Aya: The Enduring Spirit of Black Women in Higher Education

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Acknowledgments

As I begin to tell the story about my research journey over the last several years, I would be remiss if I did not first pause to give gratitude to all of the forces that came together to ensure that I would be here today. First, I give thanks to the creator for placing this desire in my heart to do this work focused on the spirituality and wellbeing of Black women, work that in the words of ancestor Katie Cannon, is work that my soul must have. It is that desire that gave me direction as I tried to figure out what I would focus my research on, and that desire that led me back again to my relationship with the creator when I wanted to give up on this process the most.

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Ase.'

Dedication

To my late grandparents, Elee Brown and Amos Hatch, who loved and nurtured my curiosity of spiritual things.

Abstract

Aya: The Enduring Spirit of Black Women in Higher Education is a research study that sought out to better understand the experiences of Black women inside of higher education. Building off of two previous unpublished research studies that focused on the resources that enable Black women to stay in their programs, this study took a more in-depth look at the protective factors and risk factors that make some Black women stay in their programs as well as the factors that make some Black women leave. I gathered this data through an initial survey and an autoethnographic self study that invited all Black identified women who attended the University of Minnesota for their PhD program to talk about their experiences, which included the extent that they experienced double consciousness, academic mammying, gendered racism, and spirit murder in their programs. From this study, I saw several themes emerge that articulated Black women's experiences in higher education and concluded the study with a model, the Integrated Ecosystem of Support, that could help address our challenges in academia.

Key words: double consciousness, academic mammying, gendered racism, spirit murder, endarkened feminist epistemology, integrated ecosystem of support

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Introduction

Kasserian Ingera is a question and traditional greeting passed between Maasai warriors in Kenya, meaning "And how are the children?" The question and the answer to it, reflects a community's commitment to the youngest and perhaps most vulnerable in their midst. For if the children are well, then the society is well. If the children are doing poorly, it not only speaks to ills in that society in the present but it is a forecasting of what that society will be in the future.

When we consider the realities of Black youth and children in our society, the United States of America, we have to face the fact that they are not doing well. Our children and youth participate in systems that were not designed for them in mind, participation that is not based on consent but force, with devastating consequences for failing to participate (Vaught, 2017). In addition, schools force students to compete with each other and track some students for prime opportunities for advancement, and others for outcomes that will ensure that those at the top remain at the top (Vaught, 2017).

K-12 institutions are sites of maintaining white hegemony. In her text, "*Compulsory: Education and the dispossession of youth in a prison school,"* Sabina Vaught (2017) explained that at bottom, this is a struggle for maintaining property and exclusive civic humanity. She offered "Blacks cannot be free, or Whites will simply cease to be. How that denial of freedom takes shape changes over time. What remains constant is that Whites cannot be free of the threat to the exclusivity of their racially singular freedom without Blacks as antithetically constructed and materially determined" (p. 32).

One of the ways that Whites have maintained hegemony in the K-12 setting is through neoliberalism and the privatization of schools for profit (Brewer, 2019). Rather than being institutions that are solely funded through taxes, some institutions - including charter schools, are

funded by wealthy donors who believe Black children need discipline so that they will comply with White economic standards (Love, 2019, p. 30). Highlighting a particular example of KIPP, one charter school involved in perpetuating violence towards Black students, Love (2019) stated that "Dark children at KIPP cannot fail, cannot express their stress, cannot feel pain from a world that rejects them, and cannot make mistakes, one of the critical and necessary experiences of childhood" (Love, 2019, p. 31).

Outside of the school context, students are forced to navigate streets that are set up for incarceration, streets that are owned and operated by the white supremacist state. Vaught (2017) demonstrated that the streets are designed this way in order to "perpetuate White dominance, and producing death was one certain route to dominance" (p. 81). Brewer (2019) likewise contextualized the dynamics of the streets, understanding that our "communities become dumping grounds for guns that are not made there, drugs that are imported, and whole communities are locked out of opportunities for education, employment, and housing" (p. 49). When we consider these realities, we have to admit that Black children and youth are not to blame for academic failures or for falling victim to the streets, but that they are in fact, living out the fulfillment of white rage that trafficks and harms Black children without recourse. Love (2019) explained that the "trigger of 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" (p. 23). Because of white rage, the spirits - if not literal bodies - of Black children and youth are routinely murdered. Violence by another name, spirit murder:

> Is less visceral and seemingly less tragic than the physical acts of murder at the hands of of White mobs or White men acting on their white rage, but the racist, hateful language

> and systemic, institutionalized, anti dark, state-sanctioned violence that dark children endure on a daily basis in the educational survival complex murders the spirit; its a slow death, but a death nonetheless (Love, 2019, p. 34).

Though spirit murder may not be a literal death, we have to consider the long term impacts on being locked inside of institutions that neither love nor feel a "commitment to its African children" (Brewer, 2019 p. 43). K-12 settings are only one of these institutions, but the reality is that not all Black children make it through K-12; many are forcibly removed from it and trafficked into detention centers and prisons through tools such as Individualized Education Program (IEPs), which Vaught (2017) stated is a stand in "for a defective child from a degenerate home: read deficient Black mother" (p. 104). In studying this particular reality, Vaught discussed with a young man incarcerated in the prison the depth of damage that takes place when children as young as eight years old find themselves removed from their homes and trapped in these systems. "That does things to a kid that can't be undone" (p. 114). Vaught stated,

> It is precisely the doing what cannot be undone that undergirds the national practice of juvenile incarceration and prison schooling. It is the demolition of home and so the attempted gutting of counterpublics of Color. It is the second possession assertion of a trustee state that cannot be undone (p. 114).

Though Love (2019) focused the way that spirit murder shows up for Black children in the K-12 system, it is not only Black children who suffer from this particular reality. Black women who make it out of the K-12 system also experience the same level of marginalization within our professional careers (regardless of sector or occupation), within our communities, and within society at large because of the intersection of racism and gender, an experience that could also be called double jeopardy, or the expectation to live up to white ideas of femaleness while

being subjected to slavery and degradation (Beal, 2008). Gendered racism is another way to understand Black women's experiences, which "describes a unique form of oppression based on the simultaneous experience of racism and sexism" (Moody and Lewis, 2019).

Aya: The Enduring Spirit of Black Women in Higher Education is a research study where I sought out to better understand the experiences of Black women inside of higher education. My primary motivation in seeking this out was to think about the risk factors that impede wellness and the protective factors that promote it, in order to examine the optimal conditions under which Black women PhD students not only survive but thrive in their program. I did this by seeking to understand Black women's experiences historically, contextualizing how they bear out in the present within academia, specifically as PhD students, and offering strategies that Black women PhD students use to resist and be well regardless of what is happening inside of the institution (even if it means leaving the institution). Building off of two previous unpublished research studies[1] that focused on the resources that enable Black women to stay in their programs, this study took a more in depth look at the protective factors and risk factors that make some Black women stay in their programs as well as the factors that make some Black women leave. I gathered this data through an initial survey that invited all Black identified women who attended the University of Minnesota for their PhD program to talk about their experiences, which included the extent that they experienced double consciousness, academic mammying, gendered racism, and spirit murder in their programs. These concepts have been specifically selected to be studied because of their prevalence in existing literature explaining what is

[1] The first study, conducted in 2020, was a case study that focused on Black women PhD students experiences in mentoring circles. The second study, conducted in 2021, was an action research and autoethnographic project that focused on Black women PhD students experiences within a particular department at the University of Minnesota, and highlighted the ways that these students sought out spaces for belonging in and outside of academia.

happening to Black women in higher education (Aya, 2022; Du Bois, 1903; Essed, 1991; Hills, 2019; Love, 2019; Szymanski and Lewis, 2016).

