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For Black Women - When the Rainbow Was Not Enough (Shange, 1976, New York City): An Autoethnographic Collection About Spirit Assassination

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For Black Women - When the Rainbow Was Not Enough (Shange, 1976, New York City):

An Autoethnographic Collection About Spirit Assassination

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ABSTRACT

We live in an America where the higher you elevate in your career as a Black woman, the greater your chances of being subjected to racism, discrimination, isolation, and bullying.

We are underrepresented in various elevated roles, but we will not let that stop us. As Black women, we can attest to the experiences that we are subjected to with no question about our mental health. The Black community in America has been subjected to a considerable presence of systemic racism, oppression, and violence - with the objectives of exercising authority and oppressing the Black community, as well as attempting to cast doubt on the veracity of the first-hand experiences and points of view of black folks.

Creating space for storytelling may help to minimize Black people's tendency to internalize negative racial experiences, which can lead to feelings of anger, sadness, and/or anxiety. This study aims to share the experiences of us, three Black women who have navigated the journey of personal and professional life in a country that is systematically constructed to assassinate the spirits of Black people. A *Critical Race Theory* (CRT) framework has been used as a lens through the tenet of storytelling-counter-storytelling. Through our shared lived experiences, we have reflected on and analyzed the impact that spirit assassination has had on each of us. This study utilized a qualitative research method and an autoethnography design, which is a reflective self-examination. We discuss the results of this self-reflection and how, through revisiting and processing our traumas, we will be able to start the healing process.

DEDICATIONS

As a group, we would like to thank our dissertation committee, Chair, Dr. Thomasina Hassler, mentors Dr. Shenita Mayes, and Dr. Robert Good, and our committee mentor, Dr. JaNae' Alfred. To our entire committee, we thank you for all the support, knowledge, tough love, and motivation that you have provided. To Dr. Alfred, we thank you for your patience, your advocacy, those "real" conversations that helped us see the light at the end of the tunnel, your shared knowledge, and all the times you answered our anxiety-induced calls, texts, and emails. Your support has been priceless, and you are so appreciated.

Tamika Galvin

I am, because I have been chosen! I give God honor and glory for life, my journey, and the wealth of knowledge and wisdom it took to get me here. Therefore, first and foremost, this dissertation is dedicated to God, whom I love and trust dearly. My life has not been what most people would idealize, but I trusted the plan. As a teenager, I endured times when I did not know where I would rest my head at night. I graduated high school with a whopping 1.67 grade point average and no direction, and this is after dropping out of my junior year and returning to my senior year. But God... There was a plan for my life after all, and I am a living testimony that prayer works!

I knew immediately that Sherrie McClellan and Teresa Quarles were my better thirds. We fit together very well, as if we were sisters from the same womb. Our thoughts, love for God, and drive for excellence were on one accord throughout our journey. When one of us experienced a challenge, it was all our challenge. We were each other's sounding

board and safe space. It has been an honor to develop a forever relationship with these two ladies, as I know that our relations extend far beyond this dissertation. With that said, I dedicate this dissertation to them, and with all the love in my heart, I say, “Thank you and job well done, my beautiful Sistas!”

Without them, there would be no me. I wholeheartedly dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Mr. Johnnie Lee Galvin Sr., and my late mother, Anna Lee Ross. Both of my parents’ education topped off with their high school diploma. Nonetheless, they were determined to make sure my siblings and I were educated and skilled, as they knew we would one day need to survive without them. They succeeded, just as we are all successful in our own right. I have my mother’s strength, bravery, and determination. I am her! My dad, my bestie, and I have his wisdom, gentle heart, and loyalty. As a blend of them both, I have reached this great level of success, and I have them to thank. I love you, Daddy and Mama!

Last but never least, I dedicate this dissertation to my Quad aka my four beautiful children. I have been in school for most, if not all, of their lives, depending on when they were born. My oldest being two at the time and now twenty-eight... you get the point. This dissertation is rightfully theirs as well. They have traveled to school with me, stayed up late nights with me so that we can have family time once my homework was done (theirs was usually done first), cooked when I was busy studying or in class, rode public transportation so that I could work a second job or go to a different campus at times, supported one another, and most importantly, they never hated me for seeking to make life better for us all. For that, I am grateful. All we had was us, and we made it! I pray that I have instilled tenacity, grit, and an unwavering level of faith in my children. Never stop

believing, never give up, and never let anyone, including me, tell you that you cannot do something (credits to the movie “The Pursuit of Happyness.” I stood on business, and now you can too, Quad members.

Sherrie McClellan

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Teresa Quarles

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We acknowledge Jill Scott, who wrote an alternative *National Anthem* at nineteen years of age living in Philadelphia. She first sang this new version at the Essence Festival, in July 2023. Some spewed negative critiques of Scott's version, even accusing her of *hating America*. As Black women, when we first heard Scott's version, we felt enlightened, heard, and understood. We decided at that moment it would be included in our dissertation in some manner. Being Black and pushing back on the majority narrative of what is acceptable has been pressed for centuries and often leads to accusations of our people hating this country or not being patriotic. We acknowledge Jill Scott and her version because it correctly states the truth of how much Black people are valued, or the lack of value, in America. As she stated, her intent was not division when she wrote, "land of the slaves." She states that she used that term because, "we are in a place that makes us slaves to consumerism, it makes us slaves to social media, makes us slaves to...lies that don't make no kind of sense" (Fung, 2023).

The last acknowledgement is of our dissertation title, *For Black People – When the Rainbow Was Not Enough* is a play on the words of the 1976 musical titled, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange. This play consists of seven women whose stories relay their experiences with oppression, racism, and sexism (for *Colored Girls who Considered Suicide*, n.d.). We thought it would be an appropriate sampling of this original title, as our dissertation covers our shared stories of maneuvering through oppression, racism, and sexism.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

As I stood today in the ninety-two-degree heat, looking anxiously down the road filled with parade floats and marchers for my daughter being transported on a golf cart, I heard, "I love your hair; it's so pretty." At that moment, I was snapped out of my anxious reality as a mother and transfixed on the location of such a tiny, cute voice. When I looked down, I noticed a smiling woman pulling a wagon with this adorable little cocoa latte face on it. She could not have been any more than three or four years old, and all I could see was a huge smile smeared with lip gloss and squinting eyes from the sun. I responded to her by saying, "I love your hair too, and your lip gloss is so cute." Then from nowhere I heard, "I have on some too." I looked around the adult, and there was another cocoa latte face, about seven or eight years old, smiling at me. She was walking, and she appeared almost on the edge of her shoes, waiting for me to respond to her as well, which I did. I responded to her by saying, "I love your hair too, and your lip gloss is so cute."

The adult with them smiled and said thank you in an almost hushed voice, as if the thank you was more of a common consideration than a necessity. It was one of those unspoken moments when two people could communicate with a look and little to no words. As two black women smiled at each other, we seemed to both understand the power of that moment for the girls and for us. In one instance, it seemed as if all my worlds were merging. Self-esteem because today was a mad rush to get out of the house and get my daughter to the drop-off point for her school's marching band's participation in a parade. So, there was not a lot of time and effort put into my hair. Honestly, I felt

incomplete but did not realize how heavy it was in my mind until she told me my hair was pretty. Past trauma snuck back in for a moment because what is seen in the media does not emphasize the beauty of black culture and our hair.

How many times would I have loved to hear that my hair was pretty or that someone loved my hair growing up? Instead, there was this fascination among White women. My hair color was referred to at the time as *dirty red* - a combination of light brown and auburn. As young as I could remember I would have White women approach me in grocery stores, at school, and other public places to ask, was this my true hair color, and could they touch it? The systemic white privilege that exists today from the legacy of enslavement tells white people it is okay to still *inspect* Black people as if we were back on the auction blocks being inspected for purchase.

Pride was the next emotion that emerged today because, in my natural hair state, another little black girl hopefully saw herself in me today. Angst emerged with its cousin anxiety because I was still looking for my child after she called me and said she had to stop marching due to her asthma. With the roads closed, I had no way to get to her. All I could do was wait. And, finally, I rounded back emotionally to faith because I realized that in my moment of anxiety and frustration, because I could not get to my child during an asthma attack, God distracted me with the little cocoa latte faces of two angels.

This experience brought up so many emotions of past hurts and questions related to Black women's hair journey. As Black girls and women, our hair is our crown. For so many of us, our hair is tied to pleasant and unpleasant memories of ritual and routine that is carried over into our adulthood. Wash day can send a shiver down the spine of a Black

girl because we knew that meant hours of washing, conditioning, detangling, flat ironing, or curling just to name a few. Growing up in this country, Black girls and women see portrayals of beauty and femininity being equated to White girls and women (Carter, et al., 2016) or fairer skinned Black women with *good hair*. Could one wonder how a Black girl or woman can question her worth in comparison? When you do not see anyone who is considered beautiful in the media and on television look like you then the questions of self-worth can set in. Being Black and being women places us in a particular place that Kimberle Crenshaw first coined *intersectionality*. In an interview, Crenshaw discusses intersectionality as, “...the fact that many of our social justice problems like racism and sexism are often overlapping, creating multiple levels of social injustice”. (TED, 2016)

The intersectionality of being Black and a woman often has us face many challenges that do not get the deserved attention or advocacy. “The lack of awareness of the challenges that Black girls face perpetuates the mischaracterization of their attitudes, abilities, achievements, and overall existence” (Carter, et. al, 2019, p 2532). When we are approached to have our hair touched, when we are ignored in meetings, when we are talked to condescendingly, or when we are overlooked for deserved promotions and jobs, we are often assigned the angry Black woman for advocating for ourselves, for being passionate, and for saying, no enough is enough.

Kimberle Crenshaw (2018) discussed her encounter with Emma de Graaff, a Black woman who was a wife and mother. Emma applied at a car manufacturing plant but was not hired. She was convinced it was because she was a woman and Black. Emma attempted to bring a lawsuit against the manufacturing plant, but the judge dismissed the case citing that the employer did in fact hire Black people and women. However, the

judge did not relay the fact that although they hired Black people and women, Black people were usually hired for maintenance or industrial-type jobs and the women who were hired for secretarial or front office work were usually White. Crenshaw points out that the judge refused to draw the awareness of these two intersecting double discriminations because he believed it would have given Emma an advantage or if she won her suit, she would be given preferential treatment over Black men and White women. Crenshaw explained that if one thinks of race and gender as intersections in the road, it is easier to comprehend how the manufacturing plant's structured hiring/work policies ran rampant through that road. Being a Black woman, Emma was positioned at an exact point of overlap in the road where she was impacted. Crenshaw goes on to share a great analogy,

...experiencing the simultaneous impacts of the company's gender and race traffic, the law was like that ambulance that shows up and is ready to treat Emma only if it can be shown that she was harmed on the race road or on the gender road but not where those roads intersected. (Russo, 2018)

Purpose of Study

The objective of this study was to conduct a comprehensive analysis of our lived experiences as Black girls and now Black women, with a specific focus on the occurrence of spirit assassination within our educational environments and our personal spheres. We did this by sharing those experiences, connecting the experiences to the existing literature, and discussing the reflection process and the impact that spirit assassination has had on each of us. There are many layers to our individual stories. When dissertation groups were forming, we were instantly drawn to each other through the commonality of our individual stories and how past interactions impacted our view of ourselves and how we managed in life.

Spirit Assassination

We defined spirit assassination as the intentional and systematic destruction of the spirit of a person or group of people. When we started researching this topic, we decided to focus on spirit *assassination* rather than spirit *murdering*. Our rationalization is that when one thinks of murder, it can be spontaneous, intentional, or unintentional.

According to the theory that Bettina Love presents in her book, in order for Black students to not only survive but also thrive in the educational system, it is imperative that schools and pedagogy be reformed or changed. Her work focuses on creating a pedagogical system that values “mattering, surviving, resisting, thriving, healing, imagining, freedom, love, and joy” (p. 8). We intend to build upon Love’s work, which is about teaching from a place of love so Black children are encouraged, their spirits are nurtured, and they are supported.

When one thinks of assassination, it tends to be plotted, planned and has many complex parts and players for assistance in carrying out the act. *Assassination* fits what we want to relay as the systemic, intentional, and multi-level manner of America’s government with legislative policies and procedures, housing, employment, and educational inequities that have been put in place. As the above story exemplifies, there are many layers of emotions and thoughts one can experience during a single interaction, we want to discuss how pervasive trauma can be, what being Black women adds to our stories, and how we see ourselves.

Life’s journey to who we have become as individual Black women, as mothers, as professionals, and as esteemed souls in the lives of those who love us has been paved with the roads of lived experiences. We acknowledge that some roads were pleasant,

rewarding, and educational. However, we must also acknowledge that other roads have been filled with challenges, hiccups, disappointments, valleys, and hurdles that, on some days, seemed ever-deepening. For those days, the state of our society and the injustices that have occurred for Black people, both historically and to this day, make the longest days seem unbearable.

Persistence is “the fact of continuing to try to do something despite difficulties, especially when other people are against you and think you are being annoying or unreasonable” (Oxford Dictionary, 2023). As this journey of life and its lived experiences have traversed us through disappointments and trauma, we now see that this word has been our unspoken mantra.

As three Black women, we have no qualms about speaking up and out for ourselves, our clients and students, and our loved ones. Because we do not give up, we do not have any issues with those who would prefer that we be quiet, be seen, and not heard, labeling us as "annoying" or "unreasonable." They feel that way because we do not give up. As we continue on this journey, the question for ourselves becomes, "How, as past trauma survivors, do we advocate for equitable education and overall justice for our children, ourselves, and others while still navigating the structural racism that has permeated this country historically?" That is the question at hand that this autoethnography will assist us in discovering. In a county where our ancestral legacy began as Black people from a narrative of stolen, broken people who still persevered as a culture, survival is in our DNA. From the *Middle Passage*, where the enslaved were chained, contaminated with disease and despair, died, and dumped in the ocean, we inherited strength; it is in our DNA. So, we three Black women open our lived

experiences to share and relive for ourselves; maybe even remind ourselves of that strength of our DNA.

When discussing what *spirit in spirit* assassination means in regard to this dissertation, we had to determine what this word meant to us on an individual level. The word spirit has so many channels of definition; it can travel. It can be a branch of religion, holistic spirituality, emotional well-being, or a mixture of all the above. What we have determined is that what the word spirit means to us is based on our individual journeys, backgrounds, home nurture growing up, and our belief system as adults. There is no right or wrong answer. We each have our own journey, our own trauma, and our own views of what spirit means. One commonality we do share is that the overall damage that can be done to one's spirit can be prodigious, despite whatever one's definition states. McMillan et al. (2017) state that "the cumulative effect of the injury reaches to the very depths of our soul" (p. 211). For one of us, the definition of spirit is defined as the nonphysical part of a person that is the seat of emotions and character, the soul. This ties into her personal spirituality. Being a believer in God, faith, and the Holy Spirit, she trusts her experiences to have added to her spiritual growth throughout her life. For another, it is defined as the unknown or unseen life that lives within us. It can be seen as the bridge between earth and heaven but can alter its existence depending on us and our experiences in the world. More so, it can be our lifeline of strength or in our dissertation case, the lack of. For the last of us, spirit is defined as the core of a person's essence of existence, their belief system in themselves, and how their mind and body regulate and respond to their lived experiences. What it appears to all tie back to is our emotional well-being and self-perceptions. Each of our definitions are drawn from experiences,

level of emotional or psychological injury, and awareness of the need to heal. Therefore, for the sake of this dissertation, the word spirit is defined by us as any intentional or unintentional act that decreases self-worth and self-esteem while making one try to shrink oneself down to be smaller, quieter, and more tolerable in the eyes of others and self.

At first glance, it would appear that the intention of destroying someone's spirit is not always successful. When you look at the three of us, we may all be outspoken; we take charge and handle things. However, one of the consequences of the assassinated spirit is that it frequently affects how you feel about yourself on the inside. It is not always the case that activities that are visible to the outside world provide an accurate portrayal of what is occurring within the mind and emotions. Our spirit is at peace when we can make peace with ourselves. In times of peace, we have fewer doubts about ourselves and a greater sense of self-assurance. Regardless of how different people may interpret the word *spirit*, peace is the most important thing.

Significance of the Study

The assessment of self-beauty and worth has historically been affected. Imitation, or mimicry, in Black culture, has long been an issue (Givens, 2021). *Black exoticism* tends to be associated more than Black is beautiful outside of Black culture (Johnson, 2021, p. 188). The European standard of beauty and culture has diminished Black self-image and fed the ideology of white supremacy (Givens, 2021, p. 99). In education, “the teachers' and other school staff's biases and personal beliefs about race and education must be explored and confronted. The historical origins and continued ideologies of those racist beliefs must be challenged as well to embrace their commitment to change toward dignitary justice in education” (Darby & Rury, 2018, p. 154).

We tell ourselves we are beautiful, intelligent, and worthy because it cannot be expected from anyone else outside our culture. The laws of this country have historically been crafted to establish white supremacy, and they have undergone only minor changes to support the myth that Black people do not possess beauty (Robinson, n.d., & Robinette, 2019). In *Nice Racism*, DiAngelo (2021) discusses the accountability of White people and how they can distance themselves from other White people who they see as *doing harm*. However, it “leaves racialized people to deal with the issue.” DiAngelo further points out that “Yet racialized people are often dismissed in a range of ways: accused of playing the race card, of having a chip on their shoulder, of seeing race in everything, and of being oversensitive or angry (p. 33). It is not okay to touch a Black person’s hair or ask invasive questions about our bodies. It lends credence to the idea that Black people are characterized not as human but as, “savage”, or “monkey-like” (Johnson, 2021, p. 207). In order for there to be genuine reflection of our lived experiences, we must be willing to revisit our past experiences and analyze the impact spirit assassination has had on us. Lorde (2017) expresses the importance of defining our own stories: “If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive” (p. 123).

A culturally responsive and trauma-informed approach should be thought about as a way to understand and help students in a way that can address the effects of differences, teach resilience, and improve the health and academic success of all students (Blitz et al., 2016). Are things better for Black people in this country? *Better* is relative to who you are asking. Unfortunately, for Black students, we have experienced at times that our voices were too fragile, timid, or scared to speak up until long after the damage had been

done. This problem also affects the educators who are committing spirit assassinations. Growing up as a black girl, many of us were taught to respect our elders, and never talk back, and adults are correct. In addition, we were often reminded to speak when being spoken to. However, when you have a teacher who is a white male with a loud and frightening voice, you are quickened when they speak and know that although you are spoken to, not speak back. The spirit of a young girl is assassinated because of the fear of speaking up and challenging the voice of a white man who yells and appears to be full of rage. The young girl has now become subject to spirit assassination and will now endure replays of this moment for years to come while suffering from the ramifications of their spirit being assassinated. Perhaps they are not aware enough of the conscious mind to know they are doing this to children. That gives them the benefit of the doubt. However, those who are committing this act could potentially cause harm to those who are witnessing it, such as other students or teachers. For example, microaggressions do not necessarily have to affect or offend only the victim. Microaggressions allow us to *see* and *feel* the tangible ways racism emerges in everyday interactions (Solórzano & Huber, 2020). This is the same for spirit assassination. Any Black student that witnesses the act of spirit assassination, can be subject to the same or similar effects as the targeted individual (Racial Trauma, 2023). It shuts down the ability to be productive or abide by the institutional metrics that ultimately define success (Young & Hines, 2018). Love (2023) discusses how the educational system is doing exactly what it was designed to do, “to dispose of Black children.”

