

# GLOBAL APARTHEID: A BLACK FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF MOTHERWORK IN TOWNSHIPS

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Psychology  
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Faculty Adviser: Dr. Christopher B. Knaus

Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors,  
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Executive Director, Global Honors

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## **Global Apartheid: A Black Feminist Analysis of Motherwork in Townships**

On a brisk Tuesday morning in the South African township of Kolazi, Somanga kisses her two daughters goodbye before leaving their one-room tin shack for work. This crowded one-room living space, created with sheets of asymmetrical corrugated iron, is home to four people; Somanga and her two daughters, and Somanga's younger sister.<sup>1</sup> The back of the ten-foot-wide shack, where Somanga departs from her daughters, contains two beds, shared amongst the two adults and two children. This sleeping area is separated by a thin black curtain, dividing the shack in half. On the other side of the curtain sits a tattered futon couch, a small outdated television obsolete by Western standards, and a cluttered makeshift kitchen sitting upon a small wooden table with a single, black frying pan and a paraffin stove used for cooking and warming the shack. The shack is not piped for running water and hence, there is no bathroom. Flattened cardboard is fastened to the walls, serving as false insulation from the cold winter nights.

A thick brown, wooden door, marked by layers of blemishes and chipped paint, serves as the entrance of the shack, and pieces of tile lie scattered across the dirt floor. The door fits haphazardly into a rectangular cutout of one of the tin walls of the shack, offering no protection from the outside world, a township environment ridden with violence and destitution from the desperation of a Black population historically disenfranchised in colonized South Africa. This shack is just one of millions crammed into unusable land in huge township communities, tangible reminders of racial segregation and oppression of Apartheid era policies.

As Somanga makes her way out of her home, she is immediately met by a gray, cinder block wall obstructing all views of the outside world. The wall forces her to walk along a trash-lined dirt pathway where she passes a formally constructed, small pink house that belongs to her

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<sup>1</sup> To maintain confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms have been assigned for all individuals, organizations, and geographic locales.

grandmother. The house is a product of the post-Apartheid South African government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). Despite post-Apartheid efforts of the African National Congress (ANC) to give Black South Africans homes, the program has given far too few houses to the millions of people who remain in substandard housing. For the ANC-connected who do receive RDP housing, the house - much like shacks - is rarely piped for running water and simply built on top of the land where the family's shack once stood.

In front of the pink RDP house belonging to Somanga's grandmother, parallel to the unpaved dirt road of their neighborhood, lies another cinder block wall that protects her small, unused blue car. The car was stolen at gunpoint and found three weeks later, and Somanga, fearful of the common occurrence of such violence, now resigns herself to the same transit options most township residents are limited to. She walks along the dirt road to catch a taxi to work, passing an endless array of tin shack houses, mirroring her own cramped living space. These shacks are clustered throughout the entire area of Kolazi, home to over 200,000 people, extending as far as the eye can see. Four of the tin slab cutouts, the remains of old shipping containers, create walls of one-room homes, with a fifth panel serving as a makeshift roof. Just like Somanga, others have placed wooden doors and even glass windows in homes that can house up to ten people. These are small, temporary steps to create what residents hope one day will become a formal house, though typically families wait decades for an RDP house.

Today Somanga avoids the taxi queue, which by early morning snakes its way across the neighborhood, hundreds deep. Instead, she jumps into an eight-seat Toyota Wish sedan, vehicles referred to as cockroaches, a hyper racialized, violent term on the African continent used by the Hutus to describe Tutsis during the Rwandan genocide. These taxis are unregulated, and drivers

often do not have licenses or insurance, yet serve as vital means of transportation for township residents who cannot afford a car or, like Somanga, are too afraid to drive.

All around Kolazi, these taxis make their way through many smaller roads where traditional township minibuses no longer stop to pick up passengers. Despite the importance of these taxis, there are several days each year when their services are unavailable as these unregulated business ventures are at the center of violent transportation protests. During protests, taxis, minibuses, and individually owned vehicles are often lit on fire, injuring and sometimes killing the people inside. Burning tires and cinder block stacks become defiant road closures, resulting in the loss of wages for residents relying on informal transports to make their daily commute to underpaid service industries and domestic work in the thriving city of Cape Town.

Somanga exits the taxi to begin her day of work as a literacy mentor for the South African Reading Center (SARC), educating both students and teachers in best practices for reading and comprehension in the indigenous language of *isiXhosa* and, as mandated by colonial school curriculums, English. As the face of SARC, working one-on-one with teachers and students of all grade levels, Somanga is a knowledgeable and experienced educator who spends her days shuttling between various centers of education throughout Kolazi. Despite conducting work which is vital to SARC's reason for existence, Somanga receives a small salary and spends a majority of her time in the same township she calls home, alienated from SARC's main office, located in an affluent, majority White suburb removed from the community they serve. On this particular morning, Somanga's day begins at an educare center, observing and teaching young students ages two to six and the teachers who oversee them.

