Written By Dr. Deirdre Cooper Owens

Sustaining Joy and Cultivating Hope, Mothering While Black

By

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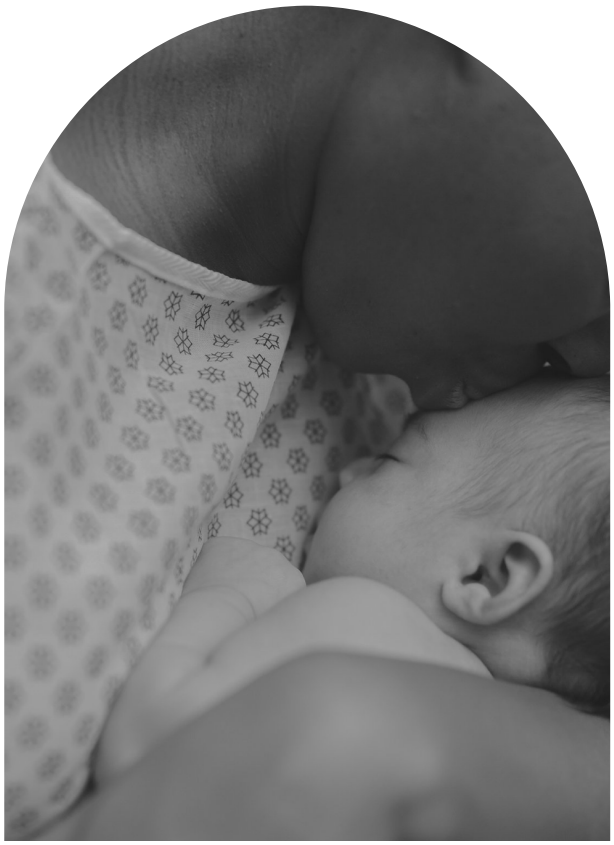
"Becoming a mother forced me to have hope."

– Nefertiti Austin, author of *Motherhood so White: A Memoir of Race, Gender, and Parenting in America*, 2019



I am a scholar who writes about the reproductive lives of enslaved women and who speaks frequently about the Black birthing crisis. In essence, I have devoted almost fifteen years of my life to reproductive justice and educating thousands of people about the intimate connection of United States slavery to the

development of American gynecology. My work is not for the faint-hearted and it is often mired in soul-breaking statistics that detail Black women and birthing people's illnesses and deaths related to reproductive injustice. Yet, I have learned within the past year to center joy during my public lectures because Black women and birthing people's lives deserve to be anchored in enjoyment, especially as it relates to parenting and motherhood.

When Nefertiti Austin, a single Black woman, decided to adopt her son, she was confronted with a sobering reality: Far too many Americans did not view single Black women as ideal mothers. For Austin, motherhood in America held space for white women. In writing about her experiences in her 2019 memoir, she asserted, "Becoming a mother forced me to have hope." Joy is bolstered by hope.

As a historian who chronicles and documents United States slavery, Austin's line penetrated me deeply. In my historical research about the inhumanity and brutality of enslavement, painful medical experiments on Black women in bondage, and the development of American gynecology, I have been comforted by the love enslaved people had for their mothers. The oral histories reveal myriad stories that demonstrate the importance of naming children that connected them to missing

At the onset of slavery in colonial America, enslavers and European monarchs were interested in the transport of Black bodies for mainly agricultural labor. In the beginning, the sex ratios between enslaved men and women were imbalanced. To ensure slavery's success and financial solvency, lawmakers instituted a new rule that all children born to enslaved women would inherit the condition of enslavement from their mothers.

family members, the administering of healing natural medicines that enslaved mothers created in secret cultural spaces to heal their children, and warm embraces in hidden spaces that soothed both minds and bodies. In deep and abiding ways, the creation of the Black family was and is the most potent tool of resistance that is still practiced today. But its creation is complicated.

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Legislators made sure that racial slavery would be birthed through the wombs of Black women in bondage. It was a law that Europeans had never used on themselves. And as slavery grew, so did the increase in Black births. Further, white enslavers and medical men had a growing interest in maintaining the reproductive health of Black women under forced servitude, especially after congress banned the Atlantic slave trade in 1807.