African Americans, alternatively referred to as Blacks, are known for having unmanaged trauma (Manyam et al., 2019). Research also suggests minorities are less

likely to seek mental health treatment in general and drop out of counseling (Manyam et al., 2019). The legacy of slavery still resonates for many Americans. In 2019, the Pew Research Center conducted a survey where 63% believe the legacy of slavery still affects the position of Black people in American society today either a great deal or a fair amount (Horowitz, 2019). “From the beginning, White Americans have sought to justify the enslavement of and discrimination against Black people by arguing that we are less than fully human... (Comrie, et. al 2022).

The educational system that we have today continues to assassinate the spirits of Black children (Love, 2023). Negative teacher interactions and biases, a lack of cultural training for teachers, low expectations of racism, and a lack of racial cultural identity for Black students in the curriculum and among school system staff and educators are all factors that contribute to the ongoing assassination of the spirits of Black students (Lorenzetti & Johnson, 2022). In an interview for her new book, *Punished for Dreaming*, Bettina Love (2023) discussed the need for *educational reparations* for Black people. These reparations would provide atonement, apology for the harm inflicted on Black people, end that harm, and prevent future harm from being committed through structural changes (Love, 2023).

Throughout the course of history, Black people have been subjected to racism, violence, and discrimination at the hands of White people through “de jure” and “de facto marginalization” (Beck, 2017). Spirit assassination attempts are made in all areas of life's spheres of existence. Similar to the way that Black adults experience disproportionate police brutality, Black children experience multiple times the level of school brutality that White children experience (Tuchinda, 2023). School brutality can be defined in many

ways. School brutality is the excessive use of physical force by governmental employees upon K-12 public school students, and it includes assaults, solitary confinement, inappropriate handcuffing, and arrests. Similar to the way that Black adults experience disproportionate police brutality, Black children experience multiple times the level of school brutality that White children experience (Tuchinda, 2023).

It is much more demoralizing for students to endure this kind of brutality and be expected to thrive under such conditions. Demoralized high school students and college students both experience subjective depression and agony, feel that no one understands them, and exhibit a certain level of suicidal ideation (Huang et al., 2022). It can be subjective as to what demoralized actually means. Demoralization has been described as a psychological state characterized by helplessness, hopelessness, a sense of failure and the inability to cope (Huang et al., 2022).

Since slavery, the educational system in the United States has been prejudiced against Black people construction and saw the preference Whites received regarding education access (Humphrey, 2017). The creation and enforcing of anti-literacy laws and prevention of educational opportunities for disenfranchised minority groups, predominantly enslaved Africans, not only impacted the development of the literary canon in retelling and distorting of histories, but also highlighted the role of literacy in ensuring the continuation of slavery (Callahan, 2020). For Black people, the educational system has been anything but equitable. Even though we have made some minor advances in the world as it is now, there is still a significant amount of educational inequality.

Equitable access to education is one of the most important tenets of citizenship that has historically been denied and provided on a less than equitable scale to Black communities. When you have such strong white resistance against you as a person such that they can take away the most fundamental thing - education- if someone can take that away from you, your esteem is so small that...you're always looking over your shoulder for who is going to attack or criticize. The damage had been done. (Anderson, 2016, pp. 85, 86)

Racism negatively impacts Black people from “from birth to death” (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019, p. 2). In our view, spirit assassination is a form of oppression that resembles other offenses against humanity whose structures are so deeply embedded in the culture as to prove extremely difficult to recognize as a form of oppression. A significant amount of research and writing has been done on the topic of the influence of White supremacist ideology as well as how our educational system contributes to and maintains racism in our society (Darby & Rury, 2018; Johnson, 2020). “Understanding this embodiment is important in examining how anti-Black racism, colonialism, and White supremacy are manifested in day-to-day schooling policies and practices” (Doret and Gorden, 2018, as cited in Lopez and Jean-Marie, 2021).

The promise of our nation’s anti-discrimination laws has not been fully realized because our current enforcement and legal system has failed to confront the fundamental power imbalance underpinning the education and employment relationship (Yang & Liu, 2021). Since the days of slavery, this nation has been run on the ideology of White supremacy, and Black communities have been subjected to a systemic continuation of denial and oppression ever since (Comrie, et. al).

Historically, Black people have been subjected to a variety of tribulations. We rise from stolen people, transported to the United States, and sold into slavery. It was widely held that people of African descent were incapable of or unworthy of receiving an

education. Slavery, oppression, beatings, and other forms of violence have all been inflicted upon Black people throughout the course of history (Givens, 2021).

Whatever education we were allowed, “produced impoverished perspectives of black culture and history and therefore, too, degraded representations of black people in the national culture” (Givens, 2021, pp 94-95). This diminished view of Black life and culture for some Black people has continued to this day. Dr. Joy DeGruy covers aspects of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) in her book, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*, she discusses how, ...slaves experienced many stressors that are listed as qualifications for post traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD). She states that,

African Americans have continued to experience traumas similar to those of our slave past. Once again, even more impactful than the physical assault on their bodies was the daily assault on their psyches. Since the capture and transport of the first African slaves, those brought to these shores had to deal with systematic efforts to destroy the bonds of relationships that held them together, as well as continuing efforts to have them believe themselves to be less than human. (DeGruy, 2005/2017, pp. 154-155)

Black people have been fighting for equality for generations, despite being made to feel as though they are less than worthy of anything during the course of those battles.

"Despite the great strides of social engineers, inequality in public education continues" (Harvard Gazette, 2015).

This country's past is characterized by a pattern of oppression. The White supremacist ideology has been given a rationality that maintains hierarchies among individuals and groups. This rationality or systemic racism upholds those hierarchies through pervasive practices that are grounded in history, law, economic policy, social

custom, and education and are rooted in keeping one group dominant over another (Forms of Racism, n.d.). During the time of slavery, people of African descent were punished for engaging in activities such as reading and writing. Since its inception, education for people of African descent has been considered a "fugitive project," during which enslaved black people "snatched learning in forbidden fields" or "played schooling." These activities were kept secret due to the fact that it was illegal for enslaved people to receive an education (Givens, 2021, p. 27).

According to DeGruy, our enslaved ancestors endured the daily torment of having their free will diminished. Close your eyes and imagine,

You live in a society that constantly reminds you that you are no different from livestock and in some cases less valuable. When you attempt to express yourself, you are beaten down. When you attempt to protect your loved ones, you are beaten down. You are beaten until you call the cruelest and most vile man you know "Master." And God forbid you attempt to be educated or think for yourself. As a result of centuries of slavery and oppression, most white Americans in their thoughts as well as actions believe themselves superior to blacks. Of greater importance, too many African Americans unconsciously share this belief. (DeGruy, 2005/2017, p. 155)

Freed slaves were not automatically granted the freedom to pursue further education after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued. Even though slavery was outlawed throughout the country, particularly in the South, formerly enslaved people were still required to struggle for educational opportunities and did not have access to anything even remotely resembling an equitable education system when compared to White schools. Freed slaves were denied access to education that was both adequate and fair as a result of the measures that were put in place. The disparities between the Black and White schools were apparent with, "overcrowded classrooms, decrepit school buildings, inadequate numbers of textbooks, schools lacking libraries, cafeterias,

gymnasiums...” (Anderson, 2016, p. 69). ” The violent assault on black life begins in the classroom for all students, not just the select few who make it to college” (Givens, 2021, p. 241).

Access to education on an equitable scale has historically been either denied to Black communities or provided on a scale that is less than equitable (Harvard Library, n.d.). This is despite the fact that education is one of the most important tenets of citizenship. Anderson (2016) states, “education can be transformative...education strengthens democracy (Anderson, pp. 95, 96). Citizenship and the benefits it offers are neither automatic nor distributed equally. The impact of closing schools in urban areas, urban renewal, the eradication of Black communities, and the dearth of resources in Black students' and families' schools and communities are just a few of the factors that support it. These arguments support the idea that if you are not a citizen, you do not automatically deserve the benefits that go along with citizenship.

Racist school policies and teacher behaviors frequently have a negative impact on Black students. The psychic injury to students' mental health, self-esteem, and overall emotional well-being is a byproduct of racism in our education system (Press & Ma, 2021). For us, who have experienced psychic injury, there can be long-term effects on the racial-cultural identity development, relationships, behavioral responses, mental health, and self-esteem. When a Black student's spirit is assassinated, the words or actions they use can often make them feel inadequate or unable to achieve the task at all. They then begin to believe what has been said—a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. This can lead to the loss of the love or zeal they had at the beginning of the task, and they may never attempt to complete or conquer that task again. For us, this showed up as a loss for the

once enjoyed classroom learning, how we felt about ourselves, and loss for activities that we once enjoyed participating in.

The cultural denial of Black dignity, humanity, and citizenship has enabled and supported the White supremacist school system model that remains in place to this day.

The White supremacist school system model is defined as,

The power to define the purposes of education, the power to define the curricular content and the discourse around education, all tend to be in control, to a large extent, white racial (actors, but probably as importantly, tend to be steeped in a history in which whiteness, as a sort of structural position and an identity, has been structured as and thought of as superior to all of the racialized groups. And so the ability to sort of control the decision making, the power over curriculum and the day-to-day activities in these contexts lead to white supremacy being embedded in school contexts (Najarro, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that was utilized for this research was critical race theory (CRT). The tenet of focus was storytelling-counter storytelling. This tenet allowed for an undoing of the false and or missing information in the history of Black people and our experiences. This tenet provided us, as researchers, the ability to tell our own stories and history. As Black women, it provided us the opportunity to explore how our intersectionality of race and gender experiences helped to shape who we are today. By utilizing this framework, we hope we were able to display how through our experiences, we were able to heal from the pain and damage of spirit assassination.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study: **1)** What insights can we gain from sharing our lived experiences with spirit assassination? **2)** How has structural racism impacted the intersectionality of our lives as Black women? Structural racism is defined

as, “the totality of ways in which societies foster racial discrimination through mutually reinforcing systems of housing, education, employment, earnings, benefits, credit, media, health care, and criminal justice (Hardeman, et al., 2022). **3)** How may our narratives assist us on our journey to healing?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this research, we used several theories to support spirit assassination in education.

The History of Spirit Assassination and the Cost of Slavery

Spirit assassination is a term used to describe the intentional and systematic destruction of the spirit of a person or group of people. It is a form of psychological warfare that has been used throughout history to oppress and enslave Black people. It is an act of tarnishing a person's reputation and credibility through false or defamatory statements. The practice has been around for centuries and has been used as a political tool to discredit opponents and a means of social control to silence dissenting voices. The suffering that has been inflicted on Black culture as a result of slavery is an ever-present example of how slavery affects the success of Black people. The Pew Research Center conducted a survey in 2019 that resulted in 63% of Americans believing that the legacy of slavery does indeed affect Black people's position in life either a great deal or at least fairly and 45% of "U.S. adults think the country hasn't gone far enough in giving black people equal right with whites." (Horowitz, 2019).

The legacy of enslavement and oppression in this country has had long-lasting traumatic effects on generations of Black people and how this country has put in place policies and practices regarding race in America (DeGruy, 2005/2017). Some of those negative consequences have been passed down generationally in the Black community such as economic status. Rothstein (2017) points out that, "Parents' economic status is commonly replicated in the next generation..." (p. 179). Oppression in school settings, legislative agendas, and White domination has all but fueled the fires of racism and

White supremacy. When you are from a culture that has historically been cast aside and told you are not worthy of dignity or humanity, how could you ever see yourself as pretty or worthy? That is often the internal fight with oneself in addition to the fight to survive and thrive in a racist world. We know that those two little faces helped to remind us of our pretty self, and the hope is that they never have to question theirs or their right to thrive and survive in this world.

Although a novice term, spirit assassination has been used to control people since slavery. In Frederick Douglass' narrative written by himself, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Douglass describes the many horrific aspects of enslaved life especially the cruelty of mothers and children being separated at birth-with often the children being a descendant of the slave owner without reaping any of the presumed benefits (Douglass, 1845). As previously mentioned, spirit assassination destroys the spirit of a person or group of people. This can be done through physical, psychological, and spiritual means. Physical means include torture, starvation, and physical abuse. Psychological means include manipulation, humiliation, and gaslighting. Spiritual means include overall spiritual well-being.

One of the most egregious examples of spirit assassination in history is the treatment of slaves. Slaves were stripped of their humanity and reduced to property, with no legal rights or protections. No issue has scarred our country nor had more long-term effects than slavery. When we celebrate America's freedom, we must also be mindful of the long and painful struggle to share in those freedoms that faced and continue to face generations of African Americans. To understand the present, we must look to the past.

By law, slaves were the personal property of their owners in all Southern states except Louisiana. The slave master held absolute authority over his human property as the Louisiana law made clear. The master may sell him, dispose of his person, his industry, and his labor; [the slave] can do nothing, possess nothing, nor acquire anything but what must belong to his master (Teach Democracy, n.d.). These individuals were exposed to severe physical and psychological mistreatment, and their fundamental humanity was undermined by legal and societal standards that saw them as inferior beings—"...the lack of freedom extended to every aspect of life: body, mind, and spirit; it invaded their family, faith, and home" (McGhee, 2021). Another example would be in schools. As Black girls, we were faced with spirit assassination from our White teachers, making us feel less than from being humiliated, verbally abused, or abandoned in a setting. Growing up during the time that we did, school was important, and our parents wanted us to be successful and surpass where they were. So when you came across a difficult teacher, you did everything in your power to fix what seemed to be the problem. But when the teacher was a nice racist, there was nothing we could do to earn that A.

Spirit assassination has been used throughout history to oppress and enslave people. It is a tool of oppression that has been used to control people and keep them deflated. For example, beginning to internalize the lack of publications and a research agenda as solely indicative of brilliance; or fears that graduation will never happen and that all of our parents' sacrifices were for nothing (Wright-Mair & Pulido, 2021). The cost of slavery is immense, both in terms of physical and psychological suffering. It is a reminder of the power of spirit assassination and the need to be aware of its effects. The cost of slavery, both to the individuals who were enslaved and to society in the founding

era, northerners' ambiguity about slavery in their own states didn't stop them from profiting from the slave economy... (McGhee, 2021).

From the beginning, white Americans have sought to justify the enslavement of and discrimination against Black people by arguing that we are less than fully human; that Blackness—in and of itself—is so evil, so frightening, so deficient, so inferior to whiteness in every way, that it warrants, even requires, the systematic oppression of an entire race. (Comrie et. al, n.d.)

The legacy of slavery has continued to impact communities and individuals today, as structural inequalities and systemic racism continue to perpetuate the effects of this dark period in history as, “Black students face an uphill battle against a system built on centuries of racism, divestment, and denied opportunities” (Harvard Library, 2022). The continued discussion of slavery is not meant to make White people feel guilty of their lineage. However, we must be truthful in looking at the facts that,

246 years of protracted slavery guaranteed the prosperity and privilege of the south's white progeny while correspondingly relegating its black progeny to a legacy of debt and suffering. It doesn't really matter today if either of us, black or white, directly experienced or participated in slavery. What does matter is that African Americans have experienced a legacy of trauma. (DeGruy, 2005/2017, p. 155)

It is important to acknowledge the harm and injustice that has been inflicted upon marginalized communities and to work towards creating a more just and equitable future for all. For Black people, this has meant constantly depending on one another, and our communities (Wright-Mair & Pulido, 2021). When you separate civil rights from housing you weaken that general welfare (Rothstein, 2017). Only by confronting the past and working toward reconciliation can we hope to move forward.

In 1845, Black parents in Boston attempted to enroll their children in the neighborhood school instead of the segregated Black school. Ultimately, it was decided

that “human difference” was just cause to keep separate schools for the Black and White children, arguing that “...blacks required an educational treatment different in some respects than that of white children” (Darby & Rury, 2018, p. 45). In addition, by 1900, only about one-third of expenditures were for Black schools versus white schools (Darby & Rury, 2018, p. 51). Dismantling structural racism is contingent on our ability to create policies that enforce equity and defend against discrimination as well as forging a new path (Hardeman et al., 2021, p. 564). Acknowledging the harm and injustice inflicted upon marginalized communities is crucial for creating a more just and equitable future for all.

Spirit Assassination and those who choose to utilize the tools of misdirection, misstatements, and revisionist historical narratives have been a lingering aspect of this country’s history. Warnick (2008) discusses Frederick Douglass’, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. In this article, Warnick focuses on the pedagogical tactics that were used during slavery to limit freed Black people who desired to learn to read and write. The recent newly adopted standards for teaching Black history in Florida is a prime example of those continued limits. These new standards revised how middle and high school students are taught about the history of slavery. They will dictate middle school teachers to provide a curriculum that teaches students that slaves developed *skills* that can be determined as beneficial. In addition, high school curriculum is set to deliver a curriculum that instructs students on the violence that Black people committed, “when learning about events like the Ocoee and Tulsa Race massacres (Griffith, 2023).

Even more appalling to these new standards is the comments made in its support by the Florida Governor, Ron DeSantis, which he supported these new standards emphatically. He signed into law House Bill 7 which allowed for the restriction of how

race can be discussed in the K-12 grade classrooms. For example, middle school standard AA.2.3 states the curriculum will,

Examine the various duties and trades performed by slaves (e.g., agricultural work, painting, carpentry, tailoring, domestic service, blacksmithing, [and] transportation). With the clarification: Instruction includes how slaves developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit. (Najarro, 2023)

With immense backlash of these new standards coming from Floridians, people across the country, and some in the political realm such as Vice President, Kamala Harris who gave an excoriating rebuttal to these standards and Governor DeSantis' support by saying, "they want to replace history with lies" (Jacques, 2023).

