Centering the Lived Experiences of Rural Black Homeschool Families

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Abstract

Compared to all other options, homeschooling provides parents with the most control over their children's educational experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a surge in the U.S. homeschool population. Black families had the largest increase in home educators from 3.3% to 16.1% between April 2020 and October 2020. The emerging literature on Black home education has focused almost entirely on urban areas. This paper presents findings from a pilot study designed to begin to address the omission of rural setting representation in Black home education research literature. This qualitative study employed conceptual frameworks that value Black women's ways of knowing (e.g., Black Feminist Theory, Endarkened Feminist Epistemologies, and Critical Race Theory) to emphasize the role of participating mothers who represented a single-parent household or a household where the mother maintained primary responsibility for the home education of children.

Keywords: *homeschooling, African American/Black families, rural education, culturally relevant methodology*

Compared to all other options, homeschooling provides parents with the most control over their children's educational experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a surge in the U.S. homeschool population, and Black families had the largest increase in homeschooling from 3.3% to 16.1% between April 2020 and October 2020 (Eggleston & Fields, 2021). An emerging body of research has begun to document the contemporary Black homeschooling movement, but these studies have focused on urban areas. The phenomenon of rural Black home education has remained largely ignored, and therefore, rural Black families' perspectives have been relatively absent from the literature. Swain and Baker (2021) asserted, "There are very few media representations of people of color in rural southern United States, and those that exist are positioned as exceptions. We speculate this may in part be due to the historical construction of white land ownership of First Nation lands, settler colonialism, and the enslavement of Black bodies", (p. 16). The continued marginalization of rural Black families' representation in the literature may lead to inequity as state legislatures revisit and revise educational policies, particularly in response to the rise in homeschooling. This paper presents findings from a pilot study designed to begin to address the omission of rural setting representation in Black home education research literature.

Review of Relevant Literature

There is a dearth of comprehensive examinations of Black rural homeschooling. Most examinations of Black rural homeschooling are included as minor mentions in larger studies of

homeschooling (Jennings & Feagin, 2019; Levy, 2009; Ray et.al, 2021). Or studies of Black home-schooling are urban focused (Fields-Smith & Kisura, 2013; Mazama, 2016; King, 2016; Taylor, 2018). When conducting the search for relevant literature for this study it was found that overall examinations of homeschooling in the rural context are limited. This finding was very intriguing especially because the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 2019 study states that most homeschooling families are in the South and live in rural places (Wang, Rathbun, Musu, 2019). Despite this being the case Bridgeforth et al. (2021) study on school choice identified homeschool-ing as a form of school choice that is consistently selected, yet only four studies examine "rural education and homeschooling" (p.3) (see. Grady & Hoffman, 2018; Lubienski, Puckett, Brewer, 2013; Ray, 2015; Schafer & Khan, 2017). The studies noted by Bridgeforth et. al (2021) are not specific to examinations of Black rural homeschooling, yet with a limited scope of general discus-sions of rural homeschooling, Black families are even more so left out of this conversation.

Black Homeschooling

Studies of Black families who homeschool are most commonly localized in an urban con-text. One study related to Black families who homeschool was conducted by Ray (2015). The study titled "African American homeschool parents' motivations for homeschooling and their black children's academic achievement" employed an exploratory, cross-sectional, explanatory non-experimental design. Summarily Ray found that Black homeschooled students had higher ac-ademic achievement outcomes than their same aged, public school peers. While this study has many limitations in its quantitative approach to this subject, it also does not explicitly include locale so there is no disaggregation of data by setting (e.g., rural, urban, or suburban). Mazama & Lundy (2015) specifically examine the motivation of Black families to homeschool and denote a paucity of research on this topic. Understanding the motivation explicit to Black families is im-portant in understanding the overall landscape of homeschooling and its implication for educa-tional policy and practice. Mazama and Lundy articulate dynamic reasons for Black homeschool-ing that are more specific to navigating a racially oppressive society, yet there is no mention of a rural context for the examination. Moreover, Taylor (2018) plainly takes up an analysis of Black women's homeschooling experiences and in doing so names

> "Thus, in spite of the growing interests in homeschoolers and the proliferation of research on education and race, the tangential and often one-dimensional inclusion of Black home-schoolers' participation distorts the breadth of sociopolitical and cultural experiences within homeschooling research while concurrently perpetuating monolithic characteriza-tions of Black family life" (p.215).

Taylor's (2018) examination provides a clear articulation of why examining the specificity of the experiences of Black rural homeschoolers adds to the literature in very important ways by disrupt-ing what Taylor calls a "monolithic characterization" of Black homeschool life. Even so Taylor's analysis does not expressly address rural as a context for Black homeschooling.

Fields-Smith and many co-authors have examined Black families and their homeschooling experiences. Fields-Smith's (2020) study discussed how Black family homeschooling is a form of resistance, and development of their children's positive cultural self-identities. Fields-Smith & Kisura (2013) documented the ways Black homeschool families engaged their children in learning, and how having this knowledge informs the needs of Black education in public schools as

well. Fields-Smith & Williams (2009) found that Black parents' motivations to homeschool included issues related to race relation, and issues with the home and school relationship. Furthermore, they found that while Black parents had religious beliefs that motivated them to homeschool those motivations were more liberatory than their Caucasian home educating counterparts. Ultimately, much of Fields-Smith work has been seminal in building the examinations of Black families homeschooling experiences. Yet it distinctly lacks an examination of rural areas. Identifying the gap in the general literature has contributed to the justification for this current study.