In the survey, participants were given the opportunity to self-select to complete the second phase of the research study which was an autoethnographic cultural self study**.** 8 participants, including myself, ultimately decided to complete this phase of the research. Cultural self study, a process that looks at self in action, is autobiographical, historical, political, and cultural in nature. Cultural self study is the process of people of African heritage talking about what has happened to us throughout institutions, including the University. Autoethnography was used to provide participants, the opportunity to reflect on their personal stories and how they related to the larger culture, or academia in this particular instance. Participants[2] were asked a set of questions that they wrote around in this stage of the research, including: *What was your experience like as a PhD student at the University of Minnesota? To what extent did you feel belonging and connectivity as a student? To what extent did you experience spirit murder as a result of being a Black student, or gendered racism as a result of being a Black identified woman in the classroom? What tools and resources (cultural, spiritual, community, familial, material, etc) did you use to navigate the institution? How would you define your relation to wellness in the program?*

There were three different sessions where participants wrote on these questions, the last session giving an opportunity for participants to debrief their experience, and analyze what was

[2] Part of me wanted to identify participants within the collective autoethnographic process, not those who filled out the survey, as co-researchers (Pope, 2020) or joint investigators, in order to recognize their autonomy and expertise in this process. This is something that I think is particularly important for Black women participants, whose experiences have been researched and extracted for someone else's benefit. I wanted to be able to have a research process that felt additive and reciprocal, and also experienced some constraints that limited my ability to fully do so. Additionally, I wanted to resist the tendency that lies in academia to lift up the individual achievements of one researcher without recognizing the labor, contributions, and otherwise expertise from others that make the research what it is (Houh & Kalsem, 2015; Hill-Collins, 2019). Future research studies on this particular topic will be set up to better accommodate the participatory action research process so that I can do this.

brought forth in this process. From this point, I spent several months reflecting, analyzing, and writing up the data, paying particular attention to people's whole stories rather than segmenting them out in ways that do not always do justice to narrative processes like autoethnography or cultural self study. I also brought participants back together after this process was done to do one final gut check assessment on the research. This provided participants the opportunity to check in and provide feedback on the analysis twice through the process.

Throughout this study, I looked at what was happening to Black women in higher education through four primary lenses, which are used as the conceptual basis for the inquiry throughout the study: double consciousness, gendered racism, academic mammying and spirit murder. Survey participants were asked to what extent they experienced each of these concepts in the first stage of research, and within the second stage of research, we expounded upon these concepts and their experience through autoethnographic self study. To analyze and further contextualize their experiences with double consciousness, gendered racism, academic mammying, and spirit murder, I drew upon three main theories including Black feminist theories (Endarkened Feminist Epistemology in particular), critical race theory, and Afropessimism. Working with these concepts and theories to understand Black women's experiences in higher education as PhD students, I saw four risk factors emerge that were barriers to Black women's wellbeing and seven protective factors emerge that Black women PhD students either drew on to be well or wish existed.

Significance of Study

The focus of this study is on Black women PhD students at the University of Minnesota, a predominately white institution (PWI) in the Midwest. The distinction here has several implications that make this study not only significant in its focus, but immensely critical to addressing the issues that Black women PhD students are facing at this University in particular.

These include the history of Minnesota as a state in relation to Black people and the struggle for African Americans at the University of Minnesota.

History of Minnesota as a state in relation to Black people

While Minnesota touts itself as a liberal state and tops the charts on almost every indicator in terms of one of the best places to live, the reality is that for Black people in Minnesota this has not been true historically or in the present. Tracing the story of our experience between the 1830s up until the 1910s, William Green's work shows that places like Minnesota have a deep connection to slavery and reconstruction, which "add African Americans and race to the stories of Minnesota and Midwestern history. In exploring these nineteenth century stories, Green clarifies how early Black struggles for freedom in Minnesota were a prelude to future generation's challenges" (Bruggeman, 2021, p. 70). The work of Christopher Lehman has accomplished similar aims, as both Lehman and Green showed that one of the state's biggest contradictions was that African Americans who were enslaved were kept here even though a 1787 Northwest Ordinance had forbidden it for this region (Bruggeman, 2021; Lehman, 2019). In his work, *Slavery's reach: Southern Slaveholder's in the Northstar state*, Lehman (2019) explained the extent of the contradiction and the lengths that Minnesota went through to cover it up:

> The connections between Minnesota and slavery went beyond those made by distant, wealthy enslavers. A slaveholding financier provided much of the capital behind the fur trade in southern and central Minnesota. Military officers, federal appointees, commuting businessmen, small farmers, banks and insurance companies, hotelkeepers, and land speculators all brought connections to slaveholders' wealth into Minnesota Territory. Some brought slaves, too. Minnesota existed as a territory and a state during only the last

> sixteen of the nation's 246 years of legal slavery, and it now has even fewer buildings that reflect its involvement in slavery than the South does. The hotels where slaves stayed with slaveholders burned down or were demolished over a century ago, and the summer homes that enslavers built met similar fates (p. 4).

In spite of its ties to slavery, Minnesota was one of the first states to offer men to fight in the Civil War, which meant accepting to hold a fair amount of cognitive dissonance about profiting from an enterprise that they were also visibly against. And even as the state sent off soldiers to fight in the war, the state also warred against the Dakota and Anishinaabe peoples who were native to this land, a struggle that culminated in the execution of 38 Dakota men on December 26, 1862 and 1700 women and children being forced to march from Mankato to Fort Snelling in the bitter cold as white passerby verbally and sometimes physically attacked them.[3]

After emancipation, the conditions for Black people in Minnesota did not largely improve even as the state enacted progressive civil rights measures. Green's (2015) text, *Degrees of freedom: The origins of civil rights in Minnesota, 1865 - 1912*, stated that the law "reflected Minnesota's commitment to civil and political equality for blacks while continuing to demonstrate its ambivalence to social equality" (p. 133). Existing in the liminal space between enslavement and free citizens, Blacks in Minnesota simply did not enjoy complete civil liberty. Although the majority of Green's work reflected the early years of Black Minnesotan experience, he did not fail to connect the historical to present day affairs after the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers in 2020. According to Green (2021), Floyd's murder found its roots