### **Thesis Statement**

For Somanga Lynik and women of color around the world, structural and individual oppression engulfing their community is an everyday, normalized occurrence which must be carefully navigated. The context of Somanga's life within South Africa, a nation built upon colonialism and systemic racism, contains experiences of oppression shared amongst various women around the world whose countries parallel these same colonial roots. In what comes next, I use the ethnographic research method of portraiture to create a detailed portrait of Somanga's daily life derived from extensive observations and field notes taken during a three-week study abroad program to Cape Town, South Africa. I situate Somanga's portrait in the guiding theoretical framework of Black Feminist Thought (BFT), using her portrait as applied BFT methodology to highlight three core themes: 1) violence accompanying intersecting oppressions, 2) work as exploitation, and 3) motherwork as both enduring and opposing oppression.

I then highlight how oppression impacts not just one woman in South Africa, but all women of color, and particularly Black women, around the world. I conclude by emphasizing the importance of validating the experiences of Black women and the need for self-definition as a means of empowerment. As Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2009) writes, "Black women's full empowerment can only occur within a transnational context of social justice" (p. 251). These are the women who, despite such oppression – or perhaps in direct opposition to such – hold communities together through love and a generous, unbreakable spirit.

### **Context: South Africa - Review of Literature**

The history of social and economic inequality in South Africa, paralleling other countries around the world, can be traced to European colonization. Clark and Worger (2016) write, "Neither racial discrimination nor segregationist policies distinguished South Africa from a multitude of other [colonial] societies...All practised various forms of social and economic

discrimination, favouring White settlers...in housing, education and jobs at the expense of indigenous peoples” (p. 3). South Africa’s history of colonization began in 1652, when the Dutch first sailed to the Cape of Good Hope, establishing the Dutch East India Trading Company (Clark & Worger, 2016). Although the Dutch did not intend to colonize South Africa, this plan changed when the indigenous Khoi tribe, who agreed to supply the Dutch ships with various meat and produce, did not agree to newly imposed trade agreements as demanded by the Dutch. In response, the Dutch settled on South African land to run their own farms. For the next 150 years, the Dutch were the primary settlers in South Africa, eventually referred to as Boers, controlling land and importing enslaved Africans from other countries to conduct farm labor.

The British were the next Northern imperial power to enter South Africa in 1795, seeking land and to extend their already well-established dominance of the Global South. The Boers, more interested in farming, and the British, more interested in creating wealth and global capitalism, clashed over issues regarding land ownership and slavery. In the 1830s, the British outlawed slavery in their colonies, angering Boers who shared in the occupation of South Africa and whose economy was built upon enslavement. These tensions eventually led to the South African War from 1889 to 1902, which was won by the British, who then took control of South Africa. Despite conflicts between Boers and British colonizers, one major ideology both groups could agree on was White supremacy.<sup>2</sup> Mies and Shiva (2014) write:

The White colonizers were convinced that tribal people were creatures in a lower evolutionary state than themselves and that the universal law of history demanded their surrender to “progress”. It was plain social Darwinism that justified the brutalities against the tribal people, and the right of the more “advanced”

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<sup>2</sup> Information in this paragraph paraphrased from Clark and Worger (2016).

civilization... In South Africa the killing of the native people by the pious Dutch colonists was an everyday affair (p. 148)

These beliefs manifested shortly after the end of the South African War, when, in 1910, policies of segregation were introduced by White settlers who feared a native uprising. These policies accumulated until 1948 with the formal introduction of Apartheid by the Afrikaner Nationalist Party, a political affiliation notably led by Nazi sympathizers (Dowden, 2009).

Apartheid called for the physical separation of Black and White South Africans in a totalitarian effort to control South Africa's indigenous people. In this system of oppression, South Africans were classified by skin color (i.e. White, Black, and Colored), which determined basic human rights, such as the right to own land, who they could marry, and educational access. Steve Biko, father of the Black Consciousness movement and a critical opponent of Apartheid, directly confronted this system before his assassination in 1977. He writes, "Apartheid – both petty and grand – is obviously evil. Nothing can justify the arrogant assumption that a clique of foreigners has the right to decide on the lives of a majority" (2002, p. 27).

Two years after the implementation of Apartheid, the Group Areas Act of 1950 was introduced to further racial oppression through forced removal of Black and Colored South Africans to rural communities organized by race (Baldwin, 1975). Under the Group Areas Act, spanning until the 1980s, 3.5 million South Africans were removed from areas designated for White populations (Clark & Worger, 2016). Land to which indigenous South Africans were consigned was and is, geographically and consciously, far removed from the sight and mind of thriving White spaces. South Africa's government ruled these communities as tribal land, revoking the citizenship of Black South Africans, meaning they did not have to provide residents within sites of forced removal with resources such as electricity, water, and hospitals (Clark &

Worger, 2016). The result of this decision and the Group Areas Act was severe economic hardship in these communities. Lingering effects remain over 60 years later through the presence of entirely Black township communities, cluttered with millions of corrugated iron shacks stretching across the South African landscape as far as the eye can see.