Black Rural Homeschooling

There are limited instances where Black families are included in the research study related to rural places. Jennings & Feagin (2019) reviewed the book *Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life* by Hunter and Robinson (2018) and used their methodological and theoretical innovation to examine Black homeschooling as a form of Black sociological liberation. In doing so Jennings & Feagin (2019) made themselves one of the few studies that include rural in their language when discussing Black families who homeschool. Ultimately Jennings and Feagin posited the "African American homeschooling movement is an even sterner critique of the US state's systemic and institutional racism" (p.435). This inclusion of analysis of racism is instructive to understanding the landscape of Black families in rural places who homeschool. Levy (2009) explicitly discussed *Homeschooling and Racism* from the title it is clear Levy is explicit with their discussion of racism. Levy's study concludes "a correlation between racism and the geotemporal diffusion of homeschooling legislation" (p. 905). Levy employed an event history analysis of the occurrence of US states adopting homeschooling legislation. Levy tied this event history to state levels of school segregation. Levy also denoted "Homeschooling families are more likely to live in small towns or rural areas. These figures therefore suggest that states that are less urban are more likely to have a higher percentage of homeschooling families" (p. 907). Even with these conclusions Levy's study is more focused on the segregation tactics of white supremacy than the explicit choice of Black families in rural places to homeschool.

Overall, the examination of the literature showed that most families who homeschool live in the South and in rural places (Wang, Rathbun, Musu, 2019), however based on the educational research one would think that a majority of homeschoolers are in urban places. From this review of the literature, we concluded there is a gap in literature on Black families in rural places who homeschool, even though most homeschooling families live in the rural places. Identifying this gap in the literature provides an opportunity to focus on the growing homeschool population with a specificity aimed toward understanding the experiences of rural and Black as it relates to homeschooling.

Conceptual Framework

This qualitative study aimed to implement a culturally responsive and anti-colonial methodological approach by employing conceptual frameworks that value Black women's ways of knowing because, based on the existing research, Black mothers tend to oversee and conduct the instruction within Black homeschool families. To this end, our research has been informed by an overlapping of Black Feminist Theory (Collins, 2009), Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 2005), and Endarkened Feminist Epistemologies (Dillard, 2007). In selecting these frameworks, we do not disparage the role of Black fathers in homeschooling. Instead, we emphasize the role of

the mothers in this study who were either represented as a single-parent household or a household where the mother maintained primary responsibility for the home education of children.

Black Feminist Thought (BFT)

We conceptualize Black home education has an extension of hooks' (1990) conception of 'homeplace', which provided a historical perspective of the role Black mothers played in the lives of their children during the Jim Crow Era. To prepare their children to face the anti-Blackness, racism, and hate outside of their homes, hooks explained,

> In our young minds houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place - the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learned dignity, integrity of being; there we learned to have faith. The folks who made this life possible, who were our primary guides and teachers, were Black women.

During Segregation, Black mothers' homes became spaces of resistance against the brutality of racism, and today, Black mothers similarly have created sites of resistance through their implementation of home education. While we are no longer segregated by force under law, today's Black home educators choose this path for a wide variety of reasons including a need to avoid and overcome the many challenges facing Black education within traditional schools, public and private. Most notably, today's Black home educators resist institutionalized anti-Blackness experienced within and outside of traditional schools, the resegregation of schools, the under-resourcing of predominantly ethnic-minority schools, and they find refuge for their children through homeschooling. BFT requires researchers to value the lived experiences and 'everyday knowledge' of those who have directly experienced the phenomenon understudy, which for this study includes the intersectionality of being a Black mother, living in a rural community, and choosing home education for your children. Who would better understand the challenges, consequences, and possibilities of this combination of potentially oppressive characteristics than the Black mothers living this life? Using BFT provides insight and knowledge well beyond statistics.

Regarding resistance, Collins' seminal work in Black Feminist Thought (2009) explained that while most Black women experience racism, sexism, or other forms of oppression, we respond to it differently. Likewise, Black home educators have myriad approaches to their home education practice. Employing Black Feminist Thought to this study enables us to seek and document this diversity within the lived experiences of Black home educators rather than using a positivistic approach, which tends to value commonalities or centrality of the data. This is critical to our study, which focuses on the intersectionality of being Black, living in rural spaces, and choosing to homeschool. Moreover, applying BFT to our study enables Black home educators to engage in self-naming. As the participating mothers described their rural communities, we remained open to their definitions of rural even if they conflicted with other participants' descriptions. Therefore, BFT promotes acknowledgement of the unique perspectives each Black home educator contributed to the study and honors the fact that Black rural homeschool families are not a monolith. Finally, BFT fosters a social justice stance in research by seeking opportunities to inform transformation of inequities and eradication of oppression in policy and practice. Therefore, this study aimed to address deficit thinking surrounding Black mothers', their children, and their families as well as stereotypes and myths related to rural living and Black home education.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Most academics know that CRT originated in the legal field by the late scholar, Derrick Bell, but has been applied to other fields/institutions, including education, through research. Ladson-Billings (1999) most notably illuminated the role of African American storytelling as a key feature of CRT in education while also linking the history of CRT beyond Derrick Bell. The social construction of race serves as a major tenet of CRT along with the acknowledgement of the predominance of whiteness as a measurement or norm for 'correctness' within U.S. institutions including our educational system, and white privilege overall. Black storytelling in research counters the deficit perspective view that tends to permeate the discourse on Black parents and their children within the field of education. Counternarratives enable Black families to speak the truths of their socially constructed realities, and they can hopefully encourage diverse perspective taking, empathy, and compassion. Further, engaging in storytelling provides Black parents with a vehicle to counter self-hate and move toward healing from the oppression/hate/Anti-Blackness experienced within and outside of schools.

This study creates a space for Black mothers who homeschool in rural communities to speak their truths, which have been omitted from the literature until now. The continued absence of Black rural home educators falsely communicates that Black home education is an urban only phenomenon. Further, Black rurally situated homeschool families' lived experiences challenges deficit thinking associated with rurality, Blackness, and the learning potential of Black children.

