence in their past that have led to a feeling of security in teaching their children how to deal with these interactions they may encounter.

Class and education was also a key influence in the way mother’s envisioned themselves as mothers and taught about race. Mothers with access to material goods often stressed attentiveness to their children as a form of good motherhood, and also advocated for their child’s exposure to shows with black children, black dolls, and so on. Working-class mothers more often

stressed the importance of working to provide for one's child as what it meant to be a good mother. All mothers highlighted the importance of remaining independent, even as mothers; educational attainment and working for one's own money was often placed at a higher importance than physically being there for one's child at all hours.

This study has been a personal journey. It has shown me that motherhood exists as a microcosm of one's entire life story, a manifestation of the lessons learned throughout childhood. The family arises as the primary source of racial socialization and one's racial identity is bound up in relationships to mothers and mother figures. Mothering work is informed by one's identity and life story, and it's a hell of a lot of physical and emotional labor. Hearing my story in the words of many mothers, I saw the ways in which my own racial identity is a product of the way my mother spoke about race and ethnicity with my brother and I as children. Her strong connection to her Italian ethnicity was stressed over our whiteness, leading to a somewhat complicated relationship with my racial identity. A desire to value my Italian side fueled a denial of whiteness for most of my life. Very few interactions with people of color throughout my childhood and overall exposure to whiteness influences my relationships with people of color and my current racial consciousness journey. This study has allowed me to complicate my own racial upbringing while also validating my mother's endless emotional and physical work, seeing her in the context of her whole life story and the demands placed on her by the institution of motherhood as a whole. Looking towards the future, if I so choose to become a mother, I will be constantly evaluating my role in the context of these identities and the identity of my children, whatever race they may be.

### **Recommendations for further study**

Various topics of motherhood arose within interviews and during final reflections that warrant further study. I could not go deeply into every complexity or musing mothers had, but there is potential for more research in a few areas. For a few women, the topic on how to raise their male children to treat women respectfully arose. South Africa, while not the 'rape capital of the world,' as it is often named, still has an extremely high levels of sexual assault and rape (Africa Check, 2016). With mothers often feeling the pressure to teach their sons how to respect women, it is understandable that mothers would be questioning how to approach this topic best. Raising the next generation of men in a country with a historical and humanitarian endemic of

violence is an immense challenge. Ndluvo (2015) explains her challenge as a black mother raising sons, trying to reflect on them multiple facets of masculinity and a questioning attitude towards patriarchal structures. Research that explores how South African mothers of male children approach and tackle these subjects is important to study. It will also be important to explore the ways in which mothers put pressures on themselves or blame themselves for children that do not grow up following this respectability.

In our final reflection interview, Elizabeth brought up differences she saw in the way she mothered and how her nanny acted as a mother to her children. In the South African context, childcare is such an integral part of the mothering experience, not only with nannies but also with many children being raised by various family members, namely grandmothers. Future research may explore the ways mothers interact and collaborate with nannies, especially single mothers. Future research may also explore the relationship between mothering and grand-mothering when it comes to transmitting racial identity.

This study also highlights the need to understand how apartheid has shifted the way mothering is enacted in different race groups, specifically how apartheid has created shifts in black motherhood. How has experiences with violent political racism affected the ways mothers choose to teach black children about the meaning of their blackness? As children grow up in the new Democracy, it becomes increasingly important to understand the ways in which they come to terms with their racial identity differently today than in the past.

Finally, future research can be done on the way mothers and motherhood are represented in photography and documentation of a child's life. As Elizabeth notes, mothers are often the documenters and thus absent from photos. Edwards (2017) writes about the need for visibility of women in photos of parenting. Often fathers with their children encompass photos, rather than placing the mother as an important subject in a child's upbringing. Edwards (2017) argues that "in a culture like ours, dominated by the image, photography is a way to demonstrate that women and women's lives are worth documenting just as much as men's. By excluding women from this culture, we give the impression that dad is the important one and mum is barely worth noticing" (Edwards, 2017). Future research may examine the ways in which photography and documentation interact with mothering.