### **Black Women's Experiences During Apartheid**

While segregation and racism were rooted in South African society, impacting both men and women, several historical accounts show that women suffered the most under Apartheid under triple, intersectional oppressions of race, gender, and class. Physical and economic suffering was explicitly documented through South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a national restorative justice program created post-Apartheid to address the human rights abuses that occurred during this time. The report on the TRC in regard to women's economic oppression states, "...women were subject to more restrictions and suffered more in economic terms than did men during the Apartheid years...Black women, in particular...remain the most disadvantaged of all" (Volume 4, p. 288, cited in Ross, 2002, p. 17). This suffering was an accepted part of White South African culture, accompanied by further oppression through the normalization of gender-based violence and the view of women as second-class citizens (Goldblatt & Meintjes, 1998; Graybill, 2001). Albie Sachs, author of South Africa's current constitution and a former ANC activist, writes, "It is a sad fact that one of the few profoundly non-racial institutions in South Africa is patriarchy" (1990, p. 1).

Within townships, women were expected to take on traditionally feminine roles of motherhood and domestic duties within their shack dwellings (Mogadime et al., 2010). These expectations imposed on women, combined with their place as second-class citizens, subjected them to harm from men on every side of the Apartheid struggle. One study by Campbell (1990)

found that in township culture, violence was equated to masculinity, meaning women suffered at the hands of men seeking to prove their worth in a community created for them by White people that already sought to vanquish any self-worth they may have potentially harnessed. Elements of hyper masculinity were seen in extremes through organizations such as the South African Rapist Association, created by township men to punish women (Goldblatt & Meintjes, 1998). Within the context of Apartheid, no place was truly safe for Black women seeking relief from the constant state of oppression in which they lived, and, as victims of sexual violence, they were also stigmatized and blamed for their experiences of abuse (Goldblatt & Meintjes, 1998).

Apartheid legislation was repealed by the Nationalist Party in 1991 and formally retracted from policy in 1994 after election of the African National Congress. Despite almost 25 years of democracy, however, very little has changed in South Africa for Black township residents, particularly women, living in peripheral communities of thriving South African cities. The roles of Black women still follow patriarchal norms (Guillebeau, 1999) and Black women continue to suffer from the highest rates of poverty. Graybill (2001) summarizes that, “One of the most serious legacies of Apartheid is poverty, whose main victims are women” (p. 4).

### **Black Feminist Thought (BFT)**

Experiences of poverty and oppression for Black women in South Africa, including women who are part of the “born free generation” (i.e. born after 1991), is clearly documented (Azania, 2014; Guillebeau, 1999; Goldblatt & Meintjes, 1998). Malaika Wa Azania (2014) writes, “[History] will tell the story of young black children whose humanity is destroyed by the brutality of life in the township, a modern-day concentration camp where poor black people find little comfort is afforded to them by a system that sucks the hope out of their very hearts” (p.

170). Given these experiences, a theory that validates the humanity of South African women, centering their resilience and opposition to intersecting oppressions is needed.

Black feminist thought (BFT) is a critical social theory and a dialectic, existing as resistance and activism to the global oppression of Black women. “As long as Black women’s subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation persists, Black feminism as an activist response to that oppression will remain needed” (Collins, 2009, p. 25). The aim of BFT is to empower Black women within intersecting oppressions while also improving their personal experiences. These experiences occur due to intersectional identities, determining subjugated placement within global matrices of domination, defined as “overall organization of hierarchical power relations for any society” (Collins, 2009, p. 320).

In BFT, all Black women are considered intellectuals and as such, individual and collective experiences, ideas, and voices are placed at the center of analysis, serving as diverse analytic tools to create an alternative epistemology to traditionally White, male-centered theories of knowledge. This standpoint creates the first key tenet of BFT, lived experience as criterion of meaning. Black women’s lived experiences are solely their own and therefore must be centered as the basis of knowledge within BFT. The second tenet, centering voice as empiricism, is the use of dialogue in social science research. In BFT, data is created through lived experiences shared through dialogue and narratives. What results from these interactions amongst Black women are an agreement upon Black women’s lived experiences and oppressions, which create the five core themes of BFT: 1) work and family, 2) negative controlling images, 3) struggles for self-definition in cultural contexts that deny Black women agency, 4) sexual politics that make Black women vulnerable to sex work, rape, and media objectification, and 5) understandings of motherwork within Black women’s politics (Collins, 2009, p. 252).