[3] Even as my work primarily focuses on the experiences of Black women, particularly as PhD students, and the larger Black community in our country and within Minnesota to further contextualize our experiences, I feel it important to also name and state the ways that this state has vehemently marginalized and discriminated against indigenous peoples. Recognizing the impacts of the discrimination on both African Americans and Indigenous peoples to this land, in 2020 both the City of Minneapolis and the Minnesota Council of Churches launched initiatives to redress the harm in both communities. I mention these not to compare or contrast the realities of either community to each other, but to name the extent of harm and destruction that Minnesota has practiced against non-white residents even as it claims to be a liberal state. (Blair, 2020, City of Minneapolis, 2023).

in a history of progressive political enablers who verbally expressed commitments to racial justice even as they empowered city police departments to "do the dirty work of abusing and endangering Black people" (p. 59). Drawing on historical accounts to further contextualize Floyd's murder, Green stated that

> "During the year preceding the Civil War, police offi cers and mob members each took extralegal steps in determining the fates of fugitive slaves. One example was the 1860 rendition of Henry Sparks by St. Paul police; they beat him before summarily placing him on a steamboat heading south. Weeks later, Minneapolis Whites rioted aft er a Hennepin County judge freed Eliza Winston. They completely destroyed the property of Emily Grey, the Black businesswoman who initiated the hearing that led to Winston's liberation. They also demolished Grey's husband's barber shop," (p. 59).

Green went on to illustrate other examples that not only highlighted mob hatred towards Blacks in Minnesota, but racist sentiments held by police officers, politicians, and even "whites who otherwise supported Black Minnesotans rights" (p. 62), even as whites insisted that "Blacks alleging discrimination did not know how good they had it in Minnesota" (Green, 2015, p. 133). With sentiments like these, it is no wonder that Minnesota produces the results that it does for Black people, results that show us lagging behind in nearly every indicator of health and wellness, including employment, home ownership, access to green spaces, arrest rates, and school suspension rates (Myers, 2020). An article written by the Minnesota Law Review (Riley-Brown, M., Osman, S., Shannon, C., Hanna, Y., Burris, B., Sanchez, T., and Cottle, J., 2021) clarifies this unfortunate truth:

> Racism in Minnesota is Lake Calhoun finally getting its name changed, but not without significant resistance…racism in Minnesota is having a city named Coon Rapids, because

> nobody acknowledges that 'coon' is a word used to dehumanize Black people by comparing them to racoons before lynching them…racism in Minnesota is Philando Castille being killed in his car by a police officer in 2016…racism in Minnesota looks like public schools that are suspending Black students at a rate that is fifteen percent greater than White students…Racism in Minnesota is being one of the top ten states for White high school graduation rates and the bottom ten for Black high school graduation rates (p. 263).

The struggle for African Americans at the University of Minnesota

Given the fact that Minnesota is one of the worst places to live and thrive as an African American, it should come as no surprise that one of the state's premier educational institutions, the University of Minnesota, likewise has a long history of disregard and marginalization for African Americans as well. This particular history has roots in the actions of men like William Aiken Jr, John Nichols, and Henry Sibley, all white men who had strong ties to slave holding and who served in key roles in constructing the University of Minnesota. William Aiken, Jr loaned the University of Minnesota money to build its first campus. John Nichols served on the University's Board of Regents. And Henry Sibley secured the University's land grant from the government in 1851 (Lehman, 2019). As a land grant, or land grab institution, the University of Minnesota also dispossessed the Dakota and Anninishabe peoples of land that they inhabited, another move that furthered the settler colonial project (Nash, 2019).

The disregard towards African Americans were not just present at the founding of the institution, but throughout its entire history. In 1924, then President Lotus D. Coffman labeled the growing Black and Jewish population on campus a problem, and played a pivotal role in creating segregation policies on campus (Nelson, 2022). An online resource, *A campus divided:*

Progressives, anticommunists, racism and antisemitism at the University of Minnesota 1930-1942 (Prell, Atwood, Hertzberg, Miron, Wilz, & Yates, 2017), specifically highlighted two cases that made this clear. One of those cases pertained to housing, where they examined and illustrated the strategies that administrators used to exclude Black people from housing. They cited an instance that occurred in 1931 where the first Black man attempted to move on campus and was redirected to move into the Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House in North Minneapolis.[4] This was just four years before the City of Minneapolis planners created a map that labeled Harrison neighborhood in North Minneapolis a Negro Slum, (The Alliance, 2012), before the majority of African Americans lived in the neighborhood.

The second case pertained to a dean of student affairs, Edward E. Nicholson, who appointed regents that endorsed his racist ideologies. Through the use of political surveillance of student groups focused on the peace movement, communism, and the advancement of African American rights, he undermined the Farmer-Labor parties efforts to select regents who among other things would support racially integrated public housing on campus and who would ensure that the University could be a place open to students of all social classes (Prell, Atwood, Hertzberg, Miron, Wilz, & Yates, 2017). Working with Ray Chase, a republican operative, between 1936 - 1941, Nicholson "provided Chase not only with the names of faculty and student activists, but their on-campus activities and the political organizations they joined and led, as well as his reflections on radicalism on the campus" (Prell, Atwood, Hertzberg, Miron, Wilz, &

[4] Founded in 1924, the Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House was a space of refuge for Blacks arriving to Minneapolis as a result of segregation in the rest of the city (Heller, 2016). Anticipating the growth of the Black population, city planners created a map in 1935 that labeled Harrison Neighborhood in North Minneapolis a Negro Slum, and relegated Near North, where the Phyllis Wheatley house was located, another acceptable space for "negroes." The rest of the city a Negro Slum, while the rest of the city was called the gold coast, working class, and middle class. Like other urban areas with populations of Black folks, North Minneapolis has been strategically disinvested and as a result, deeply impacted by the foreclosure crisis, environmental justice concerns, and the restriction of natural waterways and green space (Alliance, 2012). The reason this is significant is because that the University of Minnesota, with its racist housing policies was complicit in the ways that Black people have been treated in this region.

Yates, 2017a, paragraph 5). This information in turn was used to undermine Minnesota elections which included influencing the choice for regents.

Creators of the online resource stated that these two cases which highlighted the University's actions in the 30s and 40s were ultimately about demonstrations of power, "the power to displace African American students from housing, the power to create social segregation, and the power to determine whose needs the university must serve and whose should be diminished" (Prell, Atwood, Hertzberg, Miron, Wilz, & Yates, 2017b, paragraph 4). In many ways, these actions set the stage for what the University of Minnesota would become and how it would relate to Black students.

Protesting this long history of disregard and marginalization at the University of Minnesota, a group of 70 Black students staged a 24 hour take over of Morrell Hall on January 14, 1969. These students were members of the Afro-American Action Committee, who following Dr. Martin Luther King's death in April 1968, presented the University with a list of demands to improve the Black student experience on campus. These included "having scholarships for Black graduates from Minnesota high schools, establishing counseling and recruitment offices for Black students, reviewing athletic department policies toward Black athletes and creating an African American studies curriculum" (Burnside, 2018, paragraph 3). When the committee realized that their demands were not being taken seriously by the University's administration, they held the protest. This ultimately led the development of the African and African American studies program, $5,260 given from the University for a Black conference on campus, (Burnside, 2018), as well as the Black Student Union (Nelson, 2022).