Endarkened Feminist Epistemology (EFE)

Dillard's (2006) concept of Endarkened Feminist Epistemology (EFE) connects to and expands BFT and CRT by grounding our research in Black women's ways of knowing, and by honoring ancestral, community, and spiritual connections. Her work undergirds the purpose and process of this study. The power of self-naming, recognized by BFT, CRT, and EFE, has been embodied in the way this study defines 'rural' through the lens of the Black home educators represented within this study. Like the Black women in Dillard (2006), the Black home educators defined 'rural' in a variety of ways, which at times conflicted with traditional definitions, but also offered insight toward understanding more fully the complexity of labeling a place rural or not rural. The purpose of this study can be explained through EFE as Dillard posited "To give voice to silenced spaces as an act of resistance" (p. 19). Whether their communities would be labeled 'rural' or not did not matter for this work. That each home educator self-identified as a rural dweller enabled them to participate in the study. Our methods also embodied the EFE assumption that the distinct daily experiences of each home educator "form the criteria of meaning", and therefore, the methodology of this study not only valued rural Black home educators' everyday experiences, but also created a sense of responsibility 'to get it right' not only among the researcher, but also within the group of participating rural Black home educators. Our connection to one another held us accountable to each other. This is the spirituality of the research process described by Dillard (2006), which was accomplished through member checks and Sister Circle Methodology, to be discussed in the next section.

Methodology

This qualitative pilot study assumed a phenomenological stance seeking to understand the phenomena of homeschooling from the perspective of Black homeschool mothers living in rural communities, including their self-definitions of the rural context. We further sought to employ culturally responsive and anti-colonial research strategies to privilege the voices of participating Black rural homeschool mothers. Blending phenomenological, culturally responsive, and decolonizing research methods enabled us to be responsive to the inquiry focus of this study while also maintaining a responsiveness to the participants. Patel (2016) reminds scholars that research is never neutral and to foster change researchers need to shift from seeking to "own" data/knowledge to instead cultivate a mindset of researchers as accountable to their study participants. Research accountability, or answerability promotes a focus on the varied/unique perspectives and lived experiences of Black home educators in rural spaces rather than narrowly aiming for convergence.

Participants

Using the community nomination process, where each participant referred another person to participate in this study, resulted in 12 rural Black home educator participants. Participating Black homeschool mothers did not know other Black homeschool families in their own rural communities and instead relied on internet-based relationships to refer other home educators to participate in the study, which serves as an indication of the isolation of rural Black homeschooling to be discussed in the findings section. As a result of this isolation, the 12 participating home educators represented eight different states (Alabama, Arkansas, California, Georgia, Louisiana, Tennessee, Texas, North Carolina). Due to the isolation of participating Black home educators we limit the uniquely identifiable characteristics of their rural communities and use pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. The diverse homeschool families represented in this study chose to remove their children from either 1) public schools (Brenda, Cherie, Christy, Nichelle, Nina, Tracey, and Kim), 2) private schools (Annaliese, Kim, Mickey), or chose to homeschool from birth (Kiki). Candy and Janette indicated strong intentions to transition to homeschool soon, but they represented part-time home educators meaning that they engaged in homeschooling while their children also attended public schools.

As found on Table 1 below, the 12 rural home educators represented in this study included two single parent families (Brenda & Christy) and five of the mothers had grown up as natives of their rural communities while seven of them had been transplanted from other states and cities. Five of the seven transplants had lived in large urban metropolitan cities such as Chicago, Illinois or Baltimore, Maryland. Mothers ranged in having homeschooled for a year up to over 24 years. Three home educators were veterans having homeschooled for 10 or more years, while five of the mothers had relatively new homeschool practices of between 1-3 years. Candy and Janette, part-time home educators, had high hopes of transitioning to full-time homeschooling as soon as possible. Candy's barrier to homeschooling resided in the fact that she and her family were living with her parents and her parents did not want her to homeschool her children. Once she secured housing independent of her parents she and her husband planned to begin home educating their children. Janette had not yet transitioned to homeschooling because she was developing a plan to begin her home education practice while also maintaining her full-time job. She and some friends were in the process of developing and mapping out the homeschool curriculum they would use as part of

that plan. Contrary to common stereotypes of homeschool families, six of the home educators in this study held full-time jobs outside of their homes, four of the mothers were entrepreneurs, one mom worked part-time outside of the home and also ran her own business and only two of the home educators were stay-at-home mothers. Further, all of the mothers in this study had at least one degree; six of the home educators held professional or doctoral degrees and four had master's degrees.

Table 1: *Participating Black Home Educators' Demographics*

Home Educator (State)	Marital Status M=Married S = Single	# Years Home-schooling	# Children (Ages)	Native or Transplant	Education	Work Status
Annaliese (GA)	M	4 years	1 son (9)	T	Law School	Full-time
Brenda (NC)	S	2 years	daughter & son (Twins, 6)	T	Ph.D.	Full-time
Candy (NC)	M	Part-time Home Educator	2 daughters (10, 5)	N	Masters	Ent
Cherie (AL)	M	3 years	1 son (6)	N	Masters	Ent
Christy (TN)	S	2 years	1 son (13)	N	Masters	Ent
Janette (NC)	M	Part-time Home Educator	2 sons (10, 8)	N	Ph.D.	Full-time
Kim (LA)	M	8 years	2 sons (18,16)	T	Undergrad	Home

KiKi (GA)	M	24+ years	3 sons (23, 21, 14) daughter (19)	T	Ph.D.	Full-time
Mickey (GA)	M	1 year	2 sons (14, 6)	T	Ph.D.	Full-time
Nichelle (TX)	M	10+ years	3 daughters (15, 13, 11) 2 sons (8, 4)	T	Masters	Ent + Part-time
Nina (CA)	M	11+ years	2 sons (19, 21) Daughter (10)	N	Under grad	Home
Tracey (AR)	M	2 years	2 daughters (14, 12)	T	Ph.D.	Full-time

Data Sources and Research Process

Interviews and Sister Circles served as the primary data collection methods used in this study. In this section we describe the data collection and data analysis processes which were intertwined with strategies to ensure trustworthiness of data interpretation.