The third tenet of BFT is the ethics of caring, suggesting that “personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process” (Collins, 2009, pp. 281-282). In the ethics of caring, emotionality is a form of intellectualism and empathy must be present to understand experiences and positions of Black women across the globe. The ethics of caring interacts with previous tenets through assessing claims of knowledge created by Black women in a way that is an alternative to positivist theory in academia derived from traditionally White, male perspectives. For this reason, all Black women are intellectuals regardless of education level in BFT framework. The last key tenet of BFT is the ethic of personal accountability. When lived experiences and narratives are at the center of epistemology, people must be accountable for claims to knowledge through reliability and honesty when sharing their lived experiences. Together, these four key tenets form the framework for BFT in practice.

These four tenets situate Somanga’s story as a valuable addition to BFT and justify her story as an alternative epistemology of portraiture, with thick, qualitative detail. Her narrative also serves as a valuable addition to BFT in a transnational context, a gap which needs additional voices. Patricia Hill Collins (2009) writes, “The task now lies in fleshing out dialogues and coalitions with Black women who live elsewhere in the Black diaspora, keeping in mind that intersecting oppressions have left a path of common challenges...” (p. 254).

Regarding the transnational and sociohistorical context of South Africa, the narratives of Black South African women is also a perspective needing further attention. Early historical writings of South Africa emerged during the 19<sup>th</sup> century from the Eurocentric perspectives of colonizers and, during Apartheid, works critical of this system were banned (Clark & Worger, 2016). Throughout South Africa’s history, voices and stories of indigenous peoples, particularly women, have been silenced (Biko, 2002; Ross, 2002). What is needed now is a re-writing of this

history through narratives describing lived experiences of South Africa's historically disenfranchised members whose lives are an extension of Apartheid living conditions over 20 years after democracy. As Biko (2002) writes, "A people without a positive history is like a vehicle without an engine" (p. 29). Changing narratives aligns with BFT tenets as well as values of oral traditions in South Africa, where stories serve as a way for people to connect and stand together against oppression, facing injustices of the past and present (Ross, 2002).

A final tenet of BFT is intersectionality, defined as "particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example intersections of race and gender" (Collins, 2009, p. 21). Used as an analytic tool grounded in social context, intersectionality situates Somanga's life as a direct result of intersecting oppressions. Collins & Bilge (2016) write, "intersectionality provides a framework for explaining how social divisions...positions people differently in the world, especially in relations to global social inequality" (p. 15). In Somanga's portrait, I highlight how her intersectional identities of race, gender, and class determine the experiences she lives through a context of never-ending social inequality shared by Black women and women of color around the world. Collins (2009) writes, "due to the peculiar combination of the legacy of African cultures, a history of racial oppressions organized via slavery, colonialism, and imperialism, and an emerging global racism...women of African descent encounter particular issues" (p. 250).

### **Research Methods**

The purpose of this research was to document, in descriptive detail, the life of Somanga Lynik throughout her day-to-day activities within a South African township in relation to BFT.

Two central research questions guided this study:

Q1: What can we learn from the portrait of an impoverished Black South African mother in relation to U.S. based Black feminist epistemology in order to fill transnational gaps in Black Feminist Thought and South African history?

Q2: In what ways do the experiences of Somanga parallel those of women of color, particularly in the African diaspora, around the world?

Somanga's portrait was contrived through the ethnographic research method of portraiture, used to construct the narrative of her life in thick, descriptive detail, with participant observation and extensive observational notetaking serving as data collection methods to cultivate themes through a thematic analysis. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) state the purpose of portraiture is to "[blur] the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience" (p. xv). Portraitists diligently capture participant experience and voice – a key tenet of BFT – transcending quantitative and even traditional qualitative research methods to capture their subjects in context in a way that is easily comprehended by audiences outside of academia.

This breaking down of barriers reflects BFT's focus on breaking exclusionary walls of academia to center women who might not consider themselves intellectuals. This inclusivity is supported by notions of purposeful qualitative research with the goal of liberation for participants. Mogadime and colleagues (2010) state, "The goal of qualitative research that has emancipatory ends is to be able to understand particular experiences and how such lived experiences might contextualize social conditions that would otherwise remain silenced" (p. 816). The experiences of Somanga and other Black women around the world are stories intentionally silenced by traditional research approaches (Collins, 2009).

Qualitative research with the goal of emancipatory ends cannot be conducted without taking into account the values, biases, and beliefs of the researcher in question. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) writes, “The identity, character, and history of the researcher are obviously critical to how he or she listens, selects, interprets, and composes the story” (p. 11). Therefore, I center my own positionality and biases in relation to research methods.

As a relatively privileged, middle-class mixed-race Latina from the United States, I was able to spend thousands of dollars to travel across the world and meet Somanga in Kolazi, resources well beyond the reach of most Kolazi residents. This gender and racial context situates my personal voice outside of the creation of knowledge within BFT; as Collins (2009) states “both groups are objectified, albeit in different ways” (p. 125). Although referring to White women, this statement can be inferred for Latina women as well. However, because of the hyper-racialized context of South Africa, my own identity and appearance as a woman of color granted me access to elements of township life where a White researcher might not be as welcome, such as travelling in unregulated township taxis with Somanga and other Kolazi residents.