## Bibliography

- Africa Check. (2016). Factsheet: South Africa's 2015/16 crime statistics. *Africa Check*. Retrieved from: <https://africacheck.org/factsheets/factsheet-south-africas-201516-crime-statistics/>
- Brown, I. (2011). Class and race differences in motherhood experience: Is maternal ambivalence limited to white middle-class mothers? Doctoral dissertation, Rutgers University, New Brunswick.
- Collins, P. (1987). The meaning of motherhood in black culture and black mother/daughter relationships. *SAGE* (4):2, 3.
- Collins, P. (1994). Shifting the center: Race, class, and feminist theorizing about motherhood. *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency*, 45-65.
- Edwards, A. (2000). Community mothering: The relationship between mothering and the community work of black women. *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, 2(2): 87-100.
- Edwards, K. (2017). A plea for fathers to take more photos of the mother of their children. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved from: <http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/parenting/a-plea-for-fathers-to-take-more-photos-of-the-mother-of-their-children-20170413-gvkkov.html>
- Ewick & Sibley. (1995). Subversive stories and hegemonic tales: Toward a sociology of narrative. *Law & Society Review*, 29(2): 197-226.
- James, N. (1989). Emotional labour: Skill and work in the social regulation of feelings. *The Sociological Review*, 37(1): 15-42.
- Lee, Y. (2012). Adolescent motherhood and capital: interaction effects of race/ethnicity on harsh parenting. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 41(1): 102-116.
- McDonald, K. (1997). Black activist mothering: A historical intersection of race, gender, and class. *Gender & Society*, 11(6): 773-795.
- Mohanty, C.T. (1988). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist Review*, (30): 61-88.
- Moore, E. (2013) Transmission and change in South African motherhood: Black mothers in three-generational Cape Town families. *Journal of South African Studies*, 39(1): 151-170.
- Neblett, et al. (2009). Racial socialization and racial identity: African American parent'

- messages about race as precursors to identity. *Journal of Youth Adolescence*, 38: 189-203.
- Ndlovu, M. (2015). How do you raise the next generation of men? *The World*. Public Radio International. Video retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPI9IJ9zQRI>
- Racine L. (2011). The impact of race, gender, and class in postcolonial fieldwork: A retrospective critique of methodological dilemmas. *Aporia*, 3(1):15-27.
- Robbe, K. (2015). South African women's writing and (post)colonial imaginaries of motherhood. In *Conversations of motherhood: Women's writing across traditions*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press.
- Stevenson, J. (2011). "The mamas were ripe": Ideologies of motherhood and public resistance in a South African township. *Feminist Formations*, 23(2): 132-163.
- Verduzco-Baker, L. (2010). Charmed circle of motherhood: Intersections of race, class, age & gender in the construction of "good" and "bad" mothers. Doctoral dissertation, The University of Michigan.
- Walker, C. (1995). Conceptualising Motherhood in twentieth century South Africa. *Journal of South African Studies*, 21(3): 417-437.
- Wang, C. & Burris, M. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior*, 24(3): 369-387.
- Weingarten, K. (2004). Witnessing the effects of political violence in families: Mechanisms of intergenerational transmission of trauma and clinical interventions. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 30(1): 45-59.

## **Appendix A: Interview #1 Questions**

Tell me a little about yourself.

How do you identify yourself?

How do you identify racially?

Can you give me a brief timeline of your life, where you grew up, etc?

Tell me about your family.

Who is in your family?

Tell me about your own mother.

How was your relationship? What role did she play in your life?

What are some of the most important lessons your mother taught you?

What did your mother teach you about race? How and when would she share these lessons?

What does it mean to be a 'good mother?'

Who are you a mother to?

Did you always want to be a mother? Why?

How would you describe your parenting style?

What are your daily mothering rituals?

Do you see your own mother reflected in the way you mother?

How do you teach your children about race?

How do you see them learning about race? Can you give me an example?

Is there anything else I haven't asked that you think I should know?

Appendix B: Consent Form  
**SIT Study Abroad**  
a program of World Learning



**CONSENT FORM**

**1. Purpose of this study**

This project aims to investigate the intergenerational transmission of racial identity and conceptions of motherhood amongst four mothers in Cape Town, South Africa. Interviews with four mothers will aim to understand how race is understood across generations and lessons are passed down. Mothers will also complete a photo voice project in which they will photograph moments or representations of motherhood in their daily lives, focusing on what is important to them as mothers. The purpose is to create a collection of stories and photographs that can be viewed by other mothers trying to understand their own role and history. These stories and images will also be compared with existing literature about conceptions of motherhood in South Africa, and analyzed through a culturally and historically specific lens.