In light of ongoing efforts to revise American history and perpetuate the harmful consequences of slavery, namely the suppression of one's spirit, it was encouraging to anticipate the emergence of rational voices that have thus far remained subdued. Individuals that identify as Black or as a person of color, aligned themselves with the Democratic Party or do not identify as Republican, do not support former President Trump, or advocate for the acknowledgment of our nation's historical realities may perceive that their perspectives are not adequately acknowledged or valued. It will take people who have engaged in the revisionist history and sleight-of-hand tactics that have been going on the past almost a decade to speak up and say enough is enough. Representative Tim Scott from South Carolina spoke up about these new standards while on the Presidential stump in Iowa saying,

It's interesting, as a country founded on freedom, the greatest deprivation [sic] to freedom was slavery. There's no silver lining in freedom – in slavery. The truth is that anything you can learn, that any benefits that people suggest you had during slavery, you would have had a [sic] free person. Slavery was really about segregating families, about mutilating humans, and even raping their wives. It was just devastating. (Wagner, 2023)

Ultimately, Blacks have suffered a great deal of trauma, from watching their children get ripped out of their arms and sold to not being able to wear their hair in ethnic styles to being in schools that were not trauma informed. To date, many trauma-informed school approaches have focused on broad policy and training efforts, including professional development for educators on the impact of trauma on learning and ensuring that discipline policies are trauma-informed (Hoover et al., 2018). Even so, the trauma does not disappear; it becomes chronic, intense, and severe. Few studies have examined the degree to which symptoms of Race Based Traumatic Stress (RBTS) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) overlap; however, preliminary work of developing PTSD than impersonal trauma (e.g., natural disasters); (Williams et al., 2018). If someone had a headache that would not go away, television shows similar symptom profiles, and it is well-established that personal trauma is associated with a greater likelihood they would seek medical attention. Trauma is no exception to the rules. Seek attention when you feel hopelessness or sadness, or when you feel as though you do not want to live any more. Life is beautiful, and the effects of trauma will not win any more.

Black people have endured many obstacles and challenges. Black people have fought for equality for generations and have been made to feel less than worthy of anything in the fight for equality. One of the areas in the fight for equality has been education. American racial biases persist over time and permeate (a) institutional structures, (b) societal structures, (c) individual structures, and (d) everyday interaction patterns. Systemic racism operates with or without intention and with or without awareness (Banaji et al., 2021). We have endured many injustices. Citizenship and its benefits are not automatic or equitable. Urban renewal, the eradication of Black

communities, the impact of closing schools in urban areas, and the lack of resources in schools and Black communities all have supported the notion that if you are not deemed a citizen, then you do not inherently deserve the benefits of citizenship.

White Supremacy in Education

The phenomenon of White supremacy has endured as a prevalent concern within the realm of education for an extensive period of time, spanning across generations. An institutionally perpetuated and ever-evolving system of exploitation and domination that consolidates and maintains power and resources among White people. This system promotes the ideology of Whiteness as the standard and the belief that White people are superior to other races (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2019). Whether and how we see Whiteness is shaped by context, knowledge frameworks, and above all, racialized positionality (Hamlin & Restler, 2021). It is of utmost significance to acquire a comprehensive comprehension of the historical underpinnings and consequential ramifications associated with this matter, as it is imperative for effectuating substantial advancements. The presence of White supremacy inside the school system is a significant concern, impacting numerous students, particularly individuals belonging to marginalized racial and ethnic groups. Beyond lack of opportunity and acknowledgment of institutional problems, physical location can be an indicator for the success or lack thereof (Wright-Mair & Pulido, 2021). This matter pertains to the practices and policies implemented inside educational institutions that exhibit a preference for White pupils over students belonging to racial and ethnic minority groups. Perhaps it will be our racial, ethnic, national, gender identities and/or sexual orientation (Wright-Mair & Pulido, 2021). These practices may be observed in several forms, such as the presence of biased instructional

methods, the implementation of discriminatory disciplinary measures, and the absence of diversity in educational content.

The phenomenon of White supremacy has been observed within the realm of education since the inception of public schooling. The education system in the United States was intentionally structured to sustain White supremacy through the provision of disparate resources and opportunities to pupils of color. When we enter academic spaces our bodies, minds, and spirits never know what part will be attacked first (Wright-Mair & Pulido, 2021). As a consequence, the current system is predominantly divided and characterized by significant disparities. Furthermore, the perpetuation of White supremacy is facilitated by the utilization of textbooks and curricula that are intentionally crafted to uphold and strengthen white domination and privilege.

The perpetuation of White supremacy within the realm of education can be attributed, in part, to the absence of diversity. As such, we are committed to not only understanding our positionality but also developing our standpoint as it helps us make sense of our distinct and shared experiences (Wright-Mair & Pulido, 2021). Numerous educational institutions primarily focus on instructing students about the history and literature mostly associated with individuals of Caucasian descent, so inadvertently overlook the significant contributions made by individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. This phenomenon gives rise to a mistaken interpretation of historical events, which in turn sustains the notion of the inherent superiority of White individuals over individuals of color. The absence of diversity also has an impact on the educational experiences of students from marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds, as they may experience feelings of invisibility and marginalization within the classroom setting. Academia can

impact racially minoritized populations, whether through co-option of work, abuse of labor, inequitable output, unequal distribution of work, mistreatment, or a blatant disregard for the value we bring to academic environments (Johnson & Bryan, 2017).

Biased teaching serves as an additional mechanism for the perpetuation of White supremacy within educational settings. Educators may possess inherent prejudices against pupils belonging to racial minority groups, which can significantly influence their instructional methods and interpersonal dynamics with those students. Consequently, racism and White supremacy are deeply embedded into U.S. society and supported by public administrators in numerous ways (Gaynor, 2018). This phenomenon may result in diminished academic expectations for students belonging to racial and ethnic minority groups, as well as a decreased level of attention given to addressing their unique needs and experiences. These biases may also result in the implementation of disciplinary measures that exhibit discrimination, as pupils belonging to racial and ethnic minority groups are frequently subjected to more severe punishments compared to their White counterparts, although engaging in similar behaviors.

To effectively confront White supremacy within the realm of education, it is crucial to acknowledge the various mechanisms through which it has been sustained and to undertake measures aimed at its deconstruction. CRT challenges ahistoricism, acontextualism, and aracialism, expanding the boundaries of the analysis of race and racism in education by using contextual, historical, and interdisciplinary perspectives to inform praxis (Solórzano & Huber, 2020). This encompasses the implementation of anti-racist policies and practices within educational institutions, the provision of fair resources and opportunities to all students, and the development of curricula that are inclusive and

representative of the diverse student population. Furthermore, it is imperative to actively participate in substantive discourse regarding White supremacy with the aim of fostering a fairer and more impartial educational framework.

The issue of White supremacy in education has been a significant concern for generations, impacting students from marginalized racial and ethnic groups. Over time the spirits, bodies, and minds of Black and Brown people are slowly etched away and damaged many times beyond repair (Wright-Mair & Pulido, 2021). This phenomenon is facilitated by the use of biased instructional methods, discriminatory disciplinary measures, and the absence of diversity in educational content. The education system in the United States was intentionally structured to sustain White supremacy through the provision of disparate resources and opportunities to students of color. The perpetuation of White supremacy is facilitated by the use of textbooks and curricula that uphold and strengthen White domination and privilege.

Biased teaching serves as another mechanism for perpetuating White supremacy within educational settings. Given that schools are sites of spirit-murdering we believe that holistic healing cannot happen if it does not take place in them (Hines & Wilmot, 2018, p. 67). Educators may possess inherent prejudices against students from racial minority groups, which can influence their instructional methods and interpersonal dynamics. This can result in diminished academic expectations and decreased attention given to addressing their unique needs and experiences. Discriminatory disciplinary measures may also be implemented, as students from racial and ethnic minority groups are often subjected to more severe punishments compared to their White counterparts.

In summary, the presence of White supremacy inside the educational system is a widespread concern that has a significant impact on pupils belonging to marginalized racial and ethnic groups. The perpetuation of this issue can be attributed to the presence of biased teaching methods, discriminatory regulations, and a noticeable absence of diversity. In order to address this matter, educational institutions must proactively strive to include the perspectives and achievements of individuals from diverse racial backgrounds in their educational frameworks, thereby fostering an inclusive and fair educational atmosphere that benefits all students.

It's Critical...To Address CRT

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is designed as a theory that looks to explain how race and the law are used to produce systemic racism in this country, CRT has come under attack in recent years. Systemic racism has also been used to explain economic and educational differentials between people of color and White Americans (Nadal et al., 2019). It involves an examination of how race and racism exert their impact on our society, as well as an exploration of the intersections between race and other types of oppression, including class, gender, and sexuality. "Intersectionality" means the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combination plays out in various settings (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Critical Race Theory (CRT) holds significant importance as it provides a framework for comprehending the mechanisms by which racism persists within our societal structures, while also facilitating the formulation of effective approaches to combating it. Additionally, it furnishes us with a conceptual framework for comprehending the impact of racism on both individuals and communities.

The multidisciplinary nature of this method encompasses several fields such as history, sociology, psychology, and other relevant disciplines, to critically examine the pervasive presence of racism across our legal systems, institutions, and daily experiences. There are five tenets to CRT. 1) racism is a normal aspect of everyday life, 2) interest convergence theory states White people will support social justice advances for Black people if White people benefit from it, 3) race is a social construct, 4) storytelling-counter storytelling focuses on who is telling the story. If the narrative is void of the voices of those whom the story is about vital information and connotation are missing. The counter-storytelling is where those who the stories are about got to have their voices heard, and 5) differential rationalization is used by White people to “racialize different minority groups at different times, in response to shifting needs” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 10) in the economy or legislation as examples. We utilized the storytelling-counter storytelling tenet for our dissertation. The goal was to tell our stories, in our voices, to ensure we shared our lived experiences, so we were able to analyze those experiences as we moved toward healing.

It is imperative to understand that CRT serves as a potent analytical framework for comprehending the systemic entrenchment of racism inside our legal systems and institutions, as well as its ongoing influence on our societal fabric. The examination of racism's historical utilization as a tool for the subjugation and marginalization of individuals belonging to racial minority groups, as well as its persistent impact on contemporary society, facilitated our comprehension of this phenomenon.

In 2020, then-President Donald Trump introduced *Executive Order 13950*, whose purpose was to outlaw the teaching of federal agencies’ and contractors’ “divisive

concepts.” (Alexander, 2023). These concepts included that “the United States is fundamentally racist or sexist.” Consequently, a year later, federal, state, and local governments across the country introduced 250 measures to outlaw the teaching of CRT. (Alexander, 2023) states that anti-CRT measures have been introduced in every state in this country, except for Delaware. K–12 education is the focus of ninety percent of all anti-CRT measures and ninety-four percent of all enacted anti-CRT measures. Forty percent of the anti-CRT measures have language that is similar to what former President Trump utilized in his 2020 Executive Order (Alexander, 2023).

In his theory, *the permanence of racism*, Derrick Bell explained, “The reality is that we live in a society in which racism has been internalized and institutionalized” ...” Bell would have also foreseen Trump’s presidency as the likely follow-up to eight years of the nation’s first Black President” (Hoag, 2020). Racism and race are deeply rooted in the history of this country and because of that, they have been embedded into our policies, practices, procedures, and educational system (Milner IV. 2017). Our tenet of storytelling-counter storytelling allowed for an exploration of our lived experiences shared by us. They explored what extent racism and trauma have victimized our spirits. By this theory “racism is ordinary, not aberrational. It is ever present and the experiences of most Black people in this country” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 8).

The legislative assaults with the banning of books, the refusal to teach this country’s true history, and the removal or lack of inclusion of Black history in an already minimalistic curriculum all represent the refusal to acknowledge this country’s economic success being built on the backs of those stolen from their land. African American men, women, and children were forcibly brought to the United States, where they were

subsequently deprived of their identities, families, and names, as well as their free will and freedoms. This country has operated from the beginning to break the spirit of the Black people it enslaved. Frederick Douglass' penned work, "*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*," explains the five categories that slaveholders used to actualize oppression.

The slaveholders used tactics that were intended to (1) decrease the slaves' confidence in their abilities to act freely, (2) deny the skills of a painful literacy, (3) rob the slaves of a liberating silence, (4) increase slaves' sense of "gratitude," and (5) dismantle any relationships of family and community. (Warnick, 2008)

Broken spirits did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation or during reconstruction. Those in power, those White, and not willing to fathom the idea that Black people should be afforded the benefits of citizenship made sure that although slavery was illegal, it was still an economic goal to find ways to hold Black people in bondage, beholden to the systems (McGhee, 2021, p. 11). Work farms, indentured servitude, and sharecropping were all legal ways that Black people were still under the thumb of enslavement. Owing enormous fines for doing nothing wrong or renting a parcel of land to White landowners all ensured the "human bondage" of Black people would never be able to pay their assigned economic debts, so they remained in these indentured loops of legal enslavement (Blackmon, 2009, p. 40).

The broken spirits of the enslaved and newly freed slaves have continued for generations... "The policies and practices designed to uphold White supremacy are the same policies and practices that harm Black people and communities" (Comrie, et. al, 2022). Since the earliest days of slavery, it was against the law for a slave to acquire literacy skills such as reading or writing. It was against the law for anyone to instruct a

slave in either reading or writing. If caught, the punishments were so severe, ranging from whippings, cutting off digits on the hand, blinding with acid, and death, that the threats served their purpose in discouraging learning. “The enslaved person’s pursuit of education and independent thought disrupted the very political economic foundations of chattel slavery” (Givens, 2023, p. 66). Therefore, their spirits had to be assassinated.

Additionally, it provides us with a conceptual structure for comprehending the methods through which racism may be confronted and deconstructed. Equally so, it is also known to be a significant framework utilized to formulate effective methods aimed at combating racism and fostering the establishment of a fair and equitable society. Therefore, race is acknowledged via cultural, ethnic, and other characterizations that the dominant society then attributes with characteristics that “explain” differential societal outcomes (Vaught, 2011). CRT posited that racism extends beyond individual acts of prejudice and discrimination, encompassing a broader structural and institutionalized presence within American society. Racism is not solely attributable to isolated individuals within our culture, but rather a systemic concern that necessitates remediation through social and political transformations.

One of the fundamental principles under CRT revolves around the notion of "social justice." “Social Justice is a process, not an outcome, which (1) seeks fair (re)distribution of resources, opportunities, and responsibilities; (2) challenges the roots of oppression and injustice; (3) empowers all people to exercise self-determination and realize their full potential; (4) and builds social solidarity and community capacity for collaborative action” (Berkeley Social Welfare, 2021). The concept being discussed here pertains to the principle of ensuring equitable access to fundamental resources and opportunities for all

persons, irrespective of their racial, gender, socioeconomic, or other societal affiliations. Social justice proponents contend that societal disparities are not solely attributable to individual decisions or behaviors, but rather emerge from systemic injustices that necessitate structural interventions.

CRT challenges traditional research paradigms and theories, thereby exposing deficit notions about people and communities of color and educational practices that assume “neutrality” and “objectivity” (Solórzano & Huber, 2020). The concept being discussed pertains to the various mechanisms which racism and other manifestations of oppression can detrimentally impact an individual's perception of their own value and personal identity. Racism can often have detrimental effects not just on individuals through acts of discrimination and prejudice, but also on their psychological and emotional well-being.

The development of solutions to effectively combat systematic racism and foster a more just and equitable society is of utmost importance. This statement underscores the imperative of enacting social and political transformations in order to confront entrenched disparities within society, while also acknowledging the profound psychological and emotional ramifications experienced by individuals subjected to racism. CRT offers a transformative response to racial, gender, class and other forms of discrimination by linking theory with practice, scholarship with teaching, and the academy of communities of color (Solórzano & Huber, 2020). Through the adoption of social justice principles and the active resistance against character defamation, we can strive towards the realization of a more egalitarian and morally upright society that upholds fairness and equality for every individual.

In summary, CRT serves as a significant conceptual framework for comprehending the significance of race and racism within the context of American culture. CRT foregrounds race and racism and challenges separate discourses on race, gender, and class by demonstrating how racism intersects with these and other forms of subordination, and how they impact people of color (Solórzano & Huber, 2020). The statement underscores the imperative of effecting social and political transformations to confront entrenched disparities within systems, while also shedding emphasis on the profound psychological and emotional consequences experienced by those subjected to racism. By adopting the ideology of social justice and actively addressing the issue of character defamation, we have endeavored to establish a society that is fairer and more impartial for every individual. CRT is a multidisciplinary framework that analyzes the significance of race and racism within the context of the United States. CRT research and practice on experiences of people and communities of color and views these experiences as assets and sources of strength (Solórzano & Huber, 2020). Its primary focus is on understanding how race and racism influence societal structures and interact with various types of oppression.

Melanated Trauma

Inequality spans a wide range of societal dimensions, some of which are gender, race, and socioeconomic status, but is not confined to just three categories. We define the term "melanated trauma" as the unique experiences that people of color, particularly those of African descent, go through in modern society. Inequity can be seen in a variety of forms, including economic disparity, racial disparity, gender inequity, and several other expressions. These are only a few of the ways in which inequality can be seen.

In the presence of environmental inequalities, certain demographic subgroups indicate a heightened vulnerability to the effects of traumatic experiences. Restructuring processes have contributed to social and spatial inequalities through the transformation and dismantling of neighborhoods (Shamsuddin & Vale, 2017). People who live in conditions of extreme deprivation have a higher risk of experiencing traumatic stress because they are under constant pressure to worry about whether or not they have sufficient financial resources to meet their most fundamental needs. All things considered, trauma is inevitable and as natural as the happiness that is experienced in life. Trauma is a commonly experienced aspect of life (Muriithi, 2022). This makes it more likely that they have experienced traumatic stress. In a similar vein, those who belong to racial or ethnic groups that are underrepresented may have a higher risk of experiencing traumatic experiences because racism and prejudice are still prevalent in modern society.

Inequality is a systemic problem that has existed for a very long time, has endured throughout history, and has been maintained through a variety of different forms of oppression and bias. As a direct result of this, those who belong to racial and ethnic groups that are historically oppressed have a disproportionately harder time gaining access to necessary resources, educational opportunities, and employment opportunities. It takes a multitude of the oppressed to make their voices heard and felt (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Unlike public housing, which was primarily a federal program with some local participation, government policies to isolate white families in all-white urban neighborhoods began at the local level (Rothstein, 2017). In addition, this imbalance resulted in a multitude of problems related to mental health, such as, but not limited to, emotions of depression, increased levels of apprehension, and the development of post-

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Black adults in urban areas experience high levels of chronic trauma exposure, which increases their risk for PTSD and major depressive disorder (Gluck et al., 2021).

Although trauma can be viewed as common and a part of life, when it is managed, or better, supported, the individual is able to prevent depression and other chronic illnesses. Melanated trauma is a manifestation of the systemic difficulties at hand, which appear in a variety of forms including physical and mental suffering, a lowered sense of self-esteem, and a perspective of helplessness. People of any age can experience the effects of trauma, the same applies to racism. Racism negatively impacts Black people from birth to death (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019, p.2). There is no age discrimination, from babies to elders, it exists. If a child felt as though their emotions are being effectively responded to, they may have been less likely to escalate their emotions and behavior (Havighurst et al., 2021). Sometimes people who are experiencing trauma can go into a deep state of depression unless they are provided support to deal with the matter. Melanated trauma is a manifestation of the systemic issues at hand. The manifestation of melanated trauma is a direct result of the aforementioned systemic problems.