Yet, this same identity discrepancy led to superior treatment from Somanga’s family and teachers at sites of education we attended. I was constantly offered food items and had several teachers and students approach me for a friendly conversation. This privileged treatment turned to inferior as I travelled to the predominately White city of Cape Town, just a few miles from Kolazi. Navigating a constant state of privilege and oppression deepened my awareness of the many inconsistencies and intersectional oppressions present for women of color in South Africa.

I spent six days shadowing Somanga, observing day-to-day duties as a literacy mentor. From this time spent together, friendship and trust were born, which allowed me deep access to professional and personal elements of her life, ultimately enabling the use of portraiture.

Additionally, upon entering this project, I had been to South Africa one time prior and had predispositions about township living conditions which were accompanied by an increase in critical consciousness of racial inequalities and oppression as global occurrences. These predispositions, combined with my own identity and relationship with Somanga, were critical in the way I observed and interpreted her life as an outsider. As such, the following narrative of Somanga's life is told from my perspective through our collective experiences together. Despite my presence, narratives are solely the reflection of an average day in the life of Somanga Lynik.

### **Working within a Township**

On the day I arrive in early September, I meet Somanga at Nohwana educare center. Due to the philanthropy of a wealthy family from the United States, this center is the cleanest, most well-maintained building for miles. The shipping container which creates the structure of the educare has a fresh coat of dark green paint and a formally printed and laminated sign hangs on the outside of the building stating the educare's name in large blue letters. These aesthetically appealing touch-ups on the exterior are misleading, however, as the perimeter is marked by a metal fence consisting of wiring that has been extensively stretched and disfigured. The fence is lined with rusty barbed wire and windows are covered in metal bars, security measures serving as false symbols of protection from the brutality of township life for Kolazi's youngest residents.

Two young boys, appearing no older than five, stare through the fence to see other children playing with small red and blue bouncy balls before heading inside to begin their day of learning. After a few moments, one of the boys walks up to the fence and begins speaking with a boy on the other side. The young boy reaches through the holes of the fence, trying to grab a ball, yet the ball is too large to fit through the hole, an obvious metaphor of his exclusion. For this

boy, and many children like him, exclusion from early childhood education is a common occurrence, as families are unable to pay the 200 Rand per month fee (approximately \$15USD).

As Somanga and I make our way through the deteriorating gate held up by the rusting metal fence, we enter the educare center. We are immediately greeted by ten students and three teachers. Much like preschool teaching styles in the U.S., these three- to four-year-old children are seated on the floor, quietly listening to their teacher read a storybook in *isiXhosa*. Everyone is Black; the all women staff and every student; yet, dolls the children play with reflect White skin and blonde hair. A noticeable number of children's backpacks are covered in White Disney princesses and White faces cover many of the books from which the children read. These same books tell stories of family vacations to tropical destinations, symbols of privilege and Whiteness these children have never known. These small, yet profound pieces of misrepresentation in an entirely Black community are seeds of internalized and institutionalized racism.

Somanga spends two hours at Nohwana, observing teachers and leading sessions of singing and reading. The educare has an open layout marked by an array of bookshelves and buckets filled with various toys. Green walls are decorated with students' paintings and the carpeted floor is lined with small tables and chairs for eating and other educational activities. A group of older learners quietly build blocks while Somanga's students sing *isiXhosa* and English nursery rhymes. Three additional classes of learners are divided by age group. Three connected shipping containers serve as classrooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom, though like most preschools here, Nohwana is not piped for water. The bathroom contains a non-functional toilet, and the kitchen, much like Somanga's, contains a paraffin stove atop a flimsy, chipped wooden table.

As Somanga interacts with students, I am met with an intoxicating smell of pap and beans (a traditional Xhosa meal) coming from the small kitchen. Lunch is being prepared, and I set-up

small, colorful tables and chairs for the young learners to eat while Somanga provides teachers with feedback for their morning's work. While setting up for lunch, I notice a young boy urinating into a large pink bucket. After Somanga finishes her debriefing, I see this bucket again, this time almost filled to the brim after bathroom breaks before lunch, the bucket clearly serving as a collective toilet for all of the learners. While the learners eat their meager lunch, we wave goodbye and walk to catch a taxi, off to Somanga's shack for lunch before the next site visit.

Nohwana epitomizes the economic and social inequality rampant in South Africa. Despite the minimal resources that keep Nohwana running, the spirit of children and teachers who spend their days within this shipping container do not reflect the conditions in which the educare is run. Laughter fills each room and, while singing and reading stories with children, one can forget the despair and destitution on the other side of Nohwana's barbed wire fence. There is a feeling of not wanting to return to what awaits on the other side; to absorb and protect the happiness and innocence of the young learners, seemingly unaware of the blatant inequality and oppression that will follow them for the rest of their lives within post-Apartheid South Africa.

