

black m (othering

Principal Investigator

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Affiliated Institution

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Contact Information

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Project Title

black m(othering

Project Abstract

black m(othering is an exploration of black reproductive freedom and future making in Indiana. The roots of black m(othering take after [SisterSong](#)'s reproductive justice: "the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities." This project brings together research analysis, artistic storytelling, and public education to document and honor community-led efforts to protect and uplift and expand black reproductive care in Indiana across time, space, and access. All writing produced through this project is powered by [@crybyline](#).

Audience

The primary audience for black mothering is the project's beloved subject: black people who are and can become pregnant, black parents and families, and black community care networks.

Project Timeline

Summer 2023: Researching *June 1 — August 31*

- Research archives
- Review published reports

Fall 2023: Listening *September 1 — November 30*

- Host statewide community listening sessions
- Conduct 1:1 interviews
- Travel for research trips
- Organize portrait shoot, roundtable, and exhibition

Winter 2023: Planning *December 1 — February 29*

- Conduct follow-up research
- Write and submit interim report
- Host portrait shoot
- Call for exhibition artists

Spring 2024: Gathering *March 1 — April 30*

- Host roundtable
- Host exhibition
- Conduct evaluation
- Apply to present research at various institutions through 2024

Early Summer 2024: Sharing *May 1 — June 15*

- Write and submit final report
- Publish research

Post Project / Summer 2024: Connecting

- Disseminate research

Project Description

This project begins with a single grain of sand.

Four years ago my brand new gynecologist touches my belly during a routine physical exam and tells me she feels a sizable fibroid where my uterus should instead be. I later learn I am, to my surprise, effectively the equivalent of six months pregnant with a nonviable mass of cells sitting on top of my uterus, pushing into my cavity, probably obstructing the possibility of an actual pregnancy at all. My myomectomy is a rite of passage. Before me, a surgeon removes a massive fibroid from my mother's body just like the surgeon bringing me earthside. And before her, a long line of women on all sides of my family tree bear the same scar below our belly buttons.

Too little is certain or studied about fibroids and even moreso the prevalence and severity among black people. In self-reflection I imagine fibroids as parasitic in nature, much like a seemingly harmless grain of sand infiltrating an oyster, slowly transforming over time into a pearl, an expensive thing to come to possess and to pawn off.

The pearl necessitates my immediate and internal attention. I set aside the sand.

A modest and mighty grant from Sunday Afternoon Housewife's [Women Supporting Women initiative](#) funds a hopeful longform series starting with [a personal essay](#) about my fibroid removal surgery in Fall 2019. Six months later, I admittedly bump the project to my brain's backburner when the world enters lockdown in response to the rapid spread of COVID-19.

But the fraught history of black people and fibroids will always hold a tight grip on me for deeply guttural reasons. When my fingertips trace the slight smile of my scar I feel next to nothing but pressure, a phantom, fleeting feeling that reminds me I'm somehow and sometimes un/happily alive but also something disappeared.

What of the sand tugging on my heart, staying on my mind, working my nerves, somehow where it should not be? Unlike the dancing, deadened nerves beneath my scar, I welcome this haunt.

My connective tissue here is just one story in the system that is black reproductive health and care and the glaring gap between those words. Black people with uteruses are more likely to develop high risk [fibroids](#), [miscarriages](#), [pregnancies](#), and postpartum complications for no other reason than we survive within the crosshairs of capitalist and patriarchal anti-blackness. Contentious and contemptuous policymaking undermines our self-sovereignty and capacity to mother others and/or ourselves. This is especially true in [Indiana](#). Grains of sand together making a shifting shoreline, eroding and scattered dunes lining the scenic and changing Indiana landscape along Lake Michigan.

The geography of this project takes shape mid-pandemic when I take my first oyster shucking class. I learn to use the tip of my knife to find a slight gap at the meeting of the half shells and leverage a light touch of my strength to “feel not force” the oyster open, a layered lesson roadmapping my research.

To attend to the sand, I wield my knife like Zora Neale Hurston in her essay [How It Feels to Be Colored Me](#):

But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all but about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world — I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

More legacy media institutions than ever before cover the ongoing black reproductive health crisis in the U.S. The stories are staggering, terrifying, and on some level, one method of many to increase awareness and action. However, bright spots bring much needed light to such a bleak picture. Zora Neale Hurston compels me to look to black Hoosiers making a way out of no way to help each other survive here and now and build a future with us in mind.

The project explores community-resourced and -led abortion, prenatal and pregnancy, postpartum, and family and kinship care of Black Hoosiers, mothers and parents, and community workers across the state, historically, presently, and toward the near and far future. My research, analysis, and storytelling covers the following as a starting point:

Abortion Care

- [All Options](#)
- [Planned Parenthood of Indiana and Kentucky](#)
- Abortion doula and miscarriage support

Prenatal and Pregnancy Care

- [Hospital-based obstetricians and gynecologists](#)
- Birthing centers and home births
- Labor and delivery doula and [midwives](#)

Postpartum Care

- Postpartum doula and [lactation specialists](#)
- Family preservation and [support services](#)

Family and Kinship Care

- Childcare through kinship networks

Activities

Research

- Research archives: Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis Recorder Newspaper, IUPUI University Library
- Review published reports: Indiana Department of Health, [Indiana Maternal Mortality Review Committee](#), [Guttmacher Institute](#), Center for Disease Control
- Organize statewide community listening sessions

Listening

- Host statewide community listening sessions
- Identify and conduct key 1:1 interviews from community listening session leads
- Travel for research trips to [All Options](#) in Bloomington, IN and [SisterSong](#) in Atlanta, GA
- Organize portrait shoot: Indiana Black Breastfeeding Coalition's [Naomi and Ruth](#) reimagined
- Plan roundtable: featuring interview subjects
- Plan exhibition: featuring multidisciplinary artists

Planning

- Conduct follow-up research
- Write and submit interim report due December 2023
- Host portrait shoot
- Call for exhibition artists

Gathering

- Host roundtable
- Host exhibition
- Conduct evaluation
- Apply to present research at various institutions: [National Women's Studies Association \(NWSA\)](#) 2024 conference slated for Detroit, MI, Sister Song annual conference slated for January 2025

Sharing

- Write and submit final report due June 2024
- Publish research: potentially Indianapolis Recorder Newspaper, Indiana Humanities
- Disseminate research (potentially NWSA, SisterSong)

Relevant Archives, Collections, or Bibliography

- Indiana Historical Society [digital collections](#)
- Indianapolis Recorder Newspaper archive housed at [IUPUI University Library](#)
- IUPUI University Library, [Ruth Lilly Special Collections and Archive](#)