It is vital to have a complete understanding of the intricate interactions between melanated trauma and the differential treatment faced by persons who belong to racial and ethnic minority groups to promote a society that is fairer and more equitable. This understanding is necessary for the development of a more just and equitable society. Although the federal government kicks in a small portion, schools are financed primarily by local and state taxes, so the wealth of the community you live in will determine how

well-resourced your local school is (McGhee, 2021). It is of the utmost importance to acknowledge that these problems originate from a deeply ingrained historical context that continues to impact individuals as well as communities. After taxes, families had fewer funds left for maintenance, and some were forced to take in boarders or extended family members to pay their property taxes (Rothstein, 2017). It is of the utmost importance to take preventative action to solve these problems by putting into place policies that ensure individuals of varying racial backgrounds have equal access to resources, educational chances, and employment prospects. By using these methods, we were able to work toward a more equal society and lessen the bad effects of melanated trauma on people of African descent. This allowed us to reach both of our objectives.

The long-term effects of traumatic events can have a negative impact on a person's ability to function successfully in their daily activities as well as their physical and emotional well-being. Inequality exacerbates the negative impacts, making it more difficult for people who have been through traumatic experiences to access the resources necessary for their healing and recovery. For instance, those who have been through a traumatic experience could require access to mental health treatments as a result of the experience. On the other hand, these people could have experienced difficulties in acquiring the necessary help if they did not have health insurance or the financial means to pay for counseling.

It is of the utmost importance to acknowledge the interconnections between a lack of justice and traumatic experiences. It is also of equal importance to make it a priority to work toward creating a society that is more equitable and just. This includes engaging in

activities such as lobbying for diversity and inclusiveness, engaging in policy advocacy to confront economic inequality, and offering support and resources to people who have gone through traumatic situations.

Inequality is a systemic problem that has persisted for a long time, affecting racial and ethnic minority groups in various aspects of society. Melanated trauma, a manifestation of these issues, is a direct result of systemic problems. People of color, particularly those of African descent, face unique experiences in today's society, including economic disparity, racial disparity, gender inequity, and environmental inequalities. McGhee (2021) discussed the view of racism by the average White person and how they saw racism as a “zero-sum game”; which made it harder for Black people to access resources, education, and employment opportunities. To promote a more fair and equitable society, it is crucial to understand the intricate interactions between melanated trauma and the differential treatment faced by these groups. Implementing laws that guarantee equal access to resources, educational opportunities, and employment prospects is a preventative action.

The long-term repercussions of traumatic events can negatively impact an individual's ability to function successfully in their daily activities and well-being. The trauma that came from such horrific experiences that were unaddressed for years, decades, or longer, caused many Black people to not heal properly. However, it is important to note that healing is an ongoing and life-long process with no endpoint (Muriithi, 2022). Consequently, because of unhealed trauma and to avoid the pattern of their kids experiencing this same experience, some found it to be best to have kids with someone outside of their race. Inequality exacerbates these negative impacts, making it

more difficult for those affected to access resources for healing and recovery. Addressing inequality requires prioritizing a more equitable and just society, which can be achieved through lobbying for diversity, policy advocacy, and providing support and resources to those affected. Collective efforts to find solutions to these problems can boost resiliency and improve the overall quality of life for all individuals. This supports the supposition that the presence of other constructs such as resilience and/or self-efficacy empower mentally tough individuals to excel under stressful circumstances (Denovan et. al., 2022)

Normalizing Nice Racism: Spirit Assassination Today

The phenomenon known as "normalizing racism" was characterized by a gradual desensitization to racist ideas and behaviors that enabled people to accept and regard them as commonplace and unremarkable aspects of their daily lives. This leads to a gradual desensitization to racist thoughts and acts. The manifestation of this phenomenon can take place when people gradually develop a diminished sensitivity towards racist attitudes and practices. "In large part, the terms and phrases we have used shape how we perceive or make meaning of what we observe" (DiAngelo, 2021, p. xvii). "While there is variability in the ways in which individuals are affected by racial discrimination, certain sociocultural factors may render Black individuals vulnerable to its negative psychological effects. *Internalized racism* is the process by which people internalize and accept dominant White culture's actions and beliefs toward Black people while simultaneously rejecting African culture and ideas (Sosoo et al., 2020)." We define *internalized racism* as the conscious and/or unconscious acceptance of a racial hierarchy and its related ideologies and structures that positions and privileges Whites above People

of Color” (Kohli, 2017; Perez Huber, Johnson, & Kohli, 2006). This risk increases with the length of time that individuals are subjected to racist discourse or behavior.

This phenomenon may take place in people who are persistently exposed to racist words or conduct in the environment in which they live. Racist thoughts and actions may have become commonplace in modern society, in part because of the idea that they are a natural development of the social structure that was already there. Given that racist behavior has become commonplace and accepted in society, this phenomenon raises the possibility that people are not even aware they are doing it. The reason for this is that individuals may not be conscious that they are engaging in racist behavior.

These mechanisms provided substantial challenges that needed to be addressed and overcome for anti-racist efforts to be successful and for racism to be transformed. Individuals can dodge accountability for their actions, while other individuals have the potential to tolerate such behavior, allowing racist activity to continue without being subjected to any kind of sanctions.

All of these factors may, when combined, helped to normalize racist attitudes and behaviors. This phenomenon has the potential to give rise to a social environment that is defined by the acceptance and incorporation of racist ideas and behaviors. There are aspects of the current environment that can be interpreted as potential catalysts for the growth of racist ideas and practices. A central premise of racial realism is that racism will never be overcome because it is adaptive, constantly changing form in efforts to “maintain white dominance” (Solórzano & Huber, 2020) In the end, racism has been a strategic technique that was used to maintain dominance and impose control over certain subgroups of the population.

It is of the utmost importance to both acknowledge and make concerted efforts toward eliminating racism in all of its myriad forms. It is of the utmost importance to recognize and comprehend the processes via which racism can become embedded in cultural standards, as well as to actively participate in activities aimed at addressing and combating it. This is a prerequisite for achieving success. Participating in individual and group learning initiatives relevant to the subject matter and pushing for legislative reforms targeted at minimizing the impact of racism and its implications are all examples of actions that fall under this category.

Other examples include openly expressing disagreement towards instances of racism. These occurrences served as examples of aggressive resistance in their respective contexts. One strategy that might be taken to address the current problem is to participate in educational activities whose primary objective was to raise people's levels of consciousness and comprehension of racism and the negative effects that resulted from it. This calls for the development of an active feeling of curiosity toward unfamiliar topics and the sharing of knowledge gained with others and groups, including ourselves. In addition, it is essential to conduct a thorough analysis of the prevalent preconceived beliefs and assumptions, with the purpose of examining and challenging them in order to cultivate a more nuanced and accurate understanding of both individuals and communities.

We define spirit assassination as the intentional and systematic destruction of the spirit of a person or group of people. These behaviors can range from subtle manipulation to overt hostility, and the actions that fall under this category are numerous. The use of this strategy has the potential to have an effect not only on the emotional state of a person

but also on their cognitive functions and the patterns of behavior they exhibit (Wright-Mair & Pulido, 2021). As a result of this phenomenon, individuals may feel impotence and shame, both of which can contribute to a lower perspective of their self-esteem.

Racism is an issue that is deeply ingrained in society, and it frequently manifests in institutionalized forms. “It systematically marginalizes Black people and communities, and devalues Blackness in all contexts” (Comrie, et. al., 2022, p. 75). It is generally accepted as an essential component of the framework upon which society is built-...” whenever the interests of White people have been pitted against those of people of color, structural racism has called the winner” (McGhee, 2022, p. 14). It is of the utmost importance to have a thorough understanding of the many factors that play a role in the occurrence of this phenomenon. In addition, it is of the utmost importance to develop techniques that are both effective in combating racism and contributing to the overall reduction of its negative effects on our society.

In conclusion, we must always keep a constant awareness of our own biases and make active attempts to develop an inclusive workplace that welcomes people from a variety of backgrounds and treats them with dignity. Essentialism, then, entails a search for the proper unit, or atom, of social analysis and change (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). There is a big responsibility that comes along with identifying racist ideas and practices in our culture and conducting research on them. People can work toward this goal by strongly questioning and disputing preconceived ideas and beliefs, actively supporting and promoting efforts to change society, critically examining and disputing preconceived ideas and beliefs, strongly questioning and spreading information about racism and its effects, and actively spreading knowledge and awareness about racism and its effects.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to share the experiences of us, three Black women who have navigated the journey of personal and professional life in a country that is systematically constructed to assassinate the spirits of Black people. We served as the researchers and subjects of this study. A Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework was used as a lens through the tenet of storytelling-counter-storytelling. Through our shared lived experiences, we reflected on and analyzed the impact that spirit assassination has had on each of us. This study utilized a qualitative research method and an autoethnography design.

Research Design

Creswell and Guetterman (2019) list ten different types of ethnographies. An ethnographic method is a qualitative research procedure that describes, analyzes, and interprets a culture-sharing group that shares patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language that have developed over time. "The guiding purposes of qualitative research in generating knowledge, then, are description, attention to process, and collaboration within a social structure and with its people" (Hays & Singh, 2012). "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to systematically analyze (graphy) personal experiences (auto) in order to understand the cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis et al., 2011). Ellis and Bochner observed that autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)" and that different exemplars of autoethnography fall at different places along the continuum of each of these axes (Chang, 2016).

The qualitative narrative design of autoethnography is a reflective self-examination by an individual set within his or her cultural context (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Because we each wanted to tell our own story, our group decided on this approach so that we could do so. What initially brought us together was the fact that all of us had experienced spirit assassination and wanted to share our stories. Following the discussion and examination of the various approaches to research design, we agreed to conduct an autoethnography. Using this approach to the design of the research project, we were able to tell our stories using the events that have occurred throughout our individual lives. After that, we analyzed to look for connections of those experiences as they related to the existing research. Our goal was to utilize a thick description to convey our lived experiences related to this research. *Thick description* is a manner to provide a “rich” and “descriptive” description of our experiences and to hopefully show relevancy to the cultural patterns (Lapan, et. al, 2012, p. 201).

When conducting research using this approach, the researcher has the flexibility to choose from a wide variety of approaches to complete their writing. To facilitate the process of recalling the information necessary for the completion of our dissertation, we researched academic journal articles, books, online interviews, and video entries. Intensively analyzing our experiences and sharing our narratives had the potential to be a transformative agent for us. With this method, we looked at our personal experiences analytically. To accomplish this, it required comparing and contrasting personal experience against existing research (Ronai, 1995), interviewing cultural members, each other, (Foster, 2006; Marvasti, 2006; Tillmann-Healy, 2001), and/or examining relevant

cultural artifacts (Boykins, 2008). The goal was to produce an aesthetic and evocative *thick description* of our personal experiences.

This exploration was carried out by providing a narrative of our lived experiences. This study covered our personal lived experiences as well as our experiences navigating the education system. Reflecting and interpreting the connections that may exist between the impact of spirit assassination and the existing literature, was the intended goal of this study. Identifying and evaluating the existing literature helped with this. Our goal in conducting this qualitative research was to share our lived experiences and analyze the impact that spirit assassination had on our lives.

Researcher Role

Since the research method was qualitative, autoethnography research, we served as the researcher and the subject of this study. As researchers, we played key roles in how the study was designed. We determined the topics to be studied and the research questions. We selected the theoretical framework that was to be utilized to analyze and compare our shared lived experiences to our research questions after this study. Our data collection was provided through the lens of our shared lived experiences.

Researcher Ethics

In conducting research, ethics must be in place to ensure the overall physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of all involved. Fleming and Zegwaard (2018) state key components to stay aware of in ethical research. 1) Informed consent is required in research studies. As researchers and subjects of this study, we permitted ourselves to

participate. 2) Risk of harm, anonymity, and confidentiality is paramount to remain aware of in research. We made sure to protect all identifiable markers for others in our stories. That included names or locations. Providing pseudo-names and pseudo-locations was utilized to guarantee the anonymity and confidentiality of others. The goal was to remain cognizant of the potential harm that sharing our stories could cause to ourselves as the subjects, the community, and the institution and to have a plan to mitigate those harms if they arise (Fleming and Zegwaard, 2018). In addition, we planned to hold ourselves as well as each other accountable to be honest, transparent, and authentic without bias during this study.

Limitations/Delimitations

Autoethnography is a newer method of research that is still a novel one for some to acknowledge as a valid research method. It required vulnerability and honesty from each of us. Some may view the research as not being scientific or replicable because it is based on the personal experiences and feelings of the researchers. Another limitation of this method was that it is based on the researcher's experiences, so it may be difficult to identify and extract patterns or connections to the existing literature. Even so, these major flaws notwithstanding, autoethnography can still be useful in qualitative research methodology as long as it is used regularly and people who share their lived experiences are honest and thoughtful. As stated, in *Understanding Critical Race Research Methods and Methodologies*, “further exploration of methods such as ethnographies are essential” (DeCuir-Gunby, et al., 2019, p. 188).

Whoever narrates the stories gets to choose both the mood and the details that are included. A limitation of the autoethnographic method was the researchers' honesty and willingness to disclose all information, as well as the resulting exposure of the researcher's inner feelings and thoughts. The inability to anticipate the connections that readers may make to the narratives presents yet another limitation for this approach, as it may cause readers to experience feelings that they find unsettling (Mendez, 2013, p. 282).

Edwards (2021) dives further into the limitations and reliability issues that arise with autoethnography, pointing out the importance of the *ethic of self*, which is where, "The researcher has an obligation to describe and investigate their own experience authentically." Autoethnography requires a willingness on behalf of the author/researcher to expose their innermost thoughts and feelings and must be honest and willing to self-disclose, which can be uncomfortable or maybe even painful. Another potential limitation or risk of lack of reliability was the bias that may come into the research. Since the researcher and subject were one in the same, the lived experiences could be at risk of being told in a way that presents the experience in a certain, preordained manner (Poerwandari, 2021). The research is only as valid as we remember. Other disapproval of some researchers view autoethnography as "self-obsession" or "narcissism" at best, not a true scientific approach (Poerwandari, 2021).

Autoethnography's credibility is often challenged in the social science sphere. It is seen as less objective, an expression of *feelings* and *beliefs* related to shared experiences, rather than having the same scientific dependability and reliability as other research methods. One method we employed to control some of the limitations of utilizing

autoethnography was to employ a collaborative autoethnography methodology. Documentation, sharing, and interpreting personal reflections, visions, and stories required a rigorous commitment to personal reflection and communal sharing to explicate common insights and themes, which can serve as personal and group accountability for the authors' biases (Hornsby et al., 2021).

As researchers and subjects of this study, we had the opportunity to explore without much limitation because we had permitted ourselves to tell our stories. By researching the connection of the existing literature with our shared experiences, the goal of this study was to see what the impact of spirit assassination had on our lives and how to continue on our healing journeys. “We must reclaim, renew, and transform our minds, bodies, and spirits to combat existing and compounded emotional, mental, and physical trauma, stress, and anxiety” (Hall & Bell, 2022, p. 9).

CHAPTER FOUR: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY – OUR VOICES

The development of solutions to effectively combat systematic racism and foster a more just and equitable society was of utmost importance. Racism is an issue that is deeply ingrained in society, and it frequently manifests in institutionalized forms. “It systematically marginalizes Black people and communities, and devalues Blackness in all contexts” (Comrie, et. al., 2022, p. 75). Through sharing our individual stories in this chapter, we hoped that through honest and authentic relay we communicated how these experiences have impacted us. As well as what lengths we had to go through to successfully maneuver in a society that sees being Black women as a deficit rather than the powerful representation of strength and fortitude it truly represents.

Tamika Galvin

The Obedient Voice: How Silence Promotes Silence

As a young child in the 70’s and 80’s, I was taught to respect my elders, not talk back, and to “do” as I say, not as I “do.” I, for one, was terrified of my parents being told I did anything different. I had parents who did not believe in sparing the rod. So, I did everything I could to avoid being, what is beautifully polished for legal reasons, spanked. To say it best, my parents had a golden rule of getting it, meaning the polished spanked, in the place you act up. By now you can understand that I was careful not to act up at all, let alone in public.

The risk would have been worth it had I known then what I know now.

In seventh grade, I began to notice some struggles I had academically. Some of the struggles were not being able to comprehend some of the text that I would read,

understanding mathematical language, and completing tasks that were newly introduced. These struggles were no more or less than other students, yet I felt like I needed additional support. Unfortunately, the support did not come in the form that I needed. Here I am a brown, thin, shy little girl. My voice was so fragile and cautious that I monitored my tone, especially when speaking to adults. None of that mattered when my teacher decided to lash out at me, a memory I will never forget. We were studying tenths, hundredths, and thousandths and for one reason or another, I could not grasp the concept. The relationships and networks students establish within the school setting have the potential to influence academic performance (Carrillo et al., 2019, pg. 15). Hence why I began to have a spiral decline academically.

Fast forward to what I know now as an educator, I needed the teacher to use a different way of teaching me. I needed scaffolding. I needed differentiation. I needed a small group. I needed SUPPORT! What I did not need was for this tall white man with a monstrous voice to slap my desk and yell at me, in front of the class, putting me and everyone else on notice that I was the dumbest, stupidest person he knew and that I would never learn math. The tears in my eyes filled without permission. My body trembled as I prepared for what would be next. As everyone looked at me with awe, I could see and hear the giggles, I could see the lack of care for my feelings. I could even see some students continue to work as if I were not in the room. All the while, the teacher is using his outdoor voice to stretch his point although my physical presence showed I was already broken. "In large part, the terms and phrases we use shape how we perceive or make meaning of what we observe" (DiAngelo, 2021, p. xvii). After the incident took place, I could no longer hear anything he was saying except how dumb and stupid I was

and how my future was now over. I had seen him yell at other black girls before, just not as bad, or long. I never saw him yell at any of the white girls.

The math class felt like that of a military boot camp. When students entered, we were all quiet with fear that the teacher would lash out and yell if we were talking. The feeling was that of a basement inside a funeral home, cold and chilling. It was not a warm environment that was welcoming. If students did not get answers correct, the teacher would be displeased and turn red. As a child, he reminded me of Gargamel on the TV series Smurfs. Gargamel was a giant to the Smurfs' height. When he became angry, the Smurfs hid and would be frightened. Although the Smurfs were kind and harmless, Gargamel would tower over them and was always ready to attack. This is the image of the teacher that is in my mind. I never wanted to look the teacher in the eyes. The terror of what could happen frightened me to the point that I would be physically shaking in my seat.

None of that matters now because I was broken. If I had known that by standing up for myself, I would have prevented my spirit from being assassinated and would not have suffered for years replaying his voice and words. So yes, the risk would have been worth it to speak up and take whatever punishment my parents would have given me. At this time, I had only known about racism. There was minimal talk about how deep racism can go. There was only Black and white. I did not understand oppression, microaggressions, social justice, or critical race theory.