After being dropped off in the central street serving as a taxi queue, we walk the three blocks to Somanga's shack, making our way along the trash-lined path enclosed by the cinder block walls. Upon entering Somanga's home, we are greeted by her sister and youngest daughter. While Somanga is at work each day, her sister, unable to work due to a misplaced (and irreplaceable) birth certificate, cares for Somanga's daughters, saving Somanga the cost of educare fees for her youngest daughter, who is not yet old enough for primary school. Despite supporting numerous educares, Somanga is not paid enough to send her own children to one.

After arriving at Somanga's, her sister quickly begins making a lunch of fried dough using the paraffin stove. As I sit on the sunken futon, devouring the golden brown fried dough

her sister hands to me, Somanga begins telling me about the stressors of her job as a literacy mentor. "This job pays nothing" she says somberly, as she explains how she is currently in the process of applying for a position in SARC's call center, a position which will pay her more to answer phones than her current face-to-face educational duties, although she has not been able to finish the application due to lack of internet access in her home.

Upon our departure from Somanga's home to the next literacy mentoring session, two young girls cross our path in route to the taxi queue. These girls, who look no older than 10 years old, are unaccompanied and headed to her shack. Somanga talks to them in *isiXhosa*, and while the girls look out of sorts and wear dirt-stained clothes, they are clearly happy to see her. Somanga explains that the girls see her shack as a place where they can escape the toxic masculinity of township environments. They will most likely need food and a place to sleep for the night. Somanga explains how these two young girls face abuse at home. The girls are children of alcoholic, single mothers; various men buy their mothers alcohol in attempts to intoxicate them, so they can sexually assault both the mothers and daughters. At Somanga's home, despite the small size and scarce resources, these girls have a safe place to go where they can dodge this abuse, if only for the night. Somanga's home is always open to them, as she understands the violence that drowns the women in Kolazi and the need to escape.

In the following days, as we sit in the plush, carefully decorated SARC office, Somanga shares with me her own experiences of violence and abuse within Kolazi. While Somanga asked that I not share her personal experiences, I will add that in addition to having her car stolen at gunpoint, Somanga has seen multiple people, including her "cousin-brother," fall victim to gun violence on the unpaved road just outside of her and her grandmother's homes. This violence is encouraged by corrupt police working with Kolazi's gangs, as well as high drug usage; Somanga

estimates 90% of men in Kolazi regularly use drugs. Somanga shares with me that she is often afraid to host after-school book clubs, as the hours risk searching for a taxi after dark. To emphasize this point, she ends by simply stating, “it is not safe anywhere you go.”

### **Analysis**

Portraits of Somanga Lynik, documenting her daily experiences navigating a state of constant oppression, provide detailed BFT methodology. Through a thematic analysis, three overarching themes emerged highlighting violence accompanying intersecting oppressions, work as exploitation, and motherwork as both enduring and opposing oppression. These themes reflect collective experiences shared by impoverished Black women and women of color around the world who navigate the same oppressions within their specific nation’s postcolonial context.

### **Violence Accompanying Intersecting Oppressions**

The overarching context of violence through substandard housing, low-resourced education, and physical violence consumes the Kolazi township, and shapes Somanga’s daily experiences. This overarching context is the basis for individual acts of violence suffered by Somanga and many others, as eloquently explained by Azania (2014):

We are often made to believe that crime is committed by bad people who have no regard for human life...This is not true...crime in the new South Africa is often committed by young men and women who see it as the only ticket out of a life of cruel suffering. When a black child does his best to make an honest living but doors of learning are shut in his face or he is subjected to the cruelest exploitation in the workplace, very little options are left for him (p. 48)

This violence is supplemented by the view of women as second-class citizens, resulting in experiences of gender-based violence, as represented in Somanga’s portrait. On the culture of

violence against women in South Africa, Goldblatt and Meintjes (1998) write, “Within this environment of physical and emotional damage, millions of men still believe that women deserve to be beaten and violated and many women believe this to be their lot in life” (p. 13).

Somanga’s narrative also shows other ways Black women are impacted by individual acts of violence, even when they are not the victim. Historically, Black women in South Africa are less likely than Black men to become murder victims (Graybill, 2001); however, the loss of family members holds an extra seed of oppression. Beyond mental suffering and mourning, criminal justice for these losses does not often occur (Graybill, 2001). In seeing her cousin-brother murdered, Somanga alluded to this mental suffering while also stating she knew the killer’s identity but could not report him for fear of losing her own life due to police corruption.

Contextual violence, gender-based violence, and the inability to find justice for personal suffering and losses are all interrelated conditions situated in intersecting oppressions of race, gender, and class. These same conditions exist for impoverished Black women globally, particularly in the context of Brazil, where low-income shanty towns house a predominately Afro-Brazilian population. In these *favelas*, Afro-Brazilian women face similar conditional and individual violence and a related corrupt justice system (de Oliveira Rocha, 2012).