A focus on Black women PhD students in this study does not mean that other identities have not experienced their share of challenges in navigating the institution. In fact, as Dolmage

(2017) asserted, higher education by its very nature not only poses a challenge for all students to navigate, but employs a logic of ableism and disableism to include and support some people, and to exclude others. Here Dolmage wasn't just speaking about physical disabilities in terms of one's ability to access a physical space, but in terms of intellectual disabilities and one's capacity to engage in the rigor required to be in the University. And while this logic can apply to all students who enter through the doors of the University as whole, Dolmage shared the ways that the categories of gender, race, and sexuality further complicates the matter finally claiming that academia has used "ableism (and continues to use ableism) to marginalize specific groups of students. Thus, policies, practices, and programs that appear to be race neutral or nascent in terms of its impact in terms of limiting or being challenging for all students, have always had an adverse impact on people of color and Black students. For this reason, it is impossible in a racially stratified society for race not to play a role in the ways that BIPOC students navigate higher education.

Research conducted by Harris & Lender (2018) further explained the experience of students of color. They stated that,

> On campus, graduate Students of Color encounter racial microaggressions or acts of racism that have deleterious influences on Students of Color but are so normalized and slight that they are hard to address and redress. Microaggressive incidents include the assumption of criminality; the questioning of one's academic ability; essentialism, or being lumped into a group one does not exclusively identify with and exclusion and isolation" (p. 144).

Addressing the experience of students in Minnesota across 2 and 4 year colleges, Trotter, Ramirez, Ryan and Renner (2023) found that BIPOC students were "62% more likely to

experience people acting as if they are afraid of them than students who do not identify as BIPOC. At 4-year institutions, BIPOC students are 90% more likely to experience poorer service than other people at restaurants or stores compared to non-BIPOC students" (paragraph 3). However, when this data was disaggregated by race, Black students were 99% more likely to experience people being afraid of them, 72 % more likely to receive poor service at restaurants and stores at the institution, often fared worse than their counterparts on every social indicator including within higher education. This is because even as all racialized categories serve as pillars of white supremacy (Smith, 2013), Blackness, or rather antiBlackness, is the fulcrum upon which racism is based (Nakagawa, 2012), as Blackness was created in the space of nonbeing or nonentity (Fanon, 1967; Wynter, 2003) in a way that other racialized groups were not. For this reason, Blackness as a racialized group is not analogous to other groups. Explaining this, Wilderson in a conversation with Tiffany L. King (2020) stated "Incarceration and captivity for Latinos, Asians, and Muslims is a function of historic experience but captivity is a constituent element of Black life…theoretically, we believe Black embodiment is a problem that does not have a coherent solution" (p. 59, 65).

When race intersects with gender, the marginalization is worse. Recognizing the complexity of race and gender, DuBois (1920) expressed that after the color line, the issue that we would need to pay attention to in the 21st century is the uplift of the Black woman. Similarly, in a 1962 speech, Malcolm X (1962) expressed that "The most disrespected person in America, is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman (paragraph 4)." While these truths speak to what is happening to Black women within the larger U.S. context, these truths also reflect Black

women's experiences within academia, as academia often serves as a mirror and a reinforcer of societal norms and expectations.

Understanding these dynamics and history, this project sought out to address the following research questions - *(1) what is the experience of Black women who finish their PhD programs compared to the experience of those who decide to leave their programs? (2) what are the protective factors that have contributed to the overall well being of both groups as well as the risk factors that have contributed to unhealth and stress? (3) Whether Black women decided to stay or leave their PhD programs, do they feel that they were ultimately able to achieve, or further, health and wellness in their respective lives and field? If so, what contributed to that sense of wellbeing? If no, what barriers keep them from doing so?* Again, all of these questions and the research at large focused on the experiences of Black women particular to the University of Minnesota.

I asked these questions at multiple stages throughout the research process, first with survey participants and then with participants who took part in the autoethnographic self study. To go deeper with participants in the autoethnographic self study, a separate set of questions were asked: *What was your experience like as a PhD student at the University of Minnesota? To what extent did you feel belonging and connectivity as a student? To what extent did you experience double consciousness, gendered racism, spirit murder, or academic mammying as a result of being a Black identified woman in the classroom? What tools and resources (cultural, spiritual, community, familial, material, etc) did you use to navigate the institution? How would you define your relation to wellness in the program? What do you ultimately need for the academic space to support your wellbeing? In school resources, space and time? External resources, space and time? Other things?*

My aim in this research was to help Black women PhD students (re)member how we have been seduced to forget (Dillard, 2012) pieces of our cultural and spiritual selves in order to survive in academia, while at the same time (re)membering the rituals, ceremonies, and practices that we must (re)claim to put us on the road to wellness. The framework that Dillard (2022) proposed around (re)membering - (re)searching, (re)visioning, (re)cognizing, (re)presenting, and (re)claiming, is a framework that enables us to embrace wholeness in a new way because it decentralizes the negative and internalized messaging that we have received as Black women PhD students about our worth, and gives us the capacity to recenter African knowledge systems. It is a type of (re)membering that is rooted in a spiritual consciousness and sacred practice (Dillard, 2012), that brings us back to ourselves. Stated Dillard (2022),

> Even if we might have been asleep to our inheritance as Black people, the ancestors have always been awake. They continue to whisper sweetly to our hearts. In our quieter moments…we can 'feel the truth of our humanity way down deep inside,' so deep that no one can take it away…while Black people have definitely experienced that deep sense of loss, we are not lost. As we (re)member our way, we have the opportunity to move in the greatness of our being on our terms. This is the recognition that must find its way to the center of education for Black people on these shores, as teachers and as students (Dillard, 2022, p. 7).

This particular study is significant because very few programs or initiatives encourage graduate students, particularly Black women students, to return to our own ways of knowing as a site of reference in our studies or to increase a sense of wellbeing. We are consistently being seduced to go outside of ourselves and outside of our communities to produce knowledge, knowledge that ends up fragmenting us more and more from the communities that we say we

care about. We are also encouraged to go outside of ourselves, and the practices that we have long known in order to be well, failing to realize that our unwellness is deeply connected to the practices of forgetting that we take up in order to be acceptable in higher education. A study that recenters the focus on our own selves, is as radical as it is significant, because Black women are usually researched by those outside of us or told to do research in such a way that is extractive, objective, and that ultimately betrays spiritual and cultural wisdom.