**2. Rights Notice**

In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT ISP proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by a Local Review Board or SIT Institutional Review Board. If at any time, you feel that you are at risk or exposed to unreasonable harm, you may terminate and stop the interview. Please take some time to carefully read the statements provided below.

- a. **Privacy** - all information you present in this interview may be recorded and safeguarded. If you do not want the information recorded, you need to let the interviewer know. All photographs taken may be used and printed in the final paper, given that they follow the provided ethical guidelines. If you do not want photos shared, you need to let the interviewer know.
- b. **Anonymity** - all names in this study will be kept anonymous unless the participant chooses otherwise.
- c. **Confidentiality** - all names will remain completely confidential and fully protected by the interviewer. By signing below, you give the interviewer full responsibility to uphold this contract and its contents. The interviewer will also sign a copy of this contract and give it to the participant.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's name printed

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's signature and date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewer's name printed

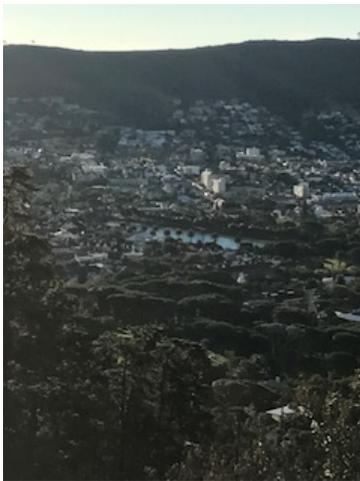
\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewer's signature and date

## Appendix C: Interviewee Photos

### Katrin



(1) Burnt trees in Deerpark: My children and I walked in Deerpark many times since they were little. At a birthday party for my son when he was six, his friend Siphoh came face-to-face with a Cape cobra there.



(2) We live in the Cape Town city bowl, which is pictured here. In the middle of the picture is a reservoir where we have been going for afternoon walks and runs since the children were little. We all love running there.



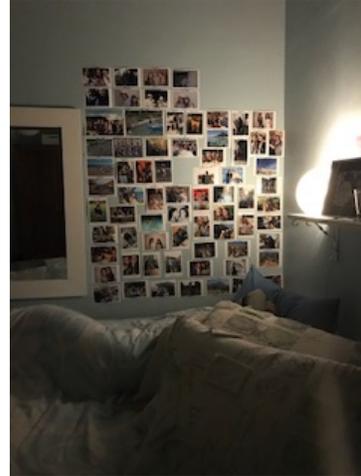
(3) My daughter arriving home from school with her impossibly heavy school bag.



(4) Daughter with the sandwich she made herself for lunch a bit of social media catch-up, while I continue working.



(5) My son arrives back from rugby practise at around 5.30pm, sweaty and exhausted, but he has to hurry: he's cooking for his girlfriend to celebrate their ten-month anniversary.



(7) 6am and my daughter is fortified behind too many pillows, unwilling to get up even though she's leaving for camp today and is terribly excited. The camp is part of a process of selection for a school club that does social justice and leadership work.



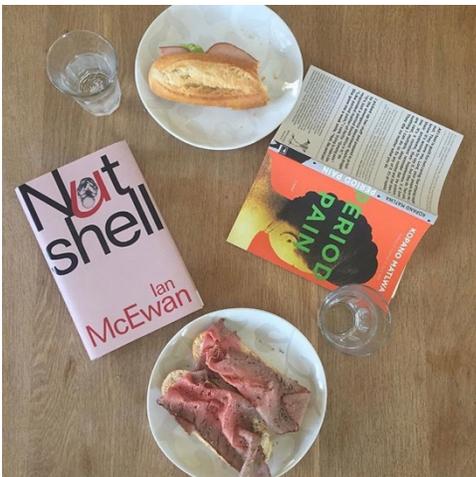
(6) Driving my son to visit his girlfriend. I have a deep affection for this little birthmark on his right arm.