In their ethnographic fieldwork within a *favela* located outside of Rio de Janeiro, de Oliveira Rocha (2012) writes, “the disproportionate killing of black bodies is so great that it is no longer possible to avoid its genocidal aspect...black women suffer the long-term consequences of this violence, which affects them socially, economically, politically, and emotionally” (p. 59-60). As both the victim and witness of violence, Somanga must carefully navigate her life within Kolazi, including each day when deciding the least threatening way to travel to and from work, only to face further oppression both in and out of the SARC office.

## **Work as Exploitation**

Employment opportunities for Black women in South Africa are an extension of the same limited opportunities they were afforded during Apartheid. Collins (2009) writes, “The work performed by employed poor Black women resembles duties long associated with domestic service...The location may have changed, but the work has not” (p. 69). Somanga’s work with SARC reflects Collins’ point. Apart from the one day per week she is in SARC offices, her days as a literacy mentor are spent supporting children within crumbling buildings lacking adequate instructional infrastructure. Reflective of this predominately Black and female demographic were observations that all teachers she interacted with and evaluated are also Black women. Beyond the township context, the ways in which Black women’s labor is situated within intersecting oppressions become even more evident at the main office of SARC.

SARC seeks to boost literacy skills among township youth by providing students and teachers with best reading practices. To increase student receptiveness, SARC seeks to make reading fun for students by hosting events such as reading contests and providing students with free books to take home so they may share stories with their families. For SARC, one-on-one contact with students is absolutely necessary and requires time spent in township communities, proving Somanga’s work within Kolazi to be at the center of SARC’s reason for existence. However, intersectional oppressions from upper management leaves her further subjugated. Given the social landscape of South Africa, Somanga does work that the entirely White SARC upper management does not want to do and does not feel comfortable with. This work – essential to SARC mission – “pays nothing” and leaves her living in a shack navigating a community consumed with violence and oppression occurring both during and after SARC duties. This takes

place while SARC office employees sit in the comfort of their large brick office building in the suburbs, earning a wage large enough to keep them safely living comfortably.

This disparity rings true for the remainder of SARC literacy mentors, all of whom are also Black and live within communities they serve. Previous research by Knaus and Brown (2016) recorded racialized expenditures of nonprofits in South Africa and found that “Black South Africans [are] paid significantly less than Coloured and especially White counterparts, even to do the same job” (p. 144). These findings support the claim that SARC literacy mentors are paid so little because they are Black, live in shacks, and will work for smaller salaries as they are afforded fewer opportunities than South Africa’s White, affluent populations.

Beyond unequal pay, Somanga faces further prejudice within the SARC main office. While there, Somanga faced maltreatment from the office’s White, Information Technology (IT) specialist when asking how to use a program on her laptop. Despite a simple question, her curiosity was met with hasty and overt aggression from the IT specialist scolding Somanga for not knowing how to use the program. This inferior treatment continues out of the office when, while walking to get lunch at a nearby KFC, we were harassed by a White, disgruntled male who appeared to be homeless. Wearing tattered, dirt-stained clothes, he approached us asking for money and pursued us for two blocks until we agreed. Somanga’s co-worker, another Black female literacy mentor, gave him the few Rand coins she received as change after paying for her lunch. Within SARC office and surrounding neighborhoods, racism and sexism are prevalent, whether from fellow employees or those whose homes are on the sidewalks nearby. For Somanga, these oppressions are constant no matter which community context she must navigate.

Somanga’s experiences working for SARC also bring to light issues of the nonprofit sector within South Africa. Waiguchu (1999) writes, “far too many nonprofit organizations and

agencies currently operate in Africa, and their effectiveness in empowering Africans is not particularly evident” (1999, p. 365). Issues of empowerment become more problematic when considering the history of Black women’s experiences within South Africa, while also making connections to women within the African diaspora, around the world. African American women in the United States, for example, are similarly subjected to employment that is a direct result of intersectional oppressions. This inequality is clearly documented by Collins (2009) who writes:

Despite differences of age, sexual orientation, social class, region, and religion, U.S. Black women encounter societal practices that restrict us to inferior housing, neighborhoods, schools, jobs, and public treatment and hide this differential consideration behind an array of common beliefs about Black women’s intelligence, work habits, and sexuality (p. 29)

Societal practices Collins refers to mirror those of Somanga within the context of South Africa. Similarities of inferior education, housing, and neighborhoods are precise, reflecting the argument of these issues as global occurrences. Outside of paid work, Somanga is also a mother, another role which must be navigated within a state of constant oppression.