Interviews

Due to COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions, interviews were conducted over Zoom. Interview protocols sought a conversation style rather than an interrogation and followed a modified version of Seidman's (2013) multi-phased interview process. The three stages of the interviews began with a review of the consent form and then transitioned to homeschool mothers' definitions of rural. The semi-structured guide included gathering background information on where participating home educators grew up and how they came to live in their current rural communities. Finally, Black home educators were asked to share their perspectives on the strengths and challenges of homeschooling in rural communities.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim via a transcription service. Interview transcripts were compared to Zoom recordings for accuracy and formatting, and then they were sent to the participants for member checks. We honored participating home educator mothers' requests to remove items from the transcript. In addition, children's names, schools, and other setting identifying details have been removed. Overall, interviews lasted for between 60 to 90 minutes. Transcripts averaged 55 pages in length and ranged from 37 to 129 pages.

Data analysis began with interview transcripts employing initial coding deductively gleaned directly from the research questions. These general codes served as somewhat of a "grand

tour", or overview, within exploratory coding as discussed in Saldana (2016, p. 73) and they included definitions of rural, challenges of rural homeschooling, benefits of rural homeschooling, and the role of race in rural homeschooling. Matrices were created to explore the unique attributes among each home educator within each of these initial codes. This second level of analysis led to deeper understanding of emerging themes such as how Black homeschool mothers experienced isolation beyond basic spatial/geographic isolation. The findings presented in this paper represent the results of this second level of analysis.

Sister Circles

Sister Circles have been used within the African American community for over 100 years; they began when Black women were not welcomed in historical White women and Black male spaces (Johnson, 2015). Out of necessity, Black women created Sister Circles to collectively share, encourage, strategize, and move toward healing from oppression. Sister Circles have been used in the counseling and health professions, and more recently have begun to be applied to educational research. Sister Circles represent a culturally responsive method of engaging in focus groups with Black women (Hall, 2020).

Johnson (2015) identified three primary characteristics of Sister Circle methodology, which were applied to this study as well. First, the researcher assumes the role of participant by sharing experiences. The aim is to remove the power dynamic. Second, Sister Circle methodology promotes empowerment for all participants. "Having opportunities to connect and share with other Black women further helps Black women to make meaning of those experiences, or knowledge, (Lacy, 2018)". Indeed, participating rural Black home educators remarked on the value of meeting and sharing with other Black homeschool mothers who lived in rural communities, which represented a rare opportunity for them given their relative isolation. Finally, Sister Circle communication styles do not typically follow the conventions of standard English, but instead privilege the African American vernacular and style. It is not unusual to hear members of a Sister Circle talking over each other, shouts of "Amen", and other culturally relevant ways of expressing connection or passion over a subject being discussed. These expressions communicate encouragement to each other, rather than rudeness. In this study, Sister Circles served as a strategy toward clarifying and verifying initial interpretations of the interview data. Therefore, Sister Circles were scheduled after completion of interviews, transcription, and the initial stages of data analysis.

Sister Circles typically occur in-person and even over a meal. However, due to the pandemic the Sister Circles for this study were recorded via Zoom, which required extra care. To cultivate collectiveness, the first author planned three Sister Circles each with four rural Black home educators. Hall (2020) suggested keeping the number of sisters in the circle small to ensure all voices would be heard. Where possible, mothers from the same state were scheduled in a Sister Circle together. The invitation to participate in a Sister Circle included a description of the event as an opportunity to meet and share with other Black mothers who homeschool in rural communities. Prior to each scheduled Sister Circle, the first author emailed participating mothers with suggestions to be in a comfortable and relaxed space for the Zoom Sister Circle and to have a warm beverage and snacks nearby. Further, rural home educators were encouraged to keep their cameras on, but also provided with the option of keeping them off. In addition, home educators were reminded to change their name in Zoom if they wanted to remain anonymous. Only 1 home educator used a pseudonym, but after the circle she asked that her email be shared with the other participants. Sister Circles began with a welcome and thank you given by the first author, a reminder of

the focus on "What is it like to be Black and homeschool in a rural community?", and introduction of each group member. The first author provided circle members with an overview of key themes in the interview data such as isolation and complexity of defining "rural". Sister Circles ended by asking home educators to share about how they experienced the circle.

Overall, the methodological design of this pilot study complimented our aim for a culturally responsive, decolonizing, and systematic rigorous research process. Each Sister Circle contained elements of joy, laughter, and bonding. Members of the circle reached out to one another and formed ongoing relationships.

Findings

With an aim of centering rural Black homeschool mothers' lived experiences, this study addressed the following questions:

1. How do rural, Black mothers define and know they live in rural spaces?
2. How do rural, Black mothers discuss the role of race in their homeschool decision-making, homeschool practice, or everyday living?

We present the findings in two main sections titled, Black Home Educators' Definitions and Perspectives of Rural and How Does Race Show Up in the Data? Overall, we found that rural does not mean an absence of resources, rural spaces are quite different from one another, and Black families can thrive in rural homeschool contexts.

Black Home Educators' Definitions and Perspectives of Rural

The twelve participating Black home educators used familiar idioms or characterizations to initially describe their rural communities. Rural home educators used common phrases such as "I'm in the sticks" (GA), "the middle of nowhere" (NC), and even "Nobody knows where we are" (TX) to begin describing their rural communities. Idioms were used by rural transplants and natives of rural communities alike. These phrases implied rural referred to remote, lesser-known areas within a state. In describing their rural communities, Black home educators tended to compare them by distance from larger, assumed more known cities (e.g., 'about 60 miles east of _____' or 'two hours away from _____'. Other characteristics of rural raised among most participants included 1) living a lengthy distance from their nearest neighbor, 2) ability to count total number of traffic lights in the community, and 3) identifying the limited existence of, or proximity to, popular franchises (e.g. fast food chains, supermarkets, and department stores). Black home educators also frequently described what they observed surrounding their homes as they looked out from their windows or porches, which included wildlife, agricultural products growing in large fields (commercial farming), wilderness, or large open spaces of land. Rural Black home educators also reported owning/living on several acres of land. In fact, access to land and agriculture served as a key asset for rural Black home educators.