I was too afraid to share what happened with my parents or the principal for that matter. The principal and teacher were friends, and I knew anything I would have said could have made things worse for me. She was not pleasant, and, in my mind, it was clear

that I was Black, and they were both white. The principal walked like a soldier in the military with a frown on her face most of the time. The only time students would meet with the principal was for disciplinary reasons. She was stern, very direct, and not a friendly person, which gave a horrifying thought to being in her presence. For the remainder of the school year, I chose to be invisible and not concern my teachers when I did not understand the concepts. Before my spirit was assassinated, I was an amazing student. I put my best foot forward. I studied every day, including the weekends. I wanted to be an attorney. I wanted to be something. Now, I was at risk of not graduating high school.

In my tenth-grade year I became so frustrated with suppressing my feelings, not asking for help, and more importantly, becoming further and further behind academically. I continued to see my friends soar academically, and participate in sports and other school activities, while I struggled to just be present. By the end of the school year, after performing poorly in my first two years of high school, I decided to drop out. My seventh grade math teacher was right! I only passed Algebra 1 because the teacher was not teaching and figured a C would keep me happy and everyone out of her unorthodox gradebook. The teacher enjoyed having conversations during class time instead of teaching which is why her gradebook was not accurate. We would get busy work, which is work meant to keep students occupied. We never took tests, we never took notes, and the teacher would issue worksheets that we would leave in a pile until she was tired of looking at the stack growing higher. I never knew why the administrators ignored the inaccuracies of the gradebook. The implementation of inaccurate grades was probably satisfactory enough for the administration team as they could only believe the grades

were true grades. I knew I did not earn a D, much less a C. I also knew that at some point I would be exposed, and I could not face another assassination. My life began to crumble.

I believed I was no longer smart enough to be at school with my friends. They were learning and had plans after graduation. The teachers seemed to like and help them because they could answer some of the questions and had some knowledge to participate in class. I was defeated. I was just as my 7th grade teacher said, dumb. I would continue to fail. There was no hope for me to succeed and there was no way I was going to graduate at this rate. Therefore, I decided to drop out and went to work at a fast-food restaurant. Unfortunately, I continued to face microaggressions from the white male managers and/or business owners. The way I was spoken to and treated validated what the teacher told me. I tried to resist the thought that he could have been correct in what he said four years ago, but at this point, it was what I had started to believe.

After spending a year out of school, living on the street and in shelters, I felt like life was over. During one of my shelter visits, I met with one of the counselors. She was a great listener and wanted to help me. She provided a space for me to think about the choices I was making and how it impacted me then and, in the years to come. Although she had several young ladies to meet with, she always made me feel like I was unique, unlike my noted teachers who did not seem to care if I graduated or not. What made her different from others, especially my teachers were how she would always get me to think about what I wanted out of life. I would try to share my story with her, but it never came out clearly. I was either crying or too traumatized to continue. Her caring voice, which permitted me to be vulnerable was how I ended up opening up to her. She encouraged me

to go back to school and that is where I would find strength. After being out of school for a year, I went to the Board of Education and re-enrolled myself. I took basic courses to complete my degree. Shockingly, I took basic math that was for those in elementary school, around second grade. After doubling up on day and night classes, I finished my basic requirements a week or so before graduation with a 1.67 grade point average. I could not believe that one situation had ruined my high school years. I was never offered a college application and for good reason. I replayed the words dumb, stupid, never will be....and so on, over and over.

For the next five years, I jumped from job to job. Finally, now 10 years later. I decided to enroll in the local community college. I wanted more. I needed a career. I was now a mother of two working dead-end jobs. I could not believe that someone would treat me so badly because of the color of my skin. I felt like I was always in a hole. Like I had to prove myself and show that I was not the dumbest or stupidest person ever. I registered for college and took the placement test. I could hear the voice in my head, but I fought hard to be released from this 10+ year hold this teacher had on me. I made up my mind that even if the teacher was correct, I was going to overcome what his thoughts were.

The first day of class came fast and I was not ready mentally or emotionally. I could not handle another attack. This was my last chance, at least this is how I felt. After sitting in my car for over an hour, I convinced myself that I could do this. I reported to my first class, which was math, at 7:00 am. I wanted to start my day to get it over with. This is where things took a twist. I walked into the class with trembling fear, to the point I wanted to withdraw. This is why I declare that my spirit was assassinated. My

spirit and love for learning was destroyed. I felt like my skin color was my downfall. It was the reason I was treated so badly. I did not get a fair chance. Until now, until I met him. This new teacher healed me in ways that I never got a chance to tell him. He was patient with me. He believed in me. He supported me and helped me to understand my errors in math. He also had a very mild tone of voice. He did not yell and he respected everyone in the class. He provided me with a safe space to ask questions and be human. Most importantly, he encouraged me to believe in myself and never stop trying. After one particular class, he spoke with me and asked if anyone had ever told me I had a gift for math. I was confused and began wondering if he was joking because I was taking a very low math class. He was not joking. In fact, he sent a message to registration to skip my next remedial class. He said I was ready.

How could this be? None of my teachers from 8th-12th grade had ever mentioned this. The jobs I had that saw my math skills had never mentioned this. I could not help but think this teacher could be wrong. Regardless of what I thought, I accepted his recommendation to skip the next course and surprisingly I did well. Unfortunately, my math redeemer passed before I could share my story and thank him. Before him, I could not choose a major because they all involved taking math. Now, I was able to take college math with honors and beyond. The high school teacher was not correct.

I now know the teacher lashed out at me, not because of my academic unfinished learning, but because I was Black. He treated Black people differently, at least that was what my 7th-grade mind noticed. My adult mind noticed how differently white students were treated in the same situations. He belittled me, shattered would be more like it. The deliberate microaggressions we experienced while in his care were meant to oppress us. I

cannot speak for others, but he was successful for about 10 years. I cannot honestly say the pain is not lingering or that I do not have residual effects. What I can say is that I am more aware of what people say to me and how I internalize it. The many nights I cried and opportunities I missed, because my spirit was assassinated, put me in great danger of not becoming my best self.

Sadly, this makes me think about how my ancestors experienced similar situations to keep them oppressed. There is not a one-size-fits-all solution to such trauma. In *Nice Racism*, DiAngelo (2021, p. 130) states, “Trauma is generally understood as serious mental and physical distress resulting from a terrible or endangering event.” I have been through therapy. I have gone above and beyond to prove this teacher was wrong, even when it nearly killed me. I have run for so long because it is sometimes easier to do nothing. My dad used to tell me that nothing from nothing will give you nothing. It is a choice to push through when any trauma is experienced. To be honest, I am still pushing through.

One of my healing agents was when I decided to obtain my Doctorate in Education with Social Justice being my focal point. However, it is important to note that healing is an ongoing and life-long process with no endpoint (Muriithi, 2022). The choice of autoethnography has been therapeutic. I never expected to relive so much pain, to endure the moment as if it happened today, or to process why it happened in the first place. I have shed countless tears to tell my story in its authentic form. From elementary school to working in corporate America, the similarities of having my spirit assassinated felt quite the same. The higher I advanced in my career, the more it seemed like I was back in my 7th-grade math class. In both situations, all I could do was be still and be

Black! Although I have had a great deal of relief in the storytelling process, I must say that I am hopeful that I will receive total healing as I continue to release and let it go.

Just Smile, Be Black, and Be Relatable

I remember it like it was yesterday. I received a call from a recruiter and thought for sure it was a bill collector or scammer trying to connect with me because of the unfamiliar area code and phone number. The recruiter went out of her way to reach me until the final attempt, an email, worked. I was confused as to why she wanted to talk with me with such urgency. When we spoke, she started the conversation off by saying she was a recruiter seeking a principal for a new school that would be opening in the fall of that year. It was February so I was not in shock that she would be recruiting during this time, yet I continued to think, “Why me?” I must admit that I partially questioned my ability as I was a dean at that time, and I planned to become an assistant principal next. During our call, she stated that the superintendent and board members had already viewed my resume and wanted to move to the next step. My belief in God motivated me to think this was a big blessing, and I am sure that it is although the story did not stay as joyful as I would like to tell. After speaking with the superintendent on the holiday, she offered to fly me out. “It is because of religious faith that we as Black women are able to be in a space of vulnerability while seeking authenticity, (Harris-Perry, 2011).” I continued to roll my eyes to the ceiling and mouth the word “God” loudly enough to verbalize it, yet soft enough not to let her hear it. I flew out almost immediately and surprised myself with the wealth of knowledge I knew. She and her assistant were drawn to how pleasant and knowledgeable I was.

I got hired the day the world shut down, March 12, 2020, a day I will never forget. I negotiated my package and was on my way to the new state to open a new school. Within one month of being hired, I called a close friend of mine and cried. I knew I was in a situation where racism was normalized. One time we were on Zoom and a white woman got on there with a wig and said is this how y'all wear it? I did not respond. She tried to imitate Black people. We were not friends, and we did not joke around. Heck, I did not even know her last name, barely her first. Everyone laughed and made comments. Although I did not participate, I did not verbalize that I found it offensive. I have just moved. Everyone was proud of me! I made it! I did the thing I said I would do, but sooner. I was making six figures. I could not make enemies or that could have cost me my job. My kids were watching, my dad was proud, and my support system was cheering me on. I had to take the racist comments, the microaggressions, the disrespect, and any other violations my white co-workers wanted to issue at me. If I did not take it, I would have put myself and my family in jeopardy of being homeless and I would have been unemployed as I had just started this job and it was the beginning of the pandemic which meant no one was hiring. My only choice was to take the negative verbiage and sit in silence.

It did not stop there. As racism began to show up during the pandemic and riots became more common, I remember thinking we should make a statement as a school district that would be serving students of color predominantly. After all, Sesame Street made a comment, which confused me even more why we did not comment. After deliberation, prayer, and long conversations with my friend and her husband, I decided to take a stand for the students. I could not do it for myself, but the kids were due a leader

who would advocate and speak up for what was right. I met with the superintendent and a few other decision-makers and shared my thoughts about us making a statement on the website. Again, they laughed and said those people would get it together and this would pass over like everything else. With the look of confusion on my face, they stopped laughing and hitting the table hysterically and came back to the meeting to tell me what we should not and would not do. It was at this point that I realized that I was just a Black face with a beautiful smile that they paid high dollars to have on their team to bring in the Black kids. What they failed to realize was that I was so much more, and I had a voice.

We continued to meet so that the school would meet compliance for the school and would open on schedule. Although I was hired to be the principal of the school, I noticed that the district leaders lacked experience with policies and procedures, and they found it fitting to have me write them. There were times when I did not sleep for days to meet the expectations set for my performance. While speaking with one of the district employees she inquired about my education level. I told her because I knew it was not private information and followed up with a question as to why she was asking. She informed me that she thought that was good how a Black gal got so much education, but she would never give up time with her family to reach my level. She told me they paid her very well, that she made \$90,000 more than I did, and that she did not need more education to do her job. I told her that was nice and that I aspire to one day start my own school. She laughed and maybe we herself with all the intensity she blurted out just to smile and tap my leg and say I love your dreams. Again, another confirmation that made me question if I was hired for my skill set or Black beautiful looks.

The situation continued as my secretary often reminded me that she was not a racist after every racist comment. She talked about comments her known racist brothers would make but would try to explain how they are different. Until one day it was apparent. One of the bosses came to me and told me he was going to make me famous. Of course, I was confused but did not entertain it with a question or statement back. In our weekly meeting, he informed me that I need to get ready because I have interviews in person, on air, and others that I will need to be doing. Okay, was my go-to word. He said we are going to rent a U-Haul and fill it up with hot dogs, chips, and water, and park on the school's front and give it to the families in the communities. He told me he would not be there, and I would need to do so as I look like my people in the community. He attempted to sell me on the idea by asking if I wanted a full school.

With a questionable look, I was trying to understand why he would be saying this to me knowing it was wrong to say the very least. The superintendent thought of supporting him and told me that the families would love to come out and meet me because we all look alike, and I can relate to them. I thought to myself that they did not know my culture, background, or anything about me. So, because I am Black, and they are Black, we are all one big happy family and know each other's life? I did not want to be rude, and I was ever so passive, at that time, but this was it. I had no time to confer with anyone. I knew an associate superintendent in my hometown who I respected and shared some of this information and she not only supported me but gave me the verbiage to speak up and how to respectfully say what I needed to say. So here we are, in another meeting where I am now being told to get my Black or n-word people to enroll and give them a brown paper bag with hot dogs, chips, and water.

I thought about the fact that families were getting so many food stamps whether they qualified or not during the pandemic. They had food and for some, more money than they normally received with the stimulus and \$1000 a week unemployment check. I did not want to address this as a personal matter, so I decided to bring awareness to them. I told them how offensive it would be to bring a U-Haul truck with those items to give to the families that we have never spoken to and how it would be most insulting to do so. I further continued and put everyone on notice that I would not partake in such a disrespectful idea. I continued and said you all did not, could not have opened a school to educate and support children. I do not hear the care for their future, families, and outcomes when we meet. Sadly, my speech was cut short as I was told, that is why we hired you. More tears. More hurt. More anger. I found myself feeling like the little girl in seventh grade math once again who had just experienced spirit assassination. The nice racism in that moment with a blend of microaggression retriggered me as I understood what was happening in that moment, and I knew that it was meant to tear me down.

I now recall the promise I made to myself years ago as I entered the field of education. I would NEVER allow a student to go through what I went through as a child in 7th grade. The trauma of having my spirit assassinated. The oppression and microaggressions I endured. The silence of a child due to fear. I knew that although I was ready to pack my bags and say goodbye, I knew the kids needed me more than ever at this new school with racist leaders. So, I stayed, at least for the next 18 months or so. I learned to tune the noise out or say something. I built a school for kids to come and feel safe. I screened teachers before hiring them, noticing there were quite a few applicants

who did not care for Black people. Yes, I snooped and went deep before putting just any person in front of these precious Black children.

Even so, I still had a teacher that I had to put on notice that we do not and will not yell at children. I liked her personally, but it was not about me. It was about how she could not respect and support the students. She said it was in her culture to yell. She also said these kids, yes, these kids, were the worst and would not listen. I disagreed and finally had to document her, ultimately writing her up with a warning. She respected me, to a degree, which is what she told me when she came to me and said she was quitting because she would not be able to stop yelling at the kids. I told her not to finish her day and to leave now, after I thanked her for her honesty. What she did not know was that I am a world-class math teacher, and I would happily teach the students if that meant keeping my word so that they were not traumatized by her actions. So, I did just that. I taught them for the remainder of the semester and brought great joy to learning. I was not happy to be taking on another task, but I was relieved that the children were learning and would not have their spirits assassinated. As an educator, and former student who experienced spirit assassination, it gave me a great deal of fuel to see the students learn and be in a safe space. I was very elated and on fire, once again, for the love of education as I watched the students' progress each day.

The final straw was when the district decided to hire a businessman to be the superintendent with no credentials other than his skin color. He asked to meet with me after his first week on the job. As I walked into the room, he began to speak as I sat down. He said we know you are smart; we know you know politics; we know you are well educated. I was unsure as to why he and I were meeting and why he would start the

meeting off like he did. He said he had a vision for the school and that I needed to get more Black kids in the school. I asked if the school was all black to be clear because another school within a seven-minute drive was. He told me technically no it was not, but I needed to get my people enrolled or else. I cried so badly that night that I was sick to my stomach. I felt myself hit a low point and knew that these feelings were very similar to that of the feeling I had when my math teacher talked down to me and spoke harshly to me.

That night I immediately reached out to get help as I now had my sick dad to take care of because his health had taken a toll for the worse and he was not allowed to live alone. I knew I could not quit now. I had my dad and three of my children to take care of. I was so broken and not sure how to fix myself. The therapist saw me the very next day as she must have known I was broken due to the ongoing tears during my intake meeting the night before. My first meeting was only supposed to be about 45 minutes...it turned into almost three hours. She did not charge me extra. She did not rush me. She provided an ear and plenty of tissue. I cried like a baby and let it all start to come out. From then on, we met weekly as she discovered my boundaries were very weak. She worked with me and supported me.

Finally, I notified my job that I was not returning and that I was submitting my resignation. I could not take another white man or woman, for that matter, talking down to me. The continued disrespect to me as a professional Black woman was done with. I refused to have my hair mocked, my makeup questioned, my build examined, and my mind, skills, and abilities in question. It was over. I knew that this man would continue to poke me. While it was not all because of him that I quit, he was the cherry on top, the

finale. I realized that in seventh grade my life took a turn that could have taken my life. I deserve the same respect as my counterparts. If my skin threatens or offends someone, it is not my problem. It seems to me that they should examine their own biases and why they are so bothered by me. “The stories we tell ourselves propel us upwards towards growth-thinking or downwards towards further distress-thinking” (Gilpin-Jackson, 2020, p. 58). As a Black woman, I was not allowed to be passive and soft. She was assassinated and sent off to never return.

Now I am a blend of passive and aggressive, with the strength and knowledge to know which can be shown, around whom, and when. Everyone does not get to experience me anymore. I am bold and stand by my power. I do not tolerate racist comments, not even from nice racists. I fight for children to receive an equitable education with love, support, and equality. During my early years in my doctoral program, I was unclear as to what kind of change agent I would be. I was never unclear that I would be a change agent. Today, as I near completion of said degree, I know that I am a change agent for children and their right to have equitable education, encouragement, and the power to grow up and become the next change agent.

Sherrie McClellan

The Epiphanies to Knowledge

Racism is still prevalent today. Black people have had to endure racism in all facets of our lives. Black people have historically faced racism, persecution, and educational and political discrimination from white America. White America struggles with the black and brown culture moving forward in the fight for equality. Carol Anderson, the author of *White Rage* wrote, “The trigger for white rage, inevitably is

black advancement. It is not the mere presence of black people that is the problem; rather, it is blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship. It is blackness that refuses to accept subjugation, to give up. A formidable array of policy assaults and legal contortions has consistently punished black resilience, and black resolve (Anderson, 2020).

These difficulties have been endured and overcome through hard work, faith, and belief in God. This has been written as a traditional means of survival for the Black community. Black liberation theologians believe that God has a special relationship with African Americans. In *Sister Citizen* by Melissa V. Harris-Perry, she wrote, “God is not a passive bystander in human history but rather an active participant in the struggles of oppressed and dispossessed people. In the American context, this means that God is on the side of blacks as they struggle against the social, political, and economic marginalization caused by the legacy and persistence of white American racism.” Faith in God and spirit assassination are two circumstances that have impacted my life as an educated Black woman.