(8) My son is very organised and every night before bed, his school bag, rugby kit and weekend bag - when he is staying with his father for the weekend - is packed and waiting at the door when he wakes up.



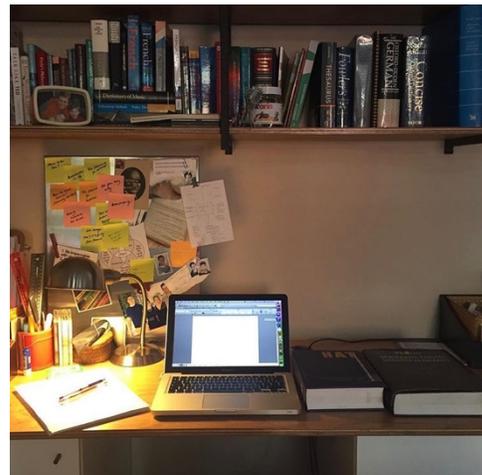
(9) 7am and my son is leaving for school and the weekend. As a divorced parent, you spend your life saying goodbye, it seems. As the children of divorced parents, you spend your life packing and schlepping. They have to be far more organised and mature than their peers, because they spend their lives in two different places and all the concomitant confusion and things-left-behind always seem to land at their doors. I've always felt for them in this regard. It's hard to have two, not one base.



(10) Lunch with my daughter. A singular pleasure is to share lunch with someone else who likes reading. My daughter is reading Kopana Matlwa's book *Period Pain*, which she got for Christmas. My book, the Ian McEwan, was a gift from my children for Christmas.



(11) My daughter's room, with the collection of Garfield books she inherited from my brother, who was also a Garfield fan.



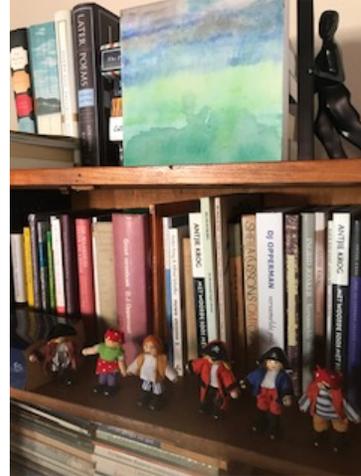
(12) My desk, with dictionaries close at hand. I once asked my children whether they had a picture of me doing something specific when they weren't with me. They both said they imagined me here, at my desk.



(13) I always had books around - this is a collection of the art books, which we used to page through together when they were little.



(14) This is a picture of my daughter when she was little. She'd made a nook for herself in a box. I love this picture. Most of the pictures I have of her when she was little was her with a book or her with a guitar. Most recently, the guitar has been replaced by her ukulele. She is an avid singer/songwriter. Her entire life revolves around these two things. My son's current main occupations are sport and his girlfriend.



(15) I have kept many of the children's special toys and they're mostly kept on the bookshelves. Here a collection of little wooden pirates from my son's pirate phase in amongst the poetry collections.



(16) This is a picture of teenage duality: two favoured soft toys, one his sister gave him when they were little and the other a gift from his girlfriend who recently went on a hockey tour to Ireland. And in the foreground, the ubiquitous computer. My son writes and does video editing to supplement his extremely meagre allowance from me.



(17) A picture of my son's bedside table. A photograph of me with him when he was tiny and I was a new and very confused and tired mother, a fuzzy bunny I gave him a few years ago for Christmas, because he has an abiding love of bunnies, and a porcelain elephant his sister gave him recently, to remind him of the time he was obsessed with elephants around the time I was pregnant with her. His elephant obsession is the stuff of family legend.



(18) Our house is constantly filled with the sound of Julia's voice and her guitar/ukulele. She sings ALL the time. When she moves out one day, this might be one of the hardest things for me to have to let go of: the constant sound of her voice filling the air with her beautiful, sad songs.

**Sebena**

**Elizabeth**



(1) Baby Carried on Back Bonding



(2) Costumes



(3) Fashion



(4) Granny Cooking



(5) Hair



(6) Hippo Attack



(7) Quiet Play



(8) Not Hungry



(10) Snakes



(9) Reflection



(11) Stern



(12) Sweets