Wellness as an Ethic

The mental and physical health challenges that Black women endure in higher education have long been ignored. As a result, the unique needs that we have as Black women PhD students are often overlooked, needs that are not only tied to academia, but also revolve around family and community, or in other words, needs that determine our emotional and spiritual wellbeing. I experienced this in my first two years of my PhD program. I felt stretched and overwhelmed as the main income earner in my family, and did not feel like I had the agency to work less. I was a full time mother, duties that heightened during the pandemic, and was somebody's wife. By the end of my PhD, I dealt with divorce and stalking from my ex-husband, repairing and selling a house, working a full time job, navigating kids' schools schedules and needs in the midst of COVID, dealing with a child's mental health issues, and dealing with my own mother's mental health issues and decreased capacity as she navigates dementia.

Although some of my professors wanted me to focus my attention on completing the program and the responsibilities associated with them, and not getting sidetracked with other endeavors, the reality was that my life as a PhD student was completely tied to my life outside of the classroom. I could not compartmentalize and I chose not to elevate matriculation above my wellbeing, or my families' wellbeing. Which meant that not only did I have to choose me, but I

had to choose my children when they were sick, and had to choose my mother, making several trips home to Milwaukee over the last few years even as demands of the PhD were compounding. For this reason, this study wasn't only about the experiences of other Black women PhD students, it was about my own experience.

Reflecting on my experience, and those of Black women that I became acquainted with in the course of research, I remember the words of a mentor of mine from when I first started the program in 2018, who cautioned me regarding my own wellness in relation to the program. "I know that you will finish the program," she said. "But will you finish it well?" is the question." The question has been a significant motivator for me along my journey - how will I finish well? And that question is one that guides this study because the question of wellbeing is seldom taken into consideration in relation to the lives of Black women period, and definitely not those who are pursuing higher education to make things better for themselves, their families, and their communities.

In this study, then, I focused on the wellbeing of Black women PhD students, who like me, have had our desires for sanity not only ignored but punished to the point of being dismissed from institutions (Benbow, 2022). In this study, I paid close attention to how Black women endure in spaces that only love us for our brain, our labor, and not our whole being. I focused on endurance not for the sake of putting up with suffering or oppression, but endurance for the sake of overcoming it, creating new pathways for ourselves to be well. *Aya,* an adinkra symbol from Ghana, is pictured as a fern leaf and means endurance and resilience. For too long, Black women have been heralded for putting up with things that are not in our best interest. In this study, I show how we take the same skills of strength and resilience to further our own wellbeing, not

work against it, so that regardless of whether we decide to stay or leave our PhD programs, we remain whole.

The question of wellness is seldom taken into consideration when it comes to the lives of Black women even as there may be an admission that we are overextended and doing too much. A colleague at a college in which I am currently teaching in a meeting after I detailed the struggle in completing my PhD repeatedly said, "I am not jealous of you." Others describe and praise Black women for our strength, "you are so strong." Seldom, however, is there understanding or even compassion for all of the balls we juggle at any given moment, and still an expectation for us to persist and do what needs to be done for everyone else in our lives, even as they admire how we do persist. Gabrielle Union (2021), in her book, *You Got Anything Stronger,* spoke to how in her very busy work schedule those in her networks - family members, friends, the media - asked her how she maintained balance in the midst of it all. Balance, as a means of self care, is often lifted up as the means to maintain sanity and equilibrium. Union's response in the face of these questions is 'Fuck balance." Fuck balance not only because it is elusive, as Union stated, but also because it does not require others around us to share responsibility for all that we carry and do for others, instead placing the onus on us to carry it all, without letting them see us sweat, cry, or cuss somebody else. Instead, Union suggested that we aim for grace instead of balance. We aim for grace, understanding that we cannot carry it all and were not made to carry it all, so we can allow somethings to drop. It also teaches others to operate in grace with us, understanding that we are carrying way too much and need help.

The Personal is Political

I reflected on these things in the context of this research study on the experiences of Black women including my own experiences. What we are experiencing in higher education is as

much as historical as it is persistent. The historical realities of Black women are connected to enslavement and its aftermath, which included early pursuits of constructing higher education on the basis of ability. In this pursuit, those who were deemed able to do rigorous[5] work (able bodies) were separated from those who are not (disabled). In his work, *Academic Ableism*, Dolmage (2017) suggested that higher education, in addition to constructing knowledge, constructs disability. The construction of disability is related to what Dolmage calls the wellness model, that again places the onus on students, including Black women, to never be unwell. Said Dolmage (2017),

> wellness is a theme that pervades the university through awareness days, exercise-a-thons, special yoga classes, the use of university-wide health statistics by researchers, and so on. In the sickness model, we are unsure of exactly to what degree the university might be disabling, but the blame and the impact almost always falls on individuals to shoulder…So we have the impossible challenge of *Academic Ableism*: not just to recognize where and how ableism happens, but to ask what the impact will be of exposing it, what the cost might be of assigning blame, and what the forces are that make it imperceptible, what the euphemisms are that disguise it, and how it comes to be normalized, even valorized in academia (p. 57).

Similar to the call to achieve balance, wellness is projected as something that individual Black women must achieve in order to withstand the pressure placed upon us to make it in these environments, meaning that academia is seldom recognized as a disabling agent. I this study, I gave space for Black women participants to define wellness on our own terms, placing a greater onus on the institution for the way it promotes positive eugenics, or the "propagation of

[5] Although the idea of rigor is lifted up as a standard of excellence in higher education, the reality is that the word itself is defined as inflexibility, strictness, severity, and cruelty. I offer this definition so that we might start to contend with our commitment to an academic philosophy that actually is rooted in abusive practices.

(supposedly) superior stock" and the disposal, or discarding of "supposedly inferior stock through isolation" (Dolmage, 2017 p. 50).

The hurdles that Black women have had to jump through in higher education then are part of reifying the historical myth of Black women's, and by extension, Black people's inferiority. Black women endurance in higher education in spite of the hurdles, then, is to show and prove to the world that we are not intellectually inferior. And in spite of going through these hurdles, it explains why some Black women don't extend grace to the Black women coming behind them, believing that others must persevere through the same hurdles in order to prove that they themselves are not inferior. At some level, we must consider what it means to put this down and refuse to play the game that many of us have been tricked into playing for the benefit of not we ourselves, but for the benefit of the institutions that we labor in where "we are expected to make white people comfortable with our presence, or…risk being expunged" (Pena, 2022).

And this, for me, is why the main purpose and intent behind this research. Yes, we need more data and stories about the experiences of Black women pursuing PhD studies for the sake of the field of education. We particularly need this information in regards to the experiences of Black women who leave their studies, never to return. More than this, however, Black women need to see ourselves reflected in the research and reflected in these stories, so that whether we choose to leave or stay, we know that we can draw on the great "cloud of witnesses" of Black women who have gone before us. We need to know, whether we decide to leave or stay, what wellness looks like for us without beating ourselves up for the ways that we are unable to achieve it, knowing that wellness is more than an individual pursuit; it is more structural than personal. We need to know at a deeply intrinsic level that no Black woman, no matter how powerful and resourced, can do it all. And that a part of our wellness is not balancing all of the

metaphorical balls, but being able to say no and set hard boundaries even when it costs relationships and opportunities. This is perhaps one of the hardest things that we must wrestle with, especially since the threat of punishment, or consequence for our 'no' as Black women looms everywhere. And still, we must if we hope to be well.