As I began this program, I did not understand the revelations that I would have in completing the journey. A journey of self-reflection and healing. Healing from the many facets of spirit assassination that I’ve experienced in my lifetime. As I dug deeper into the research, I found that my experiences were mine, but that others shared similar experiences as mine. My perception of what racism is has changed since I began pursuing my doctorate. The little things that were said and done during my lifetime, I would just use the blanket term “racism” that was how I was taught and raised. My defense for those experiences was to pray for them and move forward. Turn the other

cheek, because surely this could not be going on this day and time. Through the dissemination of information on spirit assassination that occurs in both education and life, I hoped to decrease the impact of the pain that I've experienced. Some of my experiences were blatant racism, but I thought it was subtle and not a big deal. From childhood to today, the unlocking of those experiences is viewed through the new lens I now use, and I have clarified that it was spirit assassination.

In the spring of 2008, while working in a predominately white-staffed middle school as a secretary, I decided to complete my undergraduate degree and then enroll in a master's in school counseling program. A few colleagues and my family encouraged me when I decided to complete my degree. Outside of my immediate family, one of my greatest cheerleaders was a colleague, Kimberlyn, whom I genuinely admired. She was a sharp white woman, a snazzy dresser, and all about her look. After I commenced my pursuit of a bachelor's degree, she would often privately express her pride in my accomplishment in going back to school. It was a private compliment that I neglected to notice: She would only say it to me, never in front of other colleagues. The only exception was when she once introduced me to her spouse and informed him of my academic pursuit to become a counselor. The niceness she showed me was not uncommon. She was always nice, but there was always some underlying tone or look with what she said. Robin DiAngelo said, "Niceness requires that racism only be acknowledged in acts that intentionally hurt or discriminate, which means that racism can rarely be acknowledged (DiAngelo, 2021, p. 49).

For more than five years, I had the opportunity to collaborate with Kimberlyn before she was promoted to the position of lead counselor. I found her to be quite

encouraging. It was the year before she made the move to the post that there was a vacancy for her position. A Black woman named Chelsea, who was hired for her vacancy by her predecessor, was brilliant. At this point, I became aware of Kimberlyn's blatant bigotry for the first time. On occasion, Kimberlyn would try to entice me to ask Chelsea, the new counselor, questions, and then she would try to convince me to disclose information about Chelsea to her. Because Kimberlyn would always invite me to come and talk with her, I found that whenever she was in the building, I felt an unpleasant level of discomfort and would find something else to do in the building when she was there. Learning this about her was hurtful to me.

After I finished my master's degree, I was looking forward to searching for a position in my field of school counseling. This was so exciting for me as I was already working in a school district, so I figured that landing a counseling position would be easy. To my surprise, getting the position was not as easy. Here I was, a college graduate with a master's degree and I could not find a position within the district I was working in. As I think back to all the reasons, I thought could be the issue, I could never put my finger on it. I was puzzled as to why I did not get a position, as the person who encouraged and cheered me on to go back to school was now the director. After countless interviews time and time again, I never got selected for any of the open positions. I truly became discouraged. I later learned that the person I thought was on my side was not. The fact that she was one of my biggest supporters in my face, but behind my back she was negative, baffled me. Of all the people I thought would not be for me, she was the last person on my list. In a final interview, I asked if I could speak with her afterward, and she avoided me, saying she had another meeting. We finally had a conversation via

email, and she assured me that I was on the right track but that it was a team decision and she had gone with the majority. She assured me that my interview skills were not the problem, but to continue interviewing as eventually my time or turn would come. As I think back on this situation, I see so many aspects of spirit assassination. She was okay with me aspiring for my degree, but did she think I would not complete it? It felt like she did not approve of me reaching her level of education.

When you work in education, you are exposed to a wide variety of things. For whatever reason, whether it be good, negative, or indifferent, you must maintain a neutral stance. My first job in the field of education was working as a library assistant at a school system in my hometown. Over time, I worked my way up through the ranks and eventually became a secretary. I have always maintained that there is a distinction between the two sides of the school office desk. On one side of the desk, you were a parent; you only saw and knew what schools allowed and sent home. On the other side, as an employee, you knew the ins and outs of how the school was run and the many other things that go on inside the office of the school. This has been my statement throughout my entire educational career. From parent to faculty member, you view things differently.

Discipline was the primary focus of my time spent working as a secretary. Because of the role I held, it was my responsibility to ensure that the pupils were able to serve the consequences that were set for them. When I was keeping track of my schedule, I observed that several of the teachers were continually writing up the same scholars who were Black or brown. I kept track of the scholars they were writing up over the subsequent weeks. I voiced my concerns to the administrator of the building. Since the instructors were white, nothing ever happened. When viewed from this fresh perspective,

something like this is what I would refer to as white privilege. Regularly, they would write these youngsters up for offenses that would result in them being placed in detention or school suspension. Those students who were Black and brown were subjected to more write-ups, more severe punishments, and even suspensions. Multiple infractions were written on a single kid on the same day for a variety of incidents, including being in the corridor, walking the wrong way, and arriving late to class, among other things. Bettina Love (2019) wrote, “We intersect our moonlit darkness with our culture(s), language(s), sexuality(ies), ability(ies), religion(s), and spirituality(ies). Our complicated identities cannot be discussed or examined in isolation from one another. These identity complexities, which create our multifaceted range of beings, must matter.”

“The story of this country’s rise from a starving colony to a world superpower can’t be told without the central character of race—specifically, the creation of a “racial” hierarchy to justify the enslavement of African people” (McGhee, 2021). “Black education was a fugitive project from its inception—outlawed and defined as a criminal act regarding the slave population” (Givens, p. 3, 2021). Because of this, there has been a never-ending struggle for educational equality as well as racial equality. During my formative years in a household with a robust religious ethos, my mother and our former pastor frequently cited this bible verse, Proverbs 18:21, King James Version, Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof (King James Bible, 1769/2008). This very same passage would advise me to concentrate on the positive aspects of life and to get rid of the negative things whenever I was growing up. Instead of focusing on the bad and painful things that other people say, it is better to pay attention to the words that people have to say that are encouraging and kind. One’s words

and/or actions can either help or hurt another person. Our deeds and words, on the other hand, have the potential to render people hopeless, uninspired, worn out, and stagnant, which are all manifestations of death on a spiritual and psychological level. This level of death is what I call spirit assassination. It is a slow death, a death of the spirit, and a death built on racism to diminish, humiliate, and exterminate people of color. Acts of spirit assassination happen against Black and brown people daily. “In education, we should create an equitable learning environment. A classroom for Black students where teachers affirm, nurture, motivate, and engage them (Parker, 2021).”

In the course of my work as a school staff member, I have encountered numerous instances in which efforts were made to assassinate my spirit and the scholars that I was responsible for serving. At the beginning of my employment at a particular school, I encountered several white teachers and other school personnel who did not appear to be enthusiastic about having me in the office. Especially the person I shared an office with. To get under my skin or to make me angry, she would do and say irritating things. Since I was instructed to do so, I would investigate my position by asking her questions. She asserted that she was unaware of my inquiry and that she should inquire with the manager of the office. I would ask the Black administrator to help me locate the answer to my inquiry because they were so unbecoming. It was common for me to stroll into the office and find her engaged in conversation with the teachers. However, as soon as I entered the room, the conversation would cease. She would ask me a wide variety of intimate questions about my life and my children, which is something that you would not believe at this point. These are the kinds of questions that she asked over and over again about my children's school, their father, whether or not my mother and father were married, and

about my siblings and their children. As normal, I became very cautious about answering her questions. It was easy to tell when she was probing because the question was not work-related.

Working in education can sometimes be challenging when dealing with teachers who have their own underlying biases. Bettina Love (2016, p. 2) defined spirit murdering as “The denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable structures of racism.” Love further states, “What I am talking about is a slow death, a death of the spirit, a death that is built on racism intended to reduce, humiliate, and destroy people of color” (2020, p. 2). From personal experience with spirit assassination, I am always careful of the words I say to children, no matter their color.

Internalized oppression is defined by Learning for Justice as the belief among historically oppressed people that negative stereotypes about themselves and positive stereotypes about a dominant group are, in fact, true (Webb, 2017). Internalized Racism is the permeation of racism into the psyche. Often it denotes the internalization of negative stereotypes or beliefs about one’s racial group generated by the white majority in the United States (Huber et al., 2006). This form of racism has also internalized the values and worldviews built on white supremacy. To better conceptualize the impact of internalized racism, a new theoretical framework in psychology was developed in early 1970 (Huber et al., 2006).” For many white people, racism is simply prejudice; however, for black people, racism is either systemic or institutionalized, which is also true of internal oppression. The practice of racism is still very common. Regardless of the period, people of color, specifically Black people, are still considered to be of lower

value than white people. I know this to be true because I can recall when I was working at a K-Mart store and a white woman came in looking for something and asked for assistance. When I proceeded to try to help her, she refused. As my coworker approached me and we started talking, she immediately asked her if she could help her. Naturally, my coworker was white. She proceeded to help her, and I overheard her say, "I know "they" need jobs, but I would rather they not assist me with anything."

Another form of racism that may be seen in the educational system is known as the school-to-prison pipeline. This form of racism has connections to spirits being assassinated. "According to some research, situational factors affect the educational path of African American males when they enroll in school. These situational factors include experiencing harsher discipline methods, having unprepared teachers instruct you, receiving a referral for special education, and feeling detached from school (Darensbourg et al, 2010)." The combination of these factors within the education system has been purported to contribute to the overrepresentation of African American males in prison (Darensbourg et al.)." Bettina Love wrote in an article from 2013, "Race-centered violence kills Black children daily by either murdering them in the streets—taking their bodies or murdering their spirits—taking their souls. Spirit murdering within a school context is the denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable, structures of racism (Love, 2013).

The school-to-prison pipeline was somewhat prevalent in my son's sophomore year. My son was a gentle giant. 6'1, and even 230 pounds. One day, while in school, he got into an altercation with another student. Now my son, who has never even been to detention, was told he was suspended for 10 days with a hearing. Once the story was told,

the other student took my son's water bottle into the boy's restroom without him knowing. Once my son realized his water bottle was gone, he also noticed that the boy was gone. He asked to go to the restroom. When he walked in, he saw the young man adding water to the bottle and mixing it around. Once the principal called me, I asked her why my son had been suspended for so many days. She explained that the school had zero tolerance and that my son was on camera pushing the other student into the hallway. I immediately began advocating for my son, and his suspension was reduced. The other student's suspension remained the same. But he came back to school, trying to get others to go against my son. Eventually, the student was reported, and the student was suspended again for harassment. The administrator, a white woman in her mid-to late-thirties, was truly advocating for the white student who had urinated in my son's water bottle. She even dared to say that he was only adding water, and we could not prove it was urine as it spilled when my son shoved him. In the meeting, a black administrator assisted in advocating for my son, and that's why his suspension was reduced.

“Black children in schools are humiliated, reduced, and destroyed by visceral and explicit attacks by school officials like Gordeuk and Fields, or are systemically and institutionally ejected from schools for being Black. For example, Black boys and girls are expelled and suspended at much higher rates than their White counterparts for the same or lesser offensive infractions. As a result, Black children are “steered into detention centers, jails, and prisons from the hallways of school buildings” (Love, 2013, p. 12). “As soon as they walk through those school doors, black children are immediately subjected to dehumanization and criminalization. These forms of cultural genocide, also known as "spiritual assassination," stigmatize Black boys and girls as disciplinary

problems. It is believed that the presence of all these educational systemic characteristics, taken together, contributes to the disproportionate number of African American men who are incarcerated (Love, 2016).

Spirit murder/assassination in physical form has manifested as colonization, war, genocide, lynching, land theft, rape, sexual violence, and police brutality; however, the long-term impact that these tragedies have had on the human spirit and the essence of our humanity and dignity has not been fully considered. I think of how Kimberle Crenshaw's work with Intersectionality relates to the new or younger generation. Being Black and being made to sit and listen to the blatant differential treatment of this experience was a lot to deal with at that time. One can see how crossing of racism, sexism, ableism, etc. arson Over 20 years ago, *Patricia Williams* argued that our spirits were under attack by racism and other forms of discrimination and that it behooved all of us to contend with these attacks. She warned that we are all responsible for addressing the consequences and ramifications of the legacies of racism we have inherited, especially if we believe in justice and desire a different reality for this nation (Revilla, 2021).

Teresa Quarles

I Am Good Enough: Meeting My True Self

In the not-so-distant past, I participated in equity and leadership training through my employer. It was an excellent training that created opportunities for great dialogue on pivotal topics regarding race, culture, and the work environment. Let me preface it by saying how hopeful I was because this was something the work culture overall genuinely needed. One of the exercises asked us to identify ourselves in whatever way we desired. I

only had to think briefly about what adjectives describe my identity. Without much-lingering thought, I listed my top three in the order of Black, woman, and mother. I had forethought that we may be put in small breakout groups to discuss our choices, as this was a sizable training class. However, we did not go into breakout groups, we discussed as a whole class.

We were asked for volunteers to share, but there was a lot of hesitation. Most people on this Zoom training worked in various departments so were not familiar with others. I remember thinking that people do not want to go first, maybe because they do not want to be judged. The awkward silence continued; much I believe by design by the training facilitator. So, I spoke up and I gave my choices in order. I discovered that as with most times you go first, and everyone else gets to see how the exercise or the attendees' part in the exercise is expected to play out. I felt a little hesitation and that feeling you get when you are okay with sharing something but maybe not all of it crept up in my mind. That little lump in my throat or butterflies in my stomach were there and not budging as I sat staring at the computer screen with all these faces of strangers waiting to hear my responses. I was asked why I chose those and in that order; Black, woman, and mother. I had not thought of the why, I just remember thinking what did they mean where did the order come from? I wondered if I was being asked because they legitimately wanted to know how I see myself or is this question about something else? And, that right there is another one of my abbreviated definitions of being Black in America; there is always something else behind the *whatever*. By whatever I mean there is always the wonder if there is something else behind the look, the question, the explanation, the intent, the perception, the reason, the thought, the behavior, etc.

Unfortunately, in Black history and culture, we often have to analyze actions, interactions, comments, or behaviors of others who are not Black or of color. So, this thought, although through the lens of the above question for myself only lasted a few seconds before I gave my answer.

After some thought, I said I chose words in that order because I have always been Black. I have always been a woman then I became a mother. All three give me great pride and great challenges. I wonder if we were in a different place and space in America, would my order be the same? I recognize that my identity is woven into being a Black woman and mother. However, I realize that there are some days where my identity may be first and foremost a Black mother while other days my focal identity may be as a mother who is Black. What I have come to realize is that although these two identities sound similar, they indeed are not the same. I can advocate for my child and be a mother during times when my physical identity is not shown. In those instances, I am a mother who is Black. However, once I can be physically seen, I become a Black mother telling my life experiences, which leads into the framework for this study.

The theoretical framework being utilized for this study is *Critical Race Theory (CRT)*. The applicability of this framework, specifically its tenet of *storytelling-counter storytelling*, is the focus of my shared lived experience. For whom better to tell my story, the impact of my experiences, and my hope for personal growth than me? I realize how *CRT* intermingles with my life. It is woven into every aspect of being a Black woman and mother. *CRT* critically examines the pervasive presence of racism across our legal systems, institutions, and daily experiences. The *CRT* tenet of *storytelling-counter storytelling* supports the aspect of me telling my story in my own words and through my

experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 10). Who is better to tell my story, my experiences than me? Who better to relay my emotions, my frustrations, my pain than me? If I do not revisit the pain, then can I honestly say that it is a realistic expectation that I will be able to heal? CRT theorizes that racism is part of everyday life. Racism spills over into every aspect of living, as it states, the legal system, institutions, and everyday life.

Those everyday life challenges are difficult. Not only do I have to manage as a Black woman to maneuver them daily but as a Black mother, I have to teach my child, who is on the cusp of being a Black woman, how to maneuver through the same challenges. It is overwhelming and devastatingly sad. It is a daily task to deal with the frustrations, exhaustion, and anxiety-inducing culture of what it is to be Black in America, especially a Black woman in America. I have lived to see the level of racism and hate toward people of color be so ingrained and instinctual that in retaliation to the first Black President being elected, almost an entire political party supported and voted into the highest job in the land, the United States president, a person who is the antithesis of equity, inclusivity, and diversity. A person who has admitted to actions and behaviors that define xenophobia, racism, misogyny, classism, sexism, heterosexism, or any ism that denies and discriminates.

In August 2020, NBA legend-turned-coach Doc Rivers stated in an interview after the police shooting of Jacob Blake and the response of some in the Republican party members defending the all too commonly used excuse of police shooting Black people out of fear, that, ...” We’re the ones getting killed. We’re the ones getting shot. We’re the ones that were denied to live in certain communities. We’ve been hung. We’ve been

shot” It’s amazing why we keep loving this country, and this country does not love us back. I’m so often reminded of my color. We have to do better. But we got to demand better” (Grief, 2020).

I would love to say that I am strong enough mentally and emotionally that it does not bother me to manage these daily challenges but that would not be honest. As we continued with that first training class, I could not lose sight of how significant that moment was and how it stuck with me afterward as I thought about the pride and challenges of being a Black woman. That demand for better can be defined by each person. Demand better for me means to speak up, to speak out, to advocate for equal opportunities, and to demand that inequities be eliminated and replaced with atonement and emotional/mental reparations.

The intersectionality of me being Black and a woman places me into a category rich in a history of racism and sexism. As a Black woman, I deal with microaggressions, being labeled an *angry Black woman* when speaking passionately about something, negative comments about my culture, and yet witnessing appropriation behaviors, stereotypes, and questions about my hair (can they touch it) and my lineage (what are you?). I have dealt with this all my life. I continue to deal with all this while maneuvering in a society that values me less but often expects consistent smiles through adversities, appreciation for whatever the white patriarchal system *affords* me, and compliance.

Imposter Syndrome

I started this doctorate program with more questions than answers, not just of this program but of myself and my abilities. In full transparency, I felt that as each semester

passed, I still did not have the answers. I told myself that those anxious feelings would settle as time passed but it did not. I felt as though *imposter syndrome* was settled upon me with each passing semester hanging around my shoulders refusing to leave. I questioned everything; still questioning if I am being honest. *Imposter syndrome* was conceived in 1978 by psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes. The current definition by Dr. Leilani Carver-Madalon, associate professor at Maryville University states that imposter syndrome is when “someone feels like a fraud, intellectually and/or professionally” (Chisolm, n. d.).

Another point that Chisolm (n.d.) makes is that the person feels as though they are not good enough, that they do not belong, and or will be discovered sooner or later to be an imposter. I can relate to all of these. As confident as I may appear at times when walking into a room, I am often ridden with negative thoughts of do I deserve to be in this room or at this table. I question myself, asking if I truly have qualifying thoughts to contribute. *Imposter Syndrome* is a vicious cycle that can limit not only the ability to succeed but also limit ambition. If one does not feel as if they are qualified for that dream job, then they are less likely to go out and apply. In true hindsight, I used to think that when I reminisced about when I was younger, I remembered being more adventurous and more adaptable at jumping into unfamiliar situations without the fear or hesitance of not feeling like I belonged. However, as I have progressed in age and experience, and finally the lessons learned in my doctoral journey have shown me that there was no adventure or jumping by me. I was scared and did not like having any attention brought upon me. Still to this day, all this is pretty much true.