Significance of the Land

Rural Black home educators reported strong connections between the land (owned by them and surrounding them) to their curriculum, home education practice, and transmission of values

and life lessons to their children. Interestingly, both rural natives and transplants expressed experiencing these connections.

Kiki, a veteran home educator who grew up in a large urban city in the North, who but now lived in Georgia shared,

> So, part of homeschooling rural black kids is helping them understand the value of land. *We wanted their education to be something that had this kind of continuity to our ancestors…* like your ability to grow your own food and eat your own food, right? What I'm trying to get at really is if black families could create and understand the beauty of land and have a positive connection, maybe that would help to balance out some of the ancestral experiences that were so bad and traumatic. *Owning land is liberation.* We rent out some of our land now and that was so different from what our ancestors had. That's power- that's freedom. That's freedom. *When you're rural and you're homeschooling, I think it creates this relationship to land. But, um, it's funny because when they feel the need to be free, they come home, you know, they come back to the land. They come back where it's quiet, where they can just be who they are, back to that identity that they've crafted for themselves.*

Kiki connects land ownership with freedom and African American ancestral history. Possessing the land enabled her family to enjoy financial gain from renting portions of their land to others who also farmed. Most importantly, Kiki relates her family's relationship with land to freedom, and even her children's identity development. The serenity of her rural community enabled her children to have a place where they could just be, which is reminiscent of Peters' (2020) cogent argument linking Black homeschooling to the constitutional right to privacy, or 'the freedom to be or become'. The author explained that legal definitions of privacy, which included 1) an "individual's ability to live a self-authored and self-curated life without unnecessary intrusions and distractions" (p. 26) and as breathing room referring to "the space created for play and self-making, both key to innovation and a vigilant citizenry" (p. 29) have not been explored deeply enough in relation to racial discrimination. She stated,

> Black people's experience with the right to privacy has been inconsistent at best. Black children are disproportionately denied the experience and attendant benefits of child privacy. Foregrounding the essential meaning of privacy as *the right to be and become in childhood* allows for a more nuanced examination of child privacy and the necessary protection of the developing psyche. Exposure to privacy violations cause immense damage with far reaching consequences. While parents have a duty to protect their children, Black parents carry the additional burden of identifying and protecting their children from the predictable harms of racial discrimination. (Peters, 2020, p. 30, emphasis in the original)

The author continues with a detailed discussion of the implications of Black children's racialized experiences with continued deficit-thinking and the lingering myth of Black inferiority. Given the hardships racialized experiences within schools, and outside of schools, Peters conceptualized Black homeschool parents as protecting their children's privacy or "their children's' right to be and become by adhering to a series of practices that include preserving Black childhood; creating breathing space for Black children to flourish, insulating Black children from distortions; and letting Black children self-author their own lives" (p. 43). Thus, Kiki's adult children returning to the

breathing space offered by their childhood rural homeschool environment represents a vehicle toward privacy, or "the right to be and become".

Like Kiki's children, other rural Black homeschool mothers described participation in 4-H Club or 4-H-like activities within their rural communities. 4-H Club is a youth development organization tied to the U.S. Department of Agriculture engages youths in leadership and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math hands-on activities centered on agriculture-related topics. Nina who homeschooled in a rural California community talked about integrating her home garden and care of chickens as well as bees into her homeschool practice. She shared, "We're getting to where all the afternoons are going to be outside in the garden and she [daughter] can't wait to just be outside". Nina described how they learned to protect the chickens from the hawks and caring for plants when they were young as part of their extensively agriculturally based homeschool practice. For Christy, a native of her rural community, connection to land meant connections with elders in her family. She shared, *"My dad and grand dad would always have gardens,* and sometimes you go to the grocery store, what you want ain't there. Okay, how are we going to solve that? Well, we got an old country remedy for that. Get a bucket, let's start a garden. It doesn't have to be a plot of land. You can grow some stuff in your house! You know, just being resourceful, trying to rely on the land, um, get into, you know, get to your elders because they still do live in those parts. *Get those stories about your history and know who you are… learn how to live off the land, but also learn from the people who lived off the land before you."* However, growing produce and raising animals at home did not work out for everyone. Kim, a transplant in her rural Louisiana community, shared,

> The thing is when we moved out here the boys weren't in anything, and, you know, activities really, and my husband, he swears he's a farmer. He is not a farmer. He thinks he is, but he is not. When we first moved out here, we got a goat. I had no idea. We shouldn't have been getting a goat. *The goat ran away, never saw the goat again. Um, we tried chickens. We tried to plant things, and nothing ever worked (laughs). So, we had no business doing it.*

Black rural home educators held diverse perspectives in their connections to the land and relating agriculturally based content into their curriculum ranging from intense to infertile attempts to engage in farming.

Similarly, Black rural homeschool mothers represented in this study demonstrated the diversity within rural communities. Three mothers described living in subdivision-like communities similar to suburbs where their neighbors' homes were relatively close. Although rural communities appeared to be remote, some Black rural mothers reported that their communities had a variety of valuable resources such as an abundance of STEM related industries, nearby beaches, or proximity to multiple state lines. Nonetheless, each of the Black home educators expressed feelings of isolation within their rural communities.