It is unsurprising just how closely medical branches like gynecology and obstetrics developed so quickly in the slaveholding South. By the start of the Civil War, slavery made the United States one of the world's richest nations. Black women's bodies, wombs, and labor also helped usher in these transformations even as they were forced to do so by men who either owned or leased them.

Amidst these changes, Black women survived and loved actively and fiercely. One enslaved woman stole herself and her children away from their plantation to live in the woods. Her husband and neighbors fed, clothed, and nurtured the family for seven years. Harkening back to Nefertiti Austin's opening quote, motherhood "forced" the enslaved woman and her community members who demonstrated symbolic and communal mothering to have hope.

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The hope and joy for Black mothers and birthing people is also being practiced by contemporary Black reproductive justice activists who are centering what joy looks and feels like for this community. Understanding the legacy and impact of medical racism on Black birthing people, researchers like Rachel Hardeman, PhD, public health scholar at the University of Minnesota, have dedicated years of research that evidences when Black expectant people and mothers have providers that look like them and their babies, the Black birthing morbidity and mortality statistics are decreased by 50 percent.

Dr. Hardeman found in the nearly two million hospital cases that she and her research team assessed that racism is a major contributor to the United States' position as the most dangerous nation for Black birthing people to become pregnant and give birth compared to other high-income earning nations.

Learning about these dangerous statistics spurred Pittsburgh clinician, Sharee Livingston, DO, an African American OB-GYN to found Patients R Waiting. It is a pipeline program for Black high school students who are interested in becoming physicians. Dr. Livingston, who is also a mother, created the program so that Black youth could be introduced to medicine prior to college and to also increase the single-digit percentage of Black physicians in the United States.

Other Black mothers have founded doula training programs like New York-based Mama Glow by Latham Thomas and Ancient Song Doula Services by Chanel Porchia-Albert. Nationally, they know that Black women and birthing people are three to four times more likely to suffer from pregnancy-related complications than white women. In ancestral acts of resistance, they decided to educate thousands of women to become doulas who serve as advocates for pregnant people.

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Educators and reproductive activists have worked for decades to educate Americans about "The Mothers of Gynecology," a group of enslaved women who served as both patients and surgical nurses as James Marion Sims, known as "The Father of American Gynecology," developed a successful surgical reparative method for obstetrical fistula. The "Mothers" were Betsey, Lucy, and Anarcha along with about five other enslaved women's names that are unknown.

Cape Verdean born OB-GYN, Veronica Pimentel, MD, now based in the United States, created "Betsey, Lucy, and Anarcha Days of Recognition" at the end of February (Black History Month) and the beginning of March (Women's History Month) to serve as a bridge for medical organizations and schools around the nation to honor the labor and lives of these women, some of whom were mothers, who shaped American reproductive medicine.

Ultimately, motherhood is not simply a choice but also a sacred mission to usher life and lives into being. To be a Black mother in America has its own set of challenges rooted in systems of racial, sexual, and class oppression. Yet, there are ways that Black motherhood can exist in a joy that is not temporary and fleeting but that is deep and fulfilling.

Black mothers can continue to express love for themselves and their children communally. Communal loving and parenting is a practice rooted in Black culture. Tapping into resources provided by Black mothers like Kimberly Seals-Allers, co-creator of Black Breastfeeding Week and founder of the Irth app, that allows Black and Brown women to deposit data about their birthing experiences with hospitals, doctors, and nurses. Black mothers and parents are not only empowered but affirmed via their bodies and by easily accessible tools like their smartphones.

Even in my public talks about the history of reproductive medicine and the Black birthing crisis, it's fitting to end on a hopeful note. I inform audiences of the diverse and powerful methods Black mothers and birthing people are reclaiming — legacies rooted in vulnerability, community, creativity, and love. When Black mothers and birthing people tap into the existing community activism began by our ancestral midwives and healers, an activism rooted in one of the sustaining principles of reproductive justice, "the right to parent a

child or children in safe and healthy environments" occurs, according to authors and activists Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger. As the late novelist Octavia Butler intoned some years ago, Black women know "There is nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns." The hope and joy in Black mothering in parenting is in knowing intuitively there are new paths to forge and create for our children.

Allyson Felix: My Pregnancy Story Helped Me Find My Voice and Fight for Better Birthing Outcomes for Black Women ›

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