When I dig deep and reflect on when did I start feeling this way or do I recall a time where I was happy and felt like I belonged, I honestly cannot remember. Do I have good memories of playing with friends and other times that children generally have? Yes, I do, but those are fleeting in comparison to the times I remember feeling isolated, alone, judged, and overall picked on and bullied. The memory of my imposter costume goes back as far as I can remember. The expectation that adults could say something negative to me and I should be okay became the definition of who I saw myself as and how I allowed others to see me. Thus began my mantra of *I'm okay*, when asked what was wrong throughout my childhood and adulthood.

The power of that pain is immeasurable because at a time when I felt my own biological father had never been in my life and did not want me, I thought I had someone willing to want me enough to give me his name. And, yet then came those adults who decided it was okay to tell a nine or ten year old child that I was not deserving of their family's last name. Further, the joy from feeling as though I was worthy of this man giving me his last name wore off very soon as I began to see he was just as mean and vindictive as the other adults in his family.

Growing up hearing negativity spewed on a daily basis, again from this person who I had allowed to define so much of my worth, how could I not end up pretending to be someone else? It was an environment where you had to show strength or be figuratively eaten alive. I could not show my feelings got hurt or they would be hurt even more. I could not show that teasing comments about my height or my lighter skin hurt me because again, they would increase and intensify. So, I grew up saying that all was okay, even to the point of eventually believing it myself. As I entered adulthood, I

went from an environment of oppression and emotional harm to a society that continued the same messages of not being worthy because of my gender and my race. The damage was done and the joy went away and stayed away for decades.

As one ages, you experience year upon year of hearing, seeing, feeling, and being present for times when you have been told you were not good enough in America. The legal and school systems are not equitable for the people who look like you despite the hue because let us face the fact, the various shades of Black people in America are a whole different type of historical trauma to be visited, hopefully at a date soon. I realized that I was seeing myself and my memories through rose-colored glasses. This feeling of not belonging, not being qualified or good enough has been a part of me throughout my adult life and professional career. It is very difficult to shake these thoughts freely. This program is not the first time that the syndrome has darkened my mind.

I am well accomplished at work and throughout my career. I have always been well accomplished in school from grade school throughout college. I graduated in the top ten percent of my high school class. I graduated cum laude with double undergraduate degrees in social work and psychology, and I earned straight A's while earning my master's degree. Throughout this journey, I have earned A's except for one hard-earned B. In addition, coworkers, friends, and family members tell me quite often how great a mom I am. Deep down I know I am an attentive and nurturing mother. However, those feelings of anxiety and angst often creep up in both my personal and professional lives. Sometimes I sit in meetings and get anxious when I know it is time for me to speak or present. I sit there thinking, will I sound like I know what I am doing? Will I leave people looking at me wondering how I got my job? It is an easy spiral to go down, at least for

me. I have often wondered if I felt that way because I am often one of a few if not the only Black person at the table of these meetings.

As I have researched, read, pondered, synthesized, and sought comprehension for this dissertation, I realized that at least part of the reason is the messages that I have seen, heard, and experienced throughout my life that have told me that as a Black woman, I am dually *less than*. The history books, the Middle Passage and Enslavement of My Ancestors, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the fight for Civil and Women's Rights contained the notion that Black people were property, not human, that we did not deserve the dignity and respect or equitable shares of employment opportunities, generational wealth opportunities, housing, or education. In addition, the accuracy of America's history has not always been relayed from a truthful and accurate position. For example, slavery has not always been described in its unpleasant reality. Givens (2021) discusses the history textbook, *An American History*, by Nathaniel Wright Stephenson, where Stephenson wrote,

...the Southern plantation was characterized by its hospitable mansion, its retinue of slaves, its broad tract of surrounding land. Givens points out, "that hospitable is used to describe the plantation home obscures any perspective of those who were enslaved on its land and signals the exclusion of black youth-who were the progenies of slaves-from seeing themselves in the historical narrative...the enslaved and their descendants are merely backdrop. They are inanimate context. (Givens, 2021, pp 135-136)

How can I be expected to rectify these feelings of inadequacy, doubt, and unrelenting imposter syndrome when the messaging of America continues to say because of my ethnicity, culture, and gender, I am less than? As stated above, I come from a people who were "inanimate context."

As I reflect, I can see that I have spent the majority of my adulthood operating in a state of functional depression and functional anxiety. What do I mean by that? I mean that I could still get up each morning and take care of business, go through the day, and complete tasks but there was no joy, no happiness, and no peace. Through my reflections, I now see how trauma has been present throughout my life and the effects have meant that my anxiety was always on the rise. Questions about my abilities were always present, and I had to learn how to gain self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth.

Currently, the opinions of right-wing conservatives and media, along with conspiracy theorist politicians and citizens make it appear that the de-evolution of America is in high gear. As I begin to understand more how the messaging of America has and still affects me, I begin to comprehend better how *imposter syndrome* and self-doubt were born in me and nurtured in me. How many times have I been the only person of color at a meeting? As my career has progressed, how many times have I been only one of a few women in a meeting? How many times have I had to mentally practice what I was about to say to make sure it relayed my passion, so I was not deemed *angry*? How many times has someone told me to calm down or relax when speaking passionately about a topic or defending myself? The answer to all these questions is *far too many times*. My voice, as with many Black people, especially women, will go unheard if I do not speak up for myself, defend myself, and advocate for myself. This is where the power of this autoethnography comes into play as a vital tool to tell my lived experience through my own eyes and with my own words. I am my own heroine. I am my own fixer, my own counselor, my own rebel in a system of patriarchy, racism, sexism, and systemic discrimination. To heal myself, I must transparently share my experience.

The Circus

One hot and humid day in July, I woke up feeling drained. I followed my usual morning routine and went to work. On this day I could not shake this feeling of dread and doom. There was no joy in my work any longer. Then the guilt set in because I felt as though I was doing more harm than good regarding my clients. I could not pinpoint where these feelings were coming from, nor could I shake the feelings. As I sat and talked with a coworker–therapist, it became clear to her and me when she pointed out that I was professionally burned out. She imparted some words of wisdom to me by reminding me of numerous conversations she and I had where my conversation gave evidence that it was time for a break. As I pondered what she told me I began to realize that she was indeed correct. I had been feeling this way for a while subconsciously. The social worker in me said it is time to experience something different than the direct service I had been providing to my clients. It was my decision at the time to find another job, one where I could still contribute and interact with clients but not with direct service.

Imagine my glee when I learned of an open position where I could continue working with people but have the break, I knew was necessary. About a month later I applied I was hired to work with women and children in a more cursory manner. This position would allow me to work in the realm of my career field but take that needed step back for a while. I already knew someone who had been working there for a couple of months. I was excited to start a new job doing something new. However, I did not know what I was about to step into.

Day one came, and I sat at the front desk observing and witnessing what could only be described as toxic, harassing, degrading, and condescending language and behaviors. And that was all in one eight-hour shift. Imagine my utter astonishment when I saw these behaviors were coming from the management team. I immediately felt this knot in my stomach because unfortunately, this was an all too familiar scenario I have witnessed and or had to deal with personally. Over that first day and days moving forward, I witnessed the condescension and rudeness displayed by them to the staff, who were primarily Black. In addition, the population of our clientele was majority Black. The spoken and unspoken threat of them having authority over staff and clients was real and it kept many in line for fear of retaliation. As time passed, I began to see the pattern of who the targets were. It was not that they were treating all staff that way; it was only certain staff, Black staff, and some Black clients. I remember thinking the level of privilege that was on display was infuriating. They operated as though they were untouchable for accountability or correction.

So, my enthusiasm that was there at the beginning of my first day diminished quickly. By the end of that first day, my thoughts were, you have got to be kidding me! That is all that continued to swim in my mind. I was in utter shock and disbelief. I had to look around because I swore, I heard circus music playing in my head. I felt like yelling, where are the clowns? Initially, I was spared the indignities, but I had a feeling it was only because I was new. I was proven correct after the first couple of weeks. As the first weeks passed and my newness with the agency was wearing down, I began to personally experience the microaggressions, the harassment of questions about my education, my ethnic background, and of course can I touch your hair was thrown in there. The entire

management team was white. I was approached and questioned as somewhat of a phenomenon. At least that was my perception. The more about my education and background they learned, the more shocked and amazed they seemed to be. I felt like a child in a classroom confronted with multiple teachers' lowered expectations of me and my abilities. I was waiting on the old standby, *you're a credit to your race*.

You know that sense of surprise when a white person finds you polite, articulate, and intelligent as a Black person? I began to see that I was now working in an oppressive and privileged environment. Oppression is defined as being “institutionalized through pervasive practices grounded in history, law, economic policy, social custom, and education that rationalize and maintain hierarchies among individuals and groups” (Adams et al., 2018, p. 36). If oppression had a picture in the dictionary, it would have been a picture of that agency.

At that time, the demographic make-up was twenty-four staff in total with six being white and the other eighteen being black. The leadership or management team consisted of all white women and the remaining two white women were Case Managers. I cannot adequately explain how many of the stereotypes of black people were assigned to me by most of the six white women. I experienced multiple kinds of micro-aggressive racist experiences within my first few months. When the white Case Manager who worked the shift with me learned I had a master's degree, racism by way of her lowered expectations was evident. All she could say was, “Really, you have a master's degree? I said yes, as a matter of fact, I have dual bachelor's degrees as well.

Her sense of being flabbergasted was hilarious. She was genuinely surprised that I earned those degrees. So, I had fun with it and asked her why she seemed so shocked. She told me she was just surprised because I was working as a *glorified receptionist* there and she thought I would be doing something more important with all those degrees. I laughed, but not a real laugh, more a laugh of Oh, bless your heart. From that moment moving forward, I decided she no longer deserved my time or attention to continue conversations.

I politely informed her that I was getting back to my work. She continued to press the issue wanting me to list different classes I had taken, explain to her what type of work or positions I had previously held, and asked if I had worked with white people before. I told her to go about her business and we could communicate only related to work. There were no more questions about my education or former work but then the fascination switched to my hair. Is it real, is that the real color, is it natural, do you straighten it, and of course, the inevitable can I touch it? With my best angry Black woman voice, I said no to all. At the time, there was another Black coworker present. After this encounter was over, I asked her if she could believe what had just happened. She stated to me that it will probably get a lot worse. She was so correct.

As time progressed, I started speaking up more and more about what I was observing towards clients and staff. Staff would huddle together in an office to give support to one another at the start of our shift. We shared stories of experiencing somatic symptoms on our way to work. For me, I would be fine until I reached a certain point on the highway heading into work. Then suddenly, my stomach would start to hurt. I would experience more frequent migraines. All too often, we would share our collective stories

of intimidation, dismissiveness, and oppression. I started speaking openly with my supervisor, who was not one of the management team. I relayed to her what I was seeing and how inappropriate and harmful it was for the staff and the clients. I was open and honest about not trying to point fingers or come in new as a know-it-all. However, I was assured that my concerns would be addressed in a manner that came from a place of treating people with humanity and dignity. To this day, I do not know what was shared but from that day moving forward, the management team kicked into high gear the attempted harassment and intimidating behaviors toward me. After about six months on the job, the Director decided she did not like the way I addressed her each day when I saw her. She would come in, walk past me at the front desk, barely mumble, hello, and keep walking before I even had a chance to respond. To be honest, there were times when I mumbled right back because I was going to give her the same amount of energy in my acknowledgment of her as she had given me. I was often sick to my stomach when she would come around and interject herself in the conversation of staff and or clients. I would often walk away rather than hold a conversation I did not want to have with her. I guess I had forgotten *my place*, or at least that is how it felt one day.

So, the day finally came when I was to be reminded who she was and who I was so I could be *put in my place* void of dignity. I had been getting side-eyed by the director and assistant director for a couple of weeks by this point. I could feel in the air that something was escalating but I was patient. Then, one day the director came to me asking to meet with her in her office. I stated that I wanted my supervisor present with me. So, we both entered the office to see all members of the management team present as well. I asked why the whole team was present and was told that they each had an issue with me

and my work performance. I was chastised for *starting stuff* and that I was being disrespectful to the director because I did not look her in her eyes when I said hello. I said, "Excuse me, look you in the eyes?" She said yes, that when I speak to her, I never look her in the eyes, and it is disrespectful. My thoughts immediately went to the days of enslavement, feeling like I was supposed to make my owner feel welcomed and respected despite how they treated me. Again, the message of being seen as less than human and less than deserving erupted in my brain. Was she intimidated or threatened by me? Who knows but all the actions point to that theory. It appeared that I had too much sway with the staff although I was new. It was like I was a slave rebel back in the day trying to gather the staff to work together to be free. Eventually, she saw her baiting was not going to work and the meeting ended. I commenced calling human resources to make a formal complaint only to find out that she had called as soon as I had walked out of the office spewing lies about me and trying to file a grievance of insubordination against me. In the end, the director was told that unless it is business related, I do not have to speak to her, and I surely do not have to look her in the eye when speaking. I stayed and continued supporting the staff and the clients. Eventually, the director and all of her team were no longer working there. It felt like a new type of Emancipation Day.

My emotions were not as gathered and as a matter of fact as I may have made it seem. The rage that was boiling up inside me as that meeting took place was enormous. I could feel that my ears were hot. I felt tears welling in my eyes from the amount of anger I was experiencing. I sat in that office smiling as if nothing they were saying was affecting me but indeed it was affecting me. It still affects me to this day as I recall it. I had a moment where my feelings were so intense and the energy it took to keep them

pushed down so I did allow myself to get backed into a corner where my words and behavior would give them license to suspend or fire me. So, I remained calm. This was one of the hardest incidents I have ever discussed or admitted to anyone outside of my immediate family. The level of humiliation I felt was extensive as these four white women tried to berate me and discuss how my standing up for clients and staff was wrong, they lied about me by changing my narrative of what had happened. I remember feeling small and not in control of what was happening to me. How do you process being made to feel like you cannot say or do anything outside of what is allowed? I worried about my job, being a single mother of a then four-year-old. Was I going to have to make a conscious decision to deal with anything they do to keep this job? Ultimately, I decided that nothing was worth my dignity and self-worth, but it had taken me years to get to that point.

Unfortunately, throughout my professional life, there have been many incidents of having to deal with these types of behaviors and actions. Fortunately, I have learned that others do not define my self-image or self-esteem. However, I am aware many endure in silence in these hostile environments. America systemically has created legislation, policies, and procedures to prevent the elevation and success of the Black community. There seems to be this constant pushing of Black people by America. We were pushed on boats, we were pushed out of our homeland, we were pushed into fields and plantation houses, we were pushed out of housing, education, and employment opportunities and we are now being pushed out of voting booths, school board meetings, and universities. As a Black woman, I am being pushed out of my right to choose for my reproductive health.

As I replayed this meeting over in my mind for many, many days afterward, I thought about how intimidating we must be as a people, to some, especially as a Black woman. The spirits of Black people have been assassinated for centuries. How better to gain control over someone than prove to them they are worthless and less than? Dr. DeGruy's work with Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) emerged in my thoughts as I wrote about this encounter. Historically and generationally, we are a people of damage and trauma. I thought about how, through enslavement, Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, lynching, and the overall refusal to treat my ancestors as humans have Black people been affected from generation to generation (DeGruy, 2017). I feel we must first, as a country, admit that America was and is designed to assassinate the spirit of Black people, so we do not try to be better, do better, or gain better. The inheritance of Black people from our history of enslavement comes with a thick and rich history of physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and financial abuses. The engrained messages and treatment that have resulted from PTSS and the history of slavery in Black America have lit a spark of curiosity in me to gain a better understanding of generational trauma.

For example, the body type talk of Venus Williams is often highlighted in the media world for being too muscular, having thick hips and thick thighs. That fear of losing domination, control, and power drives the agendas of some white people, even if it means they lose too in the process. McGhee describes below a sentiment that was true during and after slavery as well as today, "...the life of a Black American under slavery was the living antithesis of freedom, with Black people subject to daily bodily and spiritual tyranny by man and by state" (McGhee, p. 11).

My Journey of Evolution

During this doctorate journey, I have read, viewed, and discussed numerous books, journal articles, online articles, and videos. Initially, I asked myself what this journey would look like. How would I choose a dissertation topic? How would I choose a research method? I successfully maneuvered through the myriad of potential dissertation groups and landed with my group. The decision to utilize the qualitative research method, autoethnography was born from wanting to deep dive into our psyche and lived experiences. I am both excited and fearful to share my lived experience through an authentic lens. However, I have pledged to myself, my group members, and to the audience that I will be honest, authentic, and transparent, even when it is painful or uncomfortable.

I realize I am not the same person I was who started this journey three years ago. I had considered myself somewhat knowledgeable of the history of my ancestors and America. I understood that the history I learned in school was not complete nor accurate, but I had no idea how much I would be learning about the inequities that Black people have tolerated since the days of slavery. I have spent numerous hours reading and discussing historical events and people who played pivotal roles in the ascension and attempted descension of the Black race. Some I knew about and some I did not. Some I was able to build a larger knowledge base, and some were altogether new. I have evolved and I see the world through new eyes, more aware eyes, more open eyes. The term *woke* has been a familiar term utilized for the past several years. I do not want to say I am *woke* but rather the rose-colored glasses have been removed. I find myself reading or hearing about an issue or event and it sends me down a research rabbit hole to learn more.

Evolution is my never-ending personal theme. My goal is to continue to grow, to continue to learn, and to continue moving towards a transformative view of myself to heal.

This is my journey into the legacy of oppression and spirit assassination, my hope for an enlightened comprehension of my place in this world, and the reality of what I have and can achieve. The evolution from my early years as a Social Worker transitioning into and through motherhood to my current positioning as a doctoral student in this program. From my professional and personal experiences, the road to freedom has been laden with hills and valleys for me as well as what I have observed in America. Regarding America, I have observed how one trip up the mountain of success and change is often followed by tumbles down the hills of the majority narratives and white ideology, the refusal of Black dignity and humanity, and the refusal of equitable opportunities. My story will hopefully bring the reader along my roller coaster journey of excitement, rage, pain, and resolution. I hope that the emotional and physical purging of this experience will allow me to exhibit that my story is not unique by supporting it with the existing literature.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Throughout this dissertation process, it has been difficult to maintain emotional decorum to process and proceed effectively at times. The levels of frustration, anger, and pain seemed to take over sometimes. Experiencing trauma, the first time is daunting enough. However, when revisiting the trauma, it can often feel as though a steamroller is going back and forth over your raw nerves and emotions. We admit that the reflections and the revisiting of our traumas have been difficult. One aspect of assisting ourselves on the healing journey is the importance of self-care. We knew the challenges we faced daily as Black women and parents. However, we choose joy from every corner of our existence and every struggle we maneuver through. “Black women reckon with the racialized and gendered violence enacted against us, celebrate ourselves as an act of radical resistance, and reclaim our joy in a society bent on keeping us in a state of sorrow” (Gilliam & Toliver, 2021).