Isolation

Analysis revealed three types of isolation experienced by rural Black homeschool mothers to varying degrees. First, geographic isolation, which Levy (2009) also found as stated, "Because rural communities usually experience spatial isolation, transportation of rural students to a regional public school may not be a viable solution. In addition, the culture of social isolation where small

communities rely on their own resources for a living can also contribute to the evolution of home-schooling" (p. 913). In fact, Annaliese used geographic isolation to explain why she perceived her community as rural. She stated,

> I understand, you know, it's [her community] a decent size, you know, maybe 100,000 or so, give or take, right. But to me, that's pretty small, having come from the DC metro area, where some of the suburban communities right around the DC city proper can exceed, you know, several 100,000s of people. Right. So that, to me, is suburban. And this to me, is rural, also partly, so not just because it's a small college town for a land grant institution out in the middle of the country. Right. *But it's also, you know, 70 plus miles or so from Atlanta, which to me is a true urban city area. To get here you go through a lot of really small towns and countryside and cotton fields and farms. Right. So, components of rural. That's why I think of this as rural.*

As a transplanted rural dweller, Annaliese viewed her community as rural due to its size in comparison to the large urban metropolitan area she grew up in. But distance from the resources found in a large urban area served as a key challenge in Annaliese's homeschooling as well as the quality of resources found in her community compared to those found in large urban areas. She shared,

> I mean there is [a local community park] with a bear and some other animals there but you know, it's not the same as going to the zoo in Atlanta or the aquarium. So, I think those types of extra killer or enrichment opportunities don't exist here. *So, you must make the right arrangements to be able to go, you have to find the time to go, you have to pay the fees, you have to, you know, get there at the appointed time. And so that can be a barrier, right?* You know, even putting those aside, but you don't maybe have the same range of bookstores or toy stores, or the sort of the commercial venues to choose from.

Black rural home educators expressed having to travel long distances has one of their main challenges. Nichelle, who homeschooled in Texas, reported traveling up to three hours one way to gain access to resources to enhance her homeschool practice. But Nichelle's decision to travel two hours included a desire to enable her children to socialize with other Black homeschool children as they were the only Black family who homeschooled in her rural community. In this way, some Black rural homeschool mothers experience cultural isolation as they search for co-ops and other opportunities to interact with other Black families. Nichelle described urban areas as being plentiful in terms of ethnic-minority-focused homeschool groups. She and her children will make a day of it and travel the three hours one way to participate in a field trip with an urban-based ethnic-minority homeschool group. This topic will be further explored in the next section of findings.

Political isolation represented the final form of isolation experienced by rural Black home educators. Interestingly, this theme initially emerged from Black home educators' expressions of concerns regarding displaying images that might provoke negative responses from their White neighbors and community. Mickey shared the following, *"So, for us, if I wear my T-shirt that says Black Lives Matter- you can imagine the looks.* There are the different looks, the stares, the people who step back. And, and I can tell, you know-people are, um, you know, *they intend to let you know that I make them feel uncomfortable…*But here *I have to monitor*, you know, *what I wear and maybe even how I wear my hair and those kinds of things*." Such concerns were not limited to

issues surrounding Blackness, or concern for anti-Blackness, but also included political affiliations and even homeschooling more broadly.

Five months following the 2020 presidential election, Nichelle described her rural community experience as "we're kinda walking on eggshells out here". She further explained,

> *"The [political] signs are still up; we have flags that are upside down*…Like an SOS signal, *like something's wrong.* That's the hidden language. If you fly it upside down, *like "We're not happy"*... The distress signal that's what the word I'm looking for". Amid her neighbors' silent, but highly visible protest at the election of President Joe Biden, Nichelle reported that *her family felt ill at ease in expressing their views, but this discomfort existed prior to the election results.* Nichelle shared, "The Confederate signs are all over the place. They're, they're everywhere. before he was in office, I mean, people will look at...*Some people look at homeschoolers like... And, and have their judgements.* I remember wanting to put a sticker or something on my truck. Like, you know how they, they have the stickers where they have like the mom, father stick figure- it was something similar to that, but it was homeschool something and my husband was like, 'No, don't do that because everybody doesn't agree with that and *we don't want to be targeted for whatever reason…*you know, homeschooling in the midst of people who don't necessarily agree with who we are as, like the color of our skin and, um, people who don't necessarily agree with homeschool."

Interestingly, not all Black home educators in rural communities experienced this type of political isolation. During a Sister Circle discussion, representing southern states acknowledged the presence of confederate flags as well as guns and in response, these homeschool moms revealed that they too visibly engage in gun use for hunting and as a sport, which provided a means of alerting their neighbors that they too are armed. Brenda shared awkward interactions with her rural white community members including an incident in Wal-Mart. She shared,

> One time we were at Wal-Mart and this random man came up to us, we were walking into Walmart, and he was coming out...and he was like, "Young man, we stand for the flag, and we kneel at the cross to my five-year-old little boy!" This was of course in reference to Colin Kaepernick, and I was like, What a…And then I think some of these interactions are because I'm a woman. I doubt people would come up and talk to people's children if a man was with them. I don't know, but those types of things happen all the time in the community and make me say, 'Ahh, [this community] may not be the best place to raise and socialize Black children."

Finally, Black home educators tended to experience sociocultural isolation when they chose to homeschool due to the challenge in finding families who homeschooled who shared their Black identity and focus in the homeschool practice. Annalise described feeling constrained in finding non-religious home educators in her southern rural community, "I recognize that here [our rural community] there are a fair number of religious based homeschoolers and homeschooling programs. But I think if you're, a little bit outside that norm, that model, it can be difficult to find people to connect with, or access to home educators with more diverse perspectives". The challenge in finding like-minded homeschool families existed within majority Black and predominantly white rural communities because even in the majority Black communities, rural homeschool mothers frequently reported being the only Black family that homeschooled in their community.

How does Race Get Taken Up in this Data?