Limitations of the study

In this study, I focused on the experiences of Black women who have pursued PhD studies at the University of Minnesota. One of the biggest limitations in this study was with the population of focus itself. Most Black women I know are over extended and burning the candle at both ends and in the middle to survive. The idea of participating in anything that wasn't absolutely necessary, even if benefits could be derived from one's participation, was in and of itself a significant barrier and limitation to this study.

This isn't just an unfounded fear or worry here. In 2021, I conducted a preliminary action research study focused on Black women in higher education within a particular department at the University of Minnesota. I was able to secure three participants to engage in that study, and three other ones who I interviewed who were not able to participate in the study but who were available for 90 minute interviews. One of the biggest barriers to people's participation in the study was time, as many simply did not have the time to engage in something that wasn't critical to their programs, their families, or their ability to make tenure. One participant in that 2021 study in particular was grateful that I reached out to them to set up an interview as they were unable to take part in the participatory portion of the research even though they found it valuable. This underscores the importance of triangulating research methods so that participants can be involved in the process in multiple ways. As Lather (1986) stated, triangulation includes "multiple data sources, methods, and theoretical schemes," and is "critical in establishing data

trustworthiness" (p. 67). With this in mind, the survey portion of this study was aimed at collecting data from Black women PhD students who were interested in being involved but who can't commit to a fuller process. The second phase of this study gathered even more data, and built on what was initially collected in the first phase and to gain an even more comprehensive picture of Black women's experiences.

The other limitation to this study was simply the accessibility of records that keep track of Black women who have pursued PhDs at the University of Minnesota, which includes those who have completed their programs, those who are still attending, and those who have left. Current policies and practices, including FERPA which require that schools not disclose identifiable information from a students record including race, prevent affinity groups and other spaces at the University of Minnesota from having complete and accurate records of Black women who have ever enrolled in the institution. Policies such as these are passed at federal and local levels, and maintained under the guise of privacy and nondiscrimination. As a result, I was not be able to draw on a definite list of Black women who have attended the University of Minnesota for their PhD, and had to reach out to personal and professional networks, recruit through social media, rely on word of mouth, and did a fair amount of cold emailing to different departments at the University of Minnesota to see if I was able to turn anything up. The limitation here, I believe, also impacts Black women's experiences at the University; because there are not consistent records or lists, it is also hard to build and sustain networks that can be lifegiving for students over the lifetime of their program.

In spite of the barriers and limitations, I found that it was still necessary to implement this study because the lives of Black women are at stake. Our mental and physical wellbeing are at stake, and very few people besides Black women seem to be paying attention. While the

problems that we are experiencing are deeply structural in nature, we still have an obligation to find a space of reprieve so that we can continue to exist. Both Walker-Barnes (2017) and Dillard (2022) are helpful here in that they encourage us to take up new (and sometimes forgotten) pathways in order to find wellness. Stated Dillard (2022),

> I posit (re)membering as both the acts of putting back together (as in (remembering) and of (re)calling (as in the call or spiritual obligation we answer in becoming a teacher, an auntie, or a mother). (Re)membering is also an act of resistance, given the continuous ways that Black people and our presence in the diaspora are rendered invisible within structures of capitalistic, patriarchal, antiBlack structures of domination. Marshaling the prefix (re-) in parentheses is my way of (re)minding all of us that Black people have inherently and always existed as brilliant holders of knowledge, culture, and humanity. Thus, (re)membering is not an initial or original (re)cognition of Blackness: it is used to (re)mind us all of what Black people have always known about ourselves in contexts that consistently act otherwise (p. xv).

The Structure

The write up of this study is divided into five main parts, spanning eight chapters. The first part consists of an introduction of the study, explains the rationale and importance of the study, and concludes with discussing some of the limitations of the study. This is what this current chapter has aimed to do throughout.

The second part consists of a literature review, focusing specifically on the experiences of Black women in higher education. It starts with a historical overview of our experiences during enslavement and moves on to what our experiences in pursuing higher education after emancipation looked like, which includes addressing the struggles that Black women faced in

order to further their studies. It moves into how that marginalization continues into the present: through the invalidation of research, feeling isolated and tokenized, struggling to make tenure and find other employment opportunities. It then examines the results of the marginalization, discussing the concept of spirit murder as well as the impact on our health and wellbeing. It concludes with recommendations for improving Black women's experiences, rooted in spiritual and cultural intervention as well as self care and feelings of self efficacy.

The third part discusses the methodology that was used to implement this study. It focused on narrative methods as the main means of capturing data, specifically through collective autoethnographic self study. In this capturing process, it drew from collective memory work's emphasis on writing in community to evoke memory. Of collective memory work, said Haug (1987), "writing…transports us across another boundary: it begins to break down the division of labor between literature as creative writing and everyday language as a means of communication" (Haug, 1987, p. 38). The writing in and of itself, in addition to the call to remembrance, is one of the reasons that I am most drawn to Haug's method. In addition to collective memory work, this research also heavily centers autoethnographic practices as it uses the self as a point of reference and reflection in the context of higher education. Finally, the practice of cultural self study is drawn upon in this method because it asks participants in the study to examine themselves in the context of their own cultural understanding. By nature, it is a process that looks at one self in action, is autobiographical, historical, political, and cultural in nature. The Cultural Wellness Center (CWC), a community based institution located in South Minneapolis, described cultural self study as a process of healing for African heritage that is necessary to recover from the harm of brutalization and forced forgetting over the last 400 years. CWC stated, "The vision for this work is to take our community from a place of violence to a

place of peace" (Azzahir, Azzahir, & Tezet, 2016, p 3). The cultural self study process not only necessitated a writing process, but also involved ceremony, reflection, and eldering throughout the process, specifically for me as the researcher. This chapter will then move into the process of collecting data, discussing sampling and the participants who were engaged in this study. This chapter will also discuss analyzing data that is collected, which will be done honoring the narrative process that focuses on keeping the story intact rather than breaking stories up into themes.

The fourth and fifth chapter lays out the research results. The fourth chapter in particular contains an analysis of the survey that was given to participants. The fifth chapter consists of three different enactments. The first enactment in this chapter is comprised of how participants made sense of their own writing and reflections. The second enactment introduces the narratives and analysis from the collective autoethnographic self study. The third enactment consists of participants and a community elder interacting with the resulting analysis, which is in line with a cultural self study process.