At the beginning of this journey of recounting our lived experiences, we wanted to tell our stories to be able to share what we have experienced in our own words and voices. “Storytelling is the sharing of anecdotes based on real-life events or imagination. Stories have the power to connect us, to generate mutual understanding, love, and hope” (Muriithi, 2022). Every time we introduce ourselves, we choose which parts of our lives to string together in a story to allow others to understand us. During this research, we have come across invaluable authors. One of which is As we conclude, we are aware that this is not the end but just a transition for more work to be done. Although we each have our voices, experiences, and viewpoints, we understand and comprehend the importance of this work. Before committing to enroll in the doctoral program, more specifically, the

social justice cohort, there were decisions that we each had to make. There has been so much that we have learned as Black women throughout this process. These include knowing when to speak up, how to identify when someone is threatened by our Blackness, and the variations of racism and trauma triggers that can be experienced. By understanding and identifying what has been learned, we can not only advocate for ourselves but for those who lack the knowledge that we have gained in this process.

This dissertation has been reflective and informative for us and hopefully for anyone who will take the opportunity to read it. The insights gained from sharing our lived experiences with spirit assassination were healing and powerful. We know we are not alone, and the light at the end of the tunnel was worth it. People so openly say that sharing is caring, and we could not agree more. It was important to share our lived experiences because we knew we would enter a healing phase and, more importantly, that we deserved the healing that would come from sharing those experiences. In this journey, it was vital to be transparent, even when it hurt the most, so that forgiveness, healing, and our new person could evolve. Although this process was far from easy, it was vital because we understood that before we could help others, we had to, first, help ourselves.

The attention needs to continue to focus on the inequities and injustices that continue to haunt Black people, specifically Black students in America. The continuous attempts to assassinate the spirits of Black people and keep us behind our white counterparts must be addressed as well in future work. There must be environments created that are “nurturing, motivating, affirming, engaging, and with equitable learning

for Black students. However, the reality for Black students' educational environment is often fraught with laws and policies that lead to disproportionate discipline, a purposeful erasure of Black stories in the school curriculum, and the silencing of Black students (Parker, 2021).

In connecting to our chosen methodology, we were able to tell our stories from our perspective, from our memories, and our voices. As we reflected, analyzed, and connected our lived experiences with the existing literature, we have discerned three resulting sub-sections for processing and discussion; *Insight gained, impact, and healing*.

Insight Gained

One of the main insights gained from sharing our lived experiences was how pervasive spirit assassination has been regarding the trauma of our ancestors and the generations afterward. We defined spirit assassination as a product of racism, a form of racial violence that steals and aims to kill the humanity and spirit in Black people. There is a symbiosis among us as a group. We come from a similar era where if you were a child, you spoke when you were spoken to and even then, you may not be privileged to speak too long or say much. It was also a time when you respected what others said to you without speaking back if they were considered your elder, or at least older than you were.

As we have reflected upon this, we realized that while we were being raised to respect, there was an unconscious side effect where we adopted a mindset of just *being quiet*. We did not want to deal with the consequences of being fussed at or explaining why we spoke up when we did. This caused a lot of traumas, as we internalized these behaviors of *being quiet* as the correct way to exist. The underlying messages that we received were that our desired behaviors equaled being respectful and considerate of other's feelings and that our parents raised us well.

However, the reality was during those times, no one regularly checked in on how

children felt. Children were to be seen not heard. It was uncommon for parents to ask how children felt about anything. We were children and were expected to stay in a child's place. Unfortunately, this spilled over into adulthood, and this same mindset was extended into relationships, friendships, and situations where speaking up on our behalf was necessary but did not happen. Silence replaced situations where it should have been made clear that there was an issue or point of view about something that needed to be voiced. In the aftermath, attempts to avoid arguments in all relationships caused emotional and mental shutdowns, somatic symptoms as reactions to stress, and the allowance of disrespectful treatment and language.

As Black women today, part of our healing has been to no longer allow other's feelings to triumph over ours. If there is an issue, we address it or speak up instead of keeping it bottled up. We advocate for ourselves because we learned that we, too, matter. We learned that respect is reciprocal. We have learned that because we may witness attempts at white fragility, we can still stand our ground and not fall into the pitfalls of tears or claims of cluelessness from our white counterparts. We do not owe anyone! Nor do we have to satisfy someone else's feelings or beliefs or worry about how not to satisfy their false narratives. It is not our job to convince anyone that we are or are not what they think. Furthermore, it is not our responsibility to pacify anyone's insecurities that they may have. As Black women, we now focus on ourselves and what we can change.

Throughout this research process, we have read and learned how our ancestors were treated pre- and post-enslavement to purposely assassinate their spirit. We learned how America was/is situated to give increased resources and opportunities to our white counterparts. Breaking the spirits of Black people started the moment they were captured in their homelands, shackled, and kidnapped. Sadly, it has been a continued method to keep Black people *in line*. "There was nothing to be heard but the rattling of chains, smacking of whips, and the groans and cries of our fellow men. Some

would not stir from the ground when they were lashed and beat in the most horrible manner” (Cugoano, 1787). During slavery, what better method to keep them from running away, conspiring to learn, to grow, to believe that they were intelligent and deserving of more than to break their spirit and have them believe they were less than and undeserving?

Being Black in America requires one to think critically as we reflect on our relationship between self and culture, power, and critical thinking in an antiblack world (Hall & Bell, 2022). “Far too often educators interact with Black students through a lens of implicit bias, color blindness, and the omission or inaccurate narrative of Black history that sends a message their cultural experiences are not of importance or relevance” (Williams, 2021, p. 17).

Black celebrities are not immune to racism or excused from having to deal with racist ideologies. Take for example Misty Copeland, a world-renowned ballerina, the first African American ballerina to be promoted to principal ballerina in the seventy-five-year history of the American Ballet Theatre. In an interview, Copeland discussed the pervasive whiteness of the ballet world. In her interview, author Plante (2022), relays Copeland’s experiences with representation and inclusion. Copeland stated, “The norm is everyone wears pink tights and that’s representative of white skin.... the more I look around and not see people who look like me, not see other women who look like me, and I’m painting my skin over and over” (Plante, 2022).

Impact

The intersectionality of our lives was touched by structural racism because we have come together from three distinct places. When we view it from the perspective of spirit assassination, structural racism is analogous to the use of an ice pick to break down the brick wall that has been constructed over many years. The fact is, however, that as a group, we were able to come together and reconsider our strategy thanks to a great deal of effort and collaboration. To dismantle the wall, we first devised a plan and then obtained more effective tools. Getting started with the management of our resources and our time has allowed us to progressively break down the wall piece by piece with the understanding there is so much more wall to break down.

Structural racism has impacted the intersectionality of our lives as Black women because even in today's society we still experienced discrimination in employment in various leadership roles as we advance and with our age, gender, and race. Due to being Black women, we continuously have to define our education and defend why we are qualified for leadership roles. What makes this an unfortunate takeaway is that most of the time we may have more requirements, education, and experience than our counterparts who by the way may receive more income than we do in lesser-level roles.

One of the interesting aspects of DiAngelo (2021) is her discussion of credentialing. With the two types, color-deny and color-celebrate, we see parallel streams of what is discussed in Nice Racism and what we have experienced as Black women. Whether it be color-deny or color-celebrate, credentialing still proves the opposite that White people are not racist because they do not see race, everyone's the same (color-

deny) or that they welcome diversity, “I have Black friends” (color-celebrate) (DiAngelo, 2021).

There are variations of racism and trauma. As children, our exposure to racism was limited to whether Black or White people did not like each other due to the color of their skin. Growing up we had the consensus that we thought we would always be able to recognize racism. The myths and passed down cultural family beliefs can often provide one with misinformation that can confuse our life as we try to navigate through the stress of understanding what is happening. We have come to know and understand that racism extends beyond Black and white people. It can affect anyone.

As Black women, the eye-opener of learning about nice racism was a bonus for us in understanding White people as it relates to racism. There was a time when you could identify racist behaviors because they would make it clear that they did not like your kind (your skin color or those who look like you). For instance, when Blacks and whites were not allowed to drink from the same water fountain. Blatant use of the N-word or attacks on Black people has historically been a more open behavior of racism.

As Black women, we learned early on that we do not have the same opportunities nor seen equally as White women. Settles, et al, (2017) wrote,

...a notion of womanhood that emerged for White (middle-class) women in the mid-1800’s. This idea; emphasized modesty, purity, and domesticity for White

women and identified wife and mother as their primary and most important roles. Historically, Black women were viewed in contrast to this norm for middle-class women. Black women were not seen as “true” women, but rather as animalistic and hypersexed, which was then used to justify their enslavement and rape. (Settles, et al., 2017, p. 454)

We each grew up with the expectation that Black women are strong and that everything will be okay because we can handle anything.

The strong Black woman has been standing tall for many decades. She’s unbreakable, resilient, almost superhuman. Since the late 20th century, the image of Black women as unbreakable and almost superhuman has dominated TV and film,

...although Black women of immeasurable strength do exist in real life, in recent years popular culture has begun to recognize the toll that having to manifest this superhuman strength takes on black women, both on-screen and off. (The Take, n.d.)

We have learned that as Black women, we do not need to pretend to be okay. This was a huge lesson for us, and we celebrate it because of the struggles we have faced as Black women in our professional and personal lives are real and when we need to have a moment, we can take it because we are human, we permit ourselves to feel.

Through our journeys, we have each observed and had conversations with white people who say they cannot understand why we [Black people] are so angry. Why are we so focused on the past because slavery has ended, and we are free? The repetition of

explaining is so daunting to get them to understand the impact of slavery on America's history, on the history of Black people. In addition, first and foremost, there is the fact that there is still no equality in America.

So, the anger is still there because now there is the gaslighting effect that is currently taking place. Some people say it is not words that show intent, it is someone's behavior or actions. So, we ask then, what has America's actions shown Black people? The short answer is that there is still anger because bad things continue to happen to Black people. Inequities continue to be present for Black people. Opportunities for the advancement of Black people continue to be decreased or removed altogether. Need we discuss the recent years of voting rights and civil rights being reduced or eliminated? Dare we review how affirmative action has been attacked for colleges and university admissions? Do we need to revisit how *Critical Race Theory* and Black history have been attacked, modified to be less *offensive* to white people, or all but obliterated from the history books and curriculums?

For what we hoped to be the final time, we explain the disdain that Black people have can be attributed to the fact that as a people, our lineage has been stripped.

In 1619, the ship, the White Lion ushered what has been suggested as the first twenty enslaved Africans to the port of the British colony, Jamestown. This was the beginning of the enslavement of Africans to meet the demands of the labor force growth of North America. This transport of the enslaved increased as it moved forward into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As a result, all semblance of their former homes were erased such as name, language, geography, and culture (Eds., 2024).

In 1936, the *Negro Motorist Green Book* was written by Victor Hugo Green. During a time of discrimination, racism, race related murders, just to name a few, this book was a calculus for Black travelers to know what areas were safe and which to avoid (Biddle, 2023). Historically, we have been told where we can live, where we can work, where we can travel, or where we can lodge. Hence, the need and purpose of the *Green Book*. Although that was in 1936, the facetious question could be, how much has changed? In 2024, how often are Black people still having to plan trips that are calculated on some level by destination, time of day, who we are with, and duration of trip.

After contributing to the financial establishment and success of America during enslavement, we were still treated as if our worth was less than an animal. Look at the example of the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis where they had village-like populations set up and identified by names such as, "fiercely", "savage", or "monkey-like" (Johnson, 2020, p. 207).

What we have learned as Black women is that unfortunately, there will probably always be someone who will see us as inferior or less valuable as a human. Racism and sexism continue to be rampant in America. Stevens, et. al (2014) reflects on the "current climate of negative stereotypes held by society about African American women providing space for perpetuation of racism and sexism." We collectively hope that in our children's lifetimes, they will be eradicated. However, the fear looms that there will be changes any time soon. There is a very thin line between reality and negativity. Is it negative to say that we feel there will be no change any time soon? Not necessarily, as we feel it to be a very realistic estimation given the current pulse of America. As Love (2019), states, "Too often we think the work of fighting oppression is just intellectual.

The real work is personal, emotional, spiritual, and communal. It is explicit, with an intense understanding that loving Blackness is an act of political resistance (Love, 2019).

We are proud to be Black women. We are proud to be Black parents. We have often discussed the pride we each possess in our perseverance and the ability to stand up for ourselves when needed. As parents, Black mothers, we advocated for our children, when necessary, as well. In chapter four, falling prey to imposter syndrome was discussed in-depth. As a result, the reflection and attempt to understand where exactly, or rather yet, when exactly was that seed planted and bloomed is explored. Transparency dictates that we be honest and true to ourselves and to the audience. So, there is no space or place for ego or embarrassment, only truth and authenticity.

We each have observed and or experienced personally or professionally how best to maneuver and navigate attempts by some teachers and school staff to marginalize Black students. From the start of this dissertation journey, we each feel as though we did not choose the topic of spirit assassination but rather it chose us. For too long there has been a lack of value blatantly assigned to Black people. We are not seen as a population of people worthy or deserving of citizenship or dignity. It should not be this hard to be treated humanely and be seen as of value and promise but sadly it is difficult being Black in America. At times, it felt as though the return on the constant fight for legitimacy and equality pales in comparison; but we commit to continue to fight.

Healing

There are approximately 280 million people in the world who suffer from depression and is seen in approximately fifty percent more women than men (World

Health Organization, 2023). We are thankful that as we have lived our lives, we have learned how to identify our trauma triggers and how to avoid so that trauma is not a repeat pattern. We have become accustomed to voicing to people how something makes us feel and this relieves the pressure, anxiety, and stress. As individuals, we admit that there is a continuous struggle with the healing process. At times, we have questioned if it is possible to heal while still having to exist in a world of continued discrimination and oppression. As we have reflected, we have landed in a place of acceptance. Not acceptance of unfair treatment or inequity. The acceptance comes from a place of understanding our people's history, our contributions to this country, our continued value to the success of this country, and knowing that not all people are going to see things in the same manner. Acceptance comes from knowing that there are people who mean harm just because of the color of our skin. However, that does not define who we are or what we attempt to achieve.

We cannot control anyone else and their actions, but we are in control of our actions and reactions. There is so much anger and pain amassed that seeing how to get to a point of healing can be difficult. However, we have tried to focus on the fact that it is not impossible. We have found ourselves asking how our ancestors managed. How did they do it? How did they push all that anger down, which they must have felt from being abused and mistreated, during a time when they could say nothing? How did they maneuver when the law supported their abuse or worse rather than protect them?

As we provide our commentary for this conclusion chapter, we admit that there is still a struggle with exasperation and resentment. We question what and who Black

culture could be today if we had the same opportunities as our White counterparts. The dominance of a race who felt it was their right to take our ancestors from our heritage, our kingdoms, and our homes and bring them to a new land only to rip families apart, degrade and devalue us until we were seen as nothing but property, legal chattel.

This journey has taken us to places that we did not expect emotionally and mentally. There have been some thoughts and feelings that were expected. However, those unexpected ones are our focus as we conclude. As open-eyed as we always viewed ourselves to be, there have been several instances where we now see that we struggled with comprehending how situations have negatively affected us. By telling our stories, we were able to be transported back to those moments of pain. It did not feel good, but it felt right. We figuratively walk away with a better understanding of ourselves and each other and have renewed hopes for a better future.

As Black women and parents, over the last three years, the road towards obtaining our doctorates have provided us with additional insight, knowledge, and comprehension. Due to our topic of spirit assassination, the floodgates of our past anguish and hurt that are associated with this phenomenon have been officially opened. In the process of sharing our personal experiences, we have received a great deal of insight that can be categorized as empathy and sympathy. The more each of us shared, the more we as a group grew to care for one another and support one another. Throughout our time in this group, we have shared our sorrows, and our laughter, comforted one another, and supported one another. The narratives of broken spirits have been examined through a lens that had so many blemishes that it appeared that complete clarity of vision was impossible to achieve. This journey has provided us with a clearer perspective and a more

concrete explanation of the things we have lived through. Now that we have a better understanding, we can recognize spirit assassination, and we have the hope that we will be able to help others by continuing to raise awareness about the issue and being able to move the needle as we move forward in our lives toward healing.

Our mindset alike was that we owe us! We knew that we were opening ourselves up for others to know intimate parts of our lives, but our initial thinking was that we wanted to help others almost more than we wanted to help ourselves. We knew there would be pain and agony when we told our stories, but we also knew that it was best for us and perhaps would one day be beneficial for others. Thereby, we redirected our purpose and reasoning to ensure we would be healed so that perhaps our lived experiences would not only have helped us, but others.

Consequently, we knew that there would be light at the end of the tunnel. We had so many reasons not to share our lived experiences, yet we had more as to why we should. We have all experienced some form of therapy from our pain or trauma, and we were ready to finally make our way to the end of the tunnel to see the light. While it is true that we can see the light, the work will continue to be done. We expected a breakthrough, one that would begin the healing process for us, and we are blessed to say we have entered that zone. As with anything worth having, we are still doing the work and healing as this was the breakthrough needed to get us into the tunnel with the light.

As we begin our healing journey, we are confident that our narratives will continue to be a guiding light and resource as we continue to do the work to fully heal. Our narratives allowed us to reflect with a purpose but continue to move forward to one day brings closure to the once-lived traumas we experienced. Our narratives are also the foundation much like that of a plant in a small pot that will one day blossom to be planted in the earth. We are not rushing our process, yet, instead, we are allowing our narratives to be the soil that will nurture our growth and allow us to help and support others once we heal. Without our narratives, our traumas, and experiences would have kept us in bondage. That is not our story anymore, we have wings, and we are ready to fly! In conclusion, for those who still question what Black people want, just know that we do not want what they have, we want the right to have the same. Being Black is an honor and distinction but it is not always pleasurable or facile. How it feels to be a Black person, a Black woman, and a Black mother in America, for us, can be summed up by the lyrics below written by Jill Scott when she was nineteen years old. It is her version of the *Woke National Anthem* sung at the Essence Festival in July 2023 to reflect the relationship between Black people and America.

Oh, say can you see, by the blood in the streets.

This place doesn't smile on you, Colored child.

Whose blood built this land with sweat and their hands.

But we'll die in this place and your memory erased.

Oh, say, does this truth hold any weight?

This is not the land of the free, but the home of the Slaves. (Scott, 2023)

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