      The following section details the ways that Black home educators discussed race. Which directly responds to the research question: How does race get taken up in this data? Not all participants were as explicit about their use of language that directly addressed race. Participant transcripts were analyzed for the words: Black, African American, and race-facing terms (i.e. white, Asian, mixed). This search for explicit mentions of race was intentional in explicating how race was taken up in the data. Generally, participants were responding to some version of the prompt …talk about rural homeschooling, um, from a black perspective. The findings from this prompt resulted in three themes: *being the only black, black as a descriptor, and black representation*. While participant responses varied, there were consistent descriptions of being the only, usually when referring to the structure of the rural locale, or the activities and experiences of the family or the children. Descriptions of being the only often were in relation to discussing learning-based activities or social opportunities for the children. The use of descriptors like "only black people," "only black family" or "only black family a lot of times" provided clear articulation of the theme of *being the only black*. Each of these forms of being the only was instructive to understanding how race was taken up in the data. Overlapping this theme of being the only is the use of Black as a descriptor, meaning to denote something about the race of the Black educator or family. This particular use seemed common when describing families or individuals of races other than Black, meaning related to families or experiences where there were more than just white persons or families. Lastly, Black as representation was critical to the Black home educator's descriptions related to race. Points made by the Black home educators included discussion of teachers that are the same race as their child, the need to represent Black people in the curriculum and learning that their child participates in. The way representation was discussed was nuanced and direct, overall Black home educators where reinforcing the importance of the decisions they are making related to educating their Black children at home. The subsequent section provides examples that demonstrate how these themes were expressed in the interviews.

Being the only Black

      Representing participants discussion about *being the only black* showed up in several ways. One participant Kiki stated multiple times "... yeah, it just didn't, it didn't mesh. Um, so, so needless to say, *they were always like the only black person in their whatever*" (Kiki, p.39). Kiki discusses this when talking about her children's choices in activities. When talking about 4H she noted, "Uh, and when we joined, we were... I'm trying to think of, we were *the only black family*, or I know there was never more than two black families, and we were one" (Kiki, p.10). The form of being the only black family was a way that participants expressed their perspective of being a Black family in a rural place who homeschool. "But being in a rural space, I think the challenge becomes is that it's not easily accessible to sorta like go to a tutoring spot or to, um, uh, there's not a, there's *not a black homeschool group that's near us either*" (Tracey, p. 40). Being the only was found across most transcripts yet how it was discussed may have varied. Sometimes it was related to children's activities, other times it was related to the entire structure of being a Black family who is homeschooling. In one case Kim expressed "... you know, in our, in our rural area, I think *we're the only black people in- in our town*. Okay, maybe some other over but, like, usually in our circles, *we're usually the only black people*" (p.20). Additionally, some expressed it related to the frequency of being the only black "Uh, well, where are the *only black ones a lot of times*. (laughs)"

(Nina, p.7). "I would venture to say the biggest disadvantage of homeschooling or the experiences that we've seen is, um, *being the only black person.* It is the weirdest thing. Um, and not just only a black person homeschooling, but the only black person involved in experiences" (Kiki, p.38). These characterizations of *being the only black* contribute to how we understand how race got taken up in the data. Mothers expressed how *being the only black* impacted their children and their choices about accessing resources and locations for field trips, outings and connecting to others.

Black as Descriptor

Mothers in the study also used Black and or race as a descriptor. This meant that when describing an experience or a situation, the relevance of Black was present and necessary to include. It also showed up when mothers were discussing their experiences with other raced groups. Nichelle spends some time discussing various homeschool groups:

> Um, but I know in the more urban areas are the more...Uh, like the, the city, like in Houston, there are tons of homeschool groups, you know, you can pick and choose if want a, *a Black group, if you want a White group, if you want a Muslim group, you know, that you can just kind of pick and choose.* (p. 14)

Brenda likewise describes the ethnic/racial experience of being different, it is inferred that she is talking about different from racially white *"Two of us are African American, the other one is Jewish.* And so that- that was kind of our- our bond and glue, that we were- we were different than what is here" (Brenda, p. 24). In these descriptions both mothers find the need to denote how naming black as a descriptor is important to understand what they are experiencing. Black as descriptor also included denoting who was present in the rural space where the families reside. "Um, there's, there's no...*it's only black and white. There isn't another racial group*" (Tracey, p. 46). This descriptor also related to the age of the children relative to the community that the Black home educators lived in. The rural community, town, city that a Black home educator resides in was a big part of the way they used Black as a descriptor. Tracey related the following when talking about her neighborhood: Um, *We're the only black family with young children though"* (p.47). Additionally, Candy had a similar comment on the race/age dynamic of her location too "Um...And *I haven't met a lot of other black families that have young children.* Like, their kids are a bit older, um- "(p.26). Black home educators' use of black as a descriptor is not surprising as the context of their lived experiences and oftentimes their reasoning for home educating is tied to their identity as Black. The use of Back as a descriptor did however denote not just those that are racially Black but also those of other races too. This theme contributes to answering the research question about how race was taken up in the data through the ways that it includes Black and. Meaning Black as a necessary descriptor to include because there were also other identifying elements too. Meaning race/ethnicity or race/age. Black as a descriptor helped to explicate the nuances of living in a rural place where the need to denote Black helps to make more plain the experiences of Black home educators in rural places.