The fifth and final part consists of a discussion of the findings, implications and ends with a conclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

It is assumed that Black women in higher education, either as PhD students, or as faculty and staff, enjoy greater access to material resources and career advancement than those within the Black community who do not attend college. In part this is true, particularly in terms of being able to access spaces where we might be respected and taken seriously in ways that others in our community are not. However, access does not protect us from the psychological stress that we experience as a result of race and gender based oppression (Essed, 1991; Szymanski and Lewis, 2016), as well as oppression related to other intersections including race, gender, and age (Lewis-Flenaugh, Turnbow, and Myricks, 2019) and race, gender, and sexual orientation (Alston, 2019; Love and Abdelaziz, 2019). This is because regardless of whether we exist in institutions like the academia, we cannot escape the peculiarity that comes with being a Black woman. In fact, as Szymanski and Lewis (2016) illustrate, even though Black women in higher education may earn more than their peers who do not attend college, we are not "immune to the negative psychological effects of oppression" (p. 230). The cumulative impacts of oppression likewise has an adverse effect on our mental and physical health, including depression (Moody and Lewis, 2019).

In this literature review, I sought out to have a greater understanding of the dynamics of this oppression, including understanding the roots of it as well as possible strategies that Black women PhD students take up in order to resist and overcome it. The review consists of six main parts. In the first part, I drew from the literature that provided an understanding of Black women's experiences during enslavement and moved into how these experiences continued after emancipation through new institutions like higher education. I then brought together literature that provided a more thorough explanation of gendered racism (Essed, 1991; Szymanski &

Lewis, 2016) and also explained the other ways that Black women are marginalized. From this point, I identified the ways that this marginalization has played out: having our research marginalized, being told that we cannot earn our degree, not being able to find mentors, feeling isolated, and not being able to get tenure or find other employment opportunities. I then moved into the result of these experiences, with a particular focus on what Williams (1987) and Love (2019) called spirit murder which adversely impacts our mental and physical health, and ultimately influences our decision to stay or leave academia. Finally, I closed with recommendations to improve Black women's experiences in academia, which include self care (Hills, 2019), instituting mentoring programs and sister circles (Fries-Britt and Kelly, 2005; Green & King, 2001), integrating spiritual and cultural approaches (Atta, 2018; Yosso, 2005; Dillard, 2012), and ultimately being committed to supporting Black women (Hills, 2019).

How We Got Here: Black Women During Enslavement

Before we can understand the treatment of Black women in higher education, we must grapple with how Black women have been treated historically, stemming from the institution of enslavement. Starting here as our basis of understanding helps to contextualize the barriers that we have faced in engaging in higher education since emancipation through the present.

One of the key methods in exerting and maintaining dominance over Black people under slavery was through distinguishing between beings and nonbeings (Azzahir, 2017; Fanon, 1967; Wynter, 2003). As Azzahir (2017) has already taught us, this was for the purpose of powering over people. Under this construction of human and nonhuman, the Black body, those who are trafficked from Africa and enslaved, became flesh. Spillers (1982) explained:

> Before the "body" there is the "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.

> Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies- some of them female - out of West African communities in concert with the African "middleman," we regard this human and social ir- reparability as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. If we think of the "flesh" as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ (p. 67).

The Black body, and particularly Black women, became flesh through forced labor under enslavement or brutal domination in the words of Saidiya Hartman (1997), physical and sexual violence, and forced reproduction. Because slavery is typically thought of in the context of forced labor and domination, I sought out literature that primarily looked at slavery from the lens of violence and forced reproduction, though because all three work together in the making of the slave body, they are at times, hardly distinguishable from the other.

Physical and sexual violence

Citing the work of Frederick Douglass and the beating of his Aunt Hester, Hartman (1997) wrote that violence is central to the making of a slave. Recalling the violence that Douglass observes, Hartman stated that the “terrible spectacle dramatizes the origin of the subject and demonstrates that to be a slave is to be under the brutal power and authority of another” (p. 3). Fanon (1967) asserted that Blacks have no ontology apart from Whiteness, and because violence is a major contributing factor in constructing Blackness, we have to likewise conclude that Blacks have no ontology apart from brutal violence and force.

It may be perhaps easier to pinpoint examples of violence in narratives like Douglass’ that focus on such graphic beatings, or in texts like “*Twelve Years a Slave*” (Northup, 1968) or “*Roots*” (Haley, 1976), that show the gamut of violence enacted against the Black body: rape,

lynching, sterilization, the forced removal of children while caring for the children of others. However, we must also pay attention to the areas where "terror can hardly be discerned…slaves dancing in the quarters, the outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage, the constitution of humanity in slave law, and the fashioning of the self-possessed individual…what concerns me is the diffusion of terror and violence perpetuated under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism, and property" (p. 4). Recounting a passage from Twelve Years a Slave, and the command given to the enslaved to dance, Hartman stated that the "brutal command to merrymaking suggest that the theatricality of the Negro emerges only in the aftermath of the body's brutal dramatic placement – in short after the body has been made subject to the will of the master" (p. 43).

For the slave master, the management of enjoyment of the black body was about cultivating hegemony and productivity, and was no different than managing physical labor, another cornerstone in the making of the slave. Of course, not all violence inflicted on the enslaved was as closely tied to pleasure, or at least not the pleasure of the enslaved. The incidents of rape of Black women and girls, as well as the justification that went along with it was nothing but pure terror. In the case of a rape of an enslaved Black girl under 10 years old by an enslaved Black man, the attorney for the defendant stated, "the crime of rape does not exist in this State between African slaves. Our laws recognize no marital rights as between slaves; their sexual intercourse is left to be regulated by their owners" (Hartman, 1997, p. 96). Ultimately, the protection of the law only extended to women who were considered respectable, meaning that the protection of the law did not extend to enslaved Black women who were presumed to lack virtue and be unchaste. As Hartman noted, "the disregard of sexual injury does not divest slave women of gender" (p. 100). Instead, enslaved Black women were possessed by gender, having the construction of woman posited against and within racial capitalism and their position as

property. Because they were property, we have to likewise interrogate sexual interactions that appear to be consensual such as the case with the relationship between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson. Kaplan (2021) explained the possibilities:

> They were bound together by a doomed love that transcended the societal norms of the day; or, Jefferson was guilty of on ongoing act of rape and their offspring were the product of that violent sexual coercion; or their relationship was a mutual calculation of reciprocal benefit, in which Hemings provided her master sexual satisfaction in exchange for a set of otherwise unachievable protections and privileges, including the eventual legal and de facto freeing of their children (p. 141).

Regardless of the terms of their relationship, ultimately Hemings had no rights to consent or refuse. Even when Black women have consented, we have to question its legitimacy given the context of a capitalistic and colonial power as in the case of Sarah Baartman who "gave consent" for her body to be on display all over Europe (Young, 2017). We have to question where her consent ended (if it was ever there) and where coercion began as her body was racialized and sexualized over and over again.

Forced reproduction

Weinbaum (2019) stated that enslaved Black women, were not only forced to reproduce "their own kinlessness but also the economic system that historian Walter Johnson has dubbed "slave- racial capitalism (p. 88)." Building off of Cedric Robinson's concept of racial capitalism to describe the relationship of Black people to the upholding and endurance of capitalism, Weinbaum continues "what distinguishes slavery from all other forms of racial capitalism, such as colonialism and Euro-American empire, is that it was first and foremost a reproductive enterprise-both materially and ideologically predicated on the extraction of reproductive labor

and products from the racialized bodies of enslaved women" (p. 91). This means that slavery, then, was largely dependent and revolved around Black women's bodies and the ability to force Black women to reproduce. Reproduction not only consisted of being forced to bear children to keep the slavocracy intact but included being manipulated into being a wet nurse to white children.