### **Motherwork as Both Enduring and Opposing Oppression**

Somanga’s paid labor experiences do not show her entire realm of work. Motherhood as unpaid work, also called “motherwork” (Collins, 1994), is supported by many feminist scholars. Domestic duties, vital to the health of populations and running of a nation state, are not measured in economic theory and gross domestic product (Mies & Shiva, 2014). This denial perpetuates oppression by limiting economic resources for women of color globally whose culture emphasizes filling of traditional gender roles. What results are “recurring patterns of poverty that bear remarkable similarity from one culture to the next” (Collins, 2009, p. 263).

In addition to raising two young daughters while balancing demands of work and home, Somanga also takes on the role of what Collins (2009) calls the other-mother, defined as “women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities” (p. 192). Somanga is a present other-mother to young girls who frequent her shack to escape abuses at home, as well as to children she works with for SARC. Her sister also other-mothers Somanga’s daughters. Other-mother roles are necessary within the context of poverty and oppression that occur across the African diaspora. Fonseca (2003) conducted ethnographic fieldwork within an Afro-Brazilian *favela* assessing motherhood dynamics. Below is an interaction with a child named Claudiane:

“Claudiane – come over here and tell this lady... How many mothers do you have?” Visibly enchanted at being the center of attention, the little girl bubbled: “Three.” And, placing a finger aside her chin to better ponder the question, she added: “The mother who nursed me, the mother who raised me, and the mother who gave birth to me” (p. 116)

This extended motherhood network is a response and adaptation by poverty-stricken mothers navigating intersecting oppressions who rely on the help of others to alleviate the implications of financial limitations when raising children (Collins, 2009; Fonseca, 2003). In this way, other-mothering can be seen as a form of activism. Collins (2009) writes, “working on behalf of the community means addressing the multifaceted issues within it” (p. 208). In working to improve the education of Kolazi children and create a safe space for girls within the walls of her ten-foot wide shack, Somanga is actively responding to the oppression occurring in her community.

### **Centering BFT: Solutions**

Given the intersecting oppressions Somanga (and Black women around the world) navigate, proposed solutions to this global social inequality must center BFT analyses.

Therefore, I reposition myself in relation to Somanga's portrait as limited to sharing a gender context. This repositioning is essential given the overarching solution to Black women's global subjugation, where, as BFT author Patricia Hill Collins (2009) states, "Independent self-definitions empower Black women to bring about social change" (p. 129).

Independent self-definition can only be done by individual women "jump[ing] outside the frames and systems authorities provide" (Collins, 2009, p. 10) to combat negative controlling images which leave Black women subjugated. Self-definitions come from Black women whose unique lived experiences are solely their own. Self-definition is powerful due to critical reflections and voice required to create a space of self-definition. Collins (2009) writes, "In this process, Black women journey toward an understanding of how our personal lives have been fundamentally shaped by intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class" (p. 125). This research helped create a powerful space of self-knowledge, which can catalyze people to change their lives, a space Collins (2009) refers to as "a sphere of freedom" (p. 130).

Collins (2009) provides two overarching ways in which Black women can create safe spaces for increasing consciousness, coming to resistance through voice, and creating self-definitions outside of White, male dominated hegemony. The first is for safe spaces to be created within Black civil society as "self is found in the context of family and community" (Collins, 2009, p. 124). This includes formal organizations and relationships with other Black women (i.e. friendships and mother/daughter relationships). Collins (2009) also suggests fostering collective empowerment through self-definition done by Black women writers in literature and academia. In these ways, Black women can create space, voice, and increase critical consciousness to resist intersectional oppressions.

## **Conclusion**

Collins (2009) writes, "...issues of motherhood, work, and family responsibilities remain closely bundled in explaining Black women's poverty globally" (p. 261). Somanga's portrait clarifies this context and identifies specific navigational strategies in oppressive living conditions. Somanga's story humanizes Black women in South Africa and parallels women of color around the world. Her lived experience within an under-resourced, racialized site of destitution exemplifies connections between personal and systemic contexts, showing how domains of power interact to create oppressive systems that tangibly impact women of color. Her life, unjustly, is a direct product of centuries of institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism.

For Somanga and other Black women around the world, BFT is a necessary alternative to White, male-centered epistemology by accounting for intersectional identities and validating Black women's humanity as resistance through self-definition. BFT creates the space for the portrait of Somanga, emphasizing her resilience and importance in opposing oppression occurring in Kolazi. Somanga's portrait is a valuable addition to BFT, providing evidence of similar experiences of intersectional oppressions and necessary adaptations for Black women globally. Her story is also an example of the ways in which Black South African women's experiences in the 21st century regarding violence, patriarchy, and motherhood mirror the past.

As of this writing, Somanga has recently given birth to her third daughter, an event that has brought both her and her older daughters immense happiness and love, despite being forced to leave the shack behind her grandmother's house half-way through her pregnancy so her grandmother can build two new shack dwellings for increased profit. They were able to find a new Kolazi shack, where Somanga continues motherwork and paid work to hold her community together, opposing intersectional oppressions for the sake of her and her children's lives.

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