Black as Representation:

Examinations of the data for how Black home educators took up race included representation, which was discussed related to being in a rural place and opportunities for Black and blackness to be represented. Sometimes that representation was based on others who look like their family, or even most profoundly was related to where black is most or best represented. Annelise's discussion of this provided one of the most profound articulations of representation:

> And when we talk specifically about being black, and being a home educator, that also adds another layer. So being black and being in Athens, not even being a home educator, just being black and being [in] Athens has its own rural feel to it for me, compared to other places that I've lived in America, that were not as rural like as here. And then when you overlay the homeschooling part, and you start trying to think about connecting with people finding curriculum, finding activities to fill, *being that far from Africa, I mean, from Atlanta*, is problematic, right, as an African American Home educator. I mean, the *African American Museum is in Atlanta. Right now, [not] many African centered places here in this community*. (Annelise, p.7)

Annelise's phrasing "being that far from Africa, I mean, from Atlanta", this statement when hearing it and reading it was so poignant even though it could be read as a slip of the tongue it also can be read as a way to understand and recognize where Black people and Black representation are located and Atlanta, for her, was that place, as a representation of Africa. Other articulations related to representation also included disrupting negative narrative of Black families.

> That's, that is, it's really important because, you know, when you think about, um, *what we hear about black parents, what we hear about black kids, a lot of times, it's not always the positive things that we do. And, and it's more, it seems to me it's more of the negative things. And it continues this narrative of the inferiority of being black*. (Nina, p. 27)

The quote speaks to the need to disrupt how Black peoples are represented negatively and to do that work being a home educator was a way to do that. Janet reiterates this notion when she discusses:

> But, you know, I think that the more I've spoken to colleagues that are, that are black women raising black children, um, the more we realize that schooling for our children is simply put on the back. They, they really want... they try to make our children assimilate to the white culture, this cultural whiteness. And I just, I just rather, or *I prefer to teach my own children. Um, because for one I can include history that I know is accurate.* (p. 7)

Representing history accurately was one articulation of the ways that being a Black home educator addressed Black representation. It also names an explicit way that Black home educators are intentionally addressing representation. Another form of representation related to choices about learning interactions

> ...but, watching the kids online, *the majority are African American. And for the first time in my eighth graders, like he's got black teachers.* And for the first time, well, of course,

my little one is in first grade, but his teacher is a *Black teacher. And he just loves looking at her, 'cause she has curly long hair."* (Mickey p. 15)

When Mickey discusses her children's experience with a Black teacher as a part of their home education learning, she also asserts that having the Black teacher with curly long hair was influential to her child. This teacher represented more than just a person on the other side of the computer screen. Knowing there are others was important, other Black students and having a Black teacher. Furthermore, Nina discusses the same when it comes to her own excitement about finding others that represented Black home education.

> Um, you know, since I've been on Instagram, I've like, *I've found so many black home schoolers, but before that, um, I mean, definitely when I was homeschooled, uh, I was the only one that was black.* And, but I mean, when I went to school, that was always, that was the case a lot of times in my classes too." (Nina, p.7)

Having representations of Black people doing homeschooling, engaging home education and being able to make the decisions about how and who your child was interacting with so that Black would not be negatively represented was important to these rural home educators. Black as representation meant making intentional decisions about how and who would help educate their children in ways that are or were not available in their public school settings.

Overall, the Black home educators discussed race in concrete ways with some nuance. What was seen across the 12 transcripts was that being black, using black to describe their experiences and black representation were important and often motivating aspects of their home educating. Being in a rural place and being a Black home educator meant that sometimes the children and the family are the only black people, or that using black as a descriptor was necessary so that the context and understanding of the experience was not lost, and finally it meant that black as representation was a necessary part of the home education experience. Black as representation may have also been a result of the participants' locale. Being in rural places, even if they are mostly in the south, contextually influenced the experiences and responses Black home educators provided. As discussed related to isolation, the proximity to other Black people is influential in the ways that the Black home educators in this study chose to navigate and discuss their home educating experiences.

Discussion

This pilot study focused on the lived experiences of rural Black homeschool mothers has begun to highlight the benefits and barriers of being Black, homeschooling, and living in a rural community. Access to an abundance of land and agriculture represented a major benefit for rural homeschool mothers not just in their curriculum development, but also in providing relative quiet and even a freedom perceived to not be readily available in urban surroundings. The lived experiences expressed by rural Black home educators related to farming align with reports of contemporary Black farming as a form of resistance (Gripper, 2020; Yu, 2018). Gripper discusses the phenomenon of food sovereignty happening in major cities where Black people are regaining "agency and ownership over their food system." By maintaining and owning a source for food through farming Black families reconnect with our ancestral strength who farmed when grocery stores

refused to serve them. Farming builds community and also promotes collective healing. Gripper explained,

> Through grassroots organizing, policy advocacy, and urban planning, we are pushing for access to land for emotional, spiritual, physical, and collective healing because our communities' health and livelihoods depend on it. Gardens and farms provide people with exposure to greenness, opportunities for physical activity and potential benefits to the microbiome since exposure to soil and its many microorganisms can boost our gut health.

This activism works to counter Black land loss and to create economic opportunity within the Black community. Rural Black home educators' access to land and agriculture created opportunities for Peters' (2020) notion of privacy or freedom to be and become like what Black urban farmers seek.

The various forms of isolation, (geographic, sociocultural, and political) represented a major challenge for rural Black homeschool mothers. Rural meant being away from other Black homeschool families even within predominantly Black rural communities. In this study, rural also meant frequent incidences of awkward interactions with political and ethnic Others within the community or the need to avoid such interactions by silencing oneself in some way. Collins (2009) reminds us that we all respond to such oppressions in different ways. But it is interesting to note that rural Black home educators discussed racialized experiences that occurred outside of schools more frequently than what appears in the literature on urban Black home education.

Overall, this initial study of rural Black homeschooling disrupts the idea that homeschooling is a white and urban/suburban only phenomenon, and contributes to counter narratives demonstrating that Black families everywhere care about, and invest deeply in their children's education.

Implications for Future Research

The isolation of Black rural home school families challenges the ability to conduct large scale research on Black rural homeschooling. Infrastructure to support homeschooling overall is still in development. Black home educators are constructing their own infrastructure via social media and other digital platforms. But these may be difficult for non-home educator researchers to access.

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