Bearing children

During slavery, Black women were forced to reproduce children for the purpose of growing and sustaining the enterprise. This was particularly the case as the trafficking of enslaved persons across the Atlantic was outlawed in the early 19th century and it became necessary to expand the enslaved population through other means. Shauna Sweeney (2020), in her article "*Black Women in Freedom and Slavery: Gendering the History of Racial Capitalism*" explained that "women's bodies became discursive grounds for rethinking the imperial political economy" (p. 280). Sweeney also illustrated that both slaveowners and abolitionists were supportive of Black women's role in building the economy through the commodification of their bodies, stating that Wilberforce, a prominent abolitionist, saw a connection between colonial reform and reproduction and went as far as to advocate for the protection of Black women for the sake of procreation.

As Black women continued to produce children for the state, a law was written to make a distinction between the children borne of free, white women and those borne of enslaved, Black women. Partus sequitur ventrem, a latin phrase meaning so as the mother, the children**,** ensured that even if the children were produced through white men or freed Black men, that the children would be bound to the status of the mother not the father.

Jennifer L. Morgan (2018) quoted from the actual law in her work, *"Partus Sequitur Ventrum: Law, Race, and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery,"*

> Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishman upon a negro woman shall be slave or free, Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present grand assembly, that all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother—Partus Sequitur Ventrem. And that if any Christian shall commit fornication with a negro man or woman, hee or shee soe offending shall pay double the fines imposed by the former act (p. 1).

It is important to note that this code was first implemented in Virginia, "the first colony to regulate maternal descent" as Morgan (2018, p. 2) articulated, because there was no legal precedent either in England, or in other slave codes. Rooted in Spanish and Italian laws (and theology) governing animal husbandry and property rights, the law showed that slaveowners believed that a Black woman's ability to reproduce physically was tied to her production of labor. We must contend that this dynamic is ultimately the fulcrum in which race and reproduction revolves around.

Additionally, the law emphasized the cultural and familial disconnection of enslaved peoples. In her work, "*The Black Reproductive*," Sara Clarke Kaplan (2021) spoke to these realities and emphasized that *partus sequitur ventrem* stripped away one's connection to a peoplehood, to a sense of belonging, or what is called social death,

> social death marks not just the stripping away of rights - rightlessness - but the total legal, philosophical, and material dispossession of self that relegates the enslaved to a liminal existence between life and death, insider and outsider, human and nonhuman. In the antebellum United States, it was the construction of people as property through the

> alchemy of social death that both produced and marked captive Black people as existing as and at the limit of the hum - a liminal position that, as I argued earlier, continues to shape the meaning of blackness in slavery's afterlife (p. 47).

Wet nursing

In their article, "*Mothers' Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South*," West and Knight (2017) explained that wet nursing is a gendered type of exploitation borne by Black women. They stated that "under slavery it represented the point at which the exploitation of enslaved women as workers and as reproducers intersected" (p. 37). Wet-nursing also represented work that could only be taken up by Black women who had already given birth to their own children, meaning that their forced reproduction was not only to increase the population of enslaved persons but to also care for white babies. This also meant that Black women who had given birth to their own children were oftentimes forced to neglect feeding them in order to feed the children of their white slavemasters. West and Knight stated that "slaveholders forced enslaved women to wean their own infants early (from around six months) so they could return to their labor; yet, ironically, wet nurses had to feed white children until they were about two years old" (p. 43).

These responsibilities of the enslaved Black women all came to the fore in the depiction of the mammy figure. In many ways, the caricature of Aunt Jemima, both a real character and fictional to satisfy white sensibilities was invented to uphold the caricature of the compliant mammy. Kaplan (2021) explained,

> Aunt Jemima is both worker and commodity, productive and reproductive, asexual matriarch and seductive concubine, domestic worker and endangerment to white domesticity. In short, she is America's Grand Mammy: an iconic, fantastic, and

> anachronistic character that encompasses the myriad and contradictory forms of Black reproductivity on which the U.S. Social formation and racial imaginary has been built (p. 49).

Building on the work of Sharpe, Kaplan (2021) also stated that the contradiction of slavery was the necessity of enslaved reproduction as well as the impossibility of enslaved motherhood, or the inability to claim one's own children. This is why a court can decide that a Black woman's children are better off without her. We see examples of this in the work of Haley (2016), Sharpe (2016), Vaught (2017), Sharpe (2016), examples that show that Black women are punished not only for the excessive reproduction of children, but for daring to claim motherhood as a social location full of certain rights as White women could. "Deviant mothering was producing out-of-control children, girls were visibly among the dangerous class that might be created (Haley, 2016, p. 38). The rhetoric about Black women not being able to properly care for their children surely drove the hostility towards Black women who gave birth to stillborn children. Instead of recognizing the disparities in access to proper maternal care and nutrition, the police and courts overwhelmingly believed that Black women were intentionally killing their children. This was the case even though, as Haley noted, those who prosecuted and charged women with infanticide, had no problem "stealing black children for its convict-leasing modernization project and working them to death; they did not mind if children born to mothers serving time in the convict lease camps died during childbirth and they had no regard for what happened to those children if they survived birth" (p. 46).

The incidents of physical and sexual violence, forced labor, and forced reproduction showed that under slavery Black women were exploited in multiple ways that reinforced the idea that that her body did not belong to her, but belonged to the state and thus the children that she

produced. Even within the institution of marriage, as Ferguson (2004), Giddings (1984), and Sweeney (2020) showed us, the Black woman did not belong to her spouse,[6] but to the slaveholding state that could always exercise its will over the union of a Black man and woman.

These behaviors did not automatically stop once the institution of slavery ended. As Haley (2016) showed us, Black women continued to be physically and sexually violated as well as continued to be forced into manual labor under the convict leasing system. Additionally, while Black women were no longer forced to produce children to uphold the slave state, they continued to labor in white people's homes as caretakers for white children at the expense of caring for their own. This context is critical in light of understanding Black women's experiences in higher education: if the negation of Black women's bodies served as the basis of racial capitalism under slavery, the negation of Black women's bodies, intellect, and will continues to be the basis of racial capitalism under any new institution, including within higher education. Existing as PhD students within higher education does not absolve Black women from experiencing the impacts of these behaviors, instead Black women PhD students encounter them at new and compounding levels. It is from this point that I was able to situate the negative experiences that Black women have encountered in higher education, understanding that the mistreatment and disdain for Black women in academia was and continues to be rooted in a philosophies committed to control and erasure.

The History of Black Women in Higher Education

The mistreatment of Black women during enslavement did not disappear after emancipation. In fact, enslavement, and the codification of the racial construct, gave way for this

[6] This is not to suggest that a Black woman should have belonged to her spouse but to suggest that under the system of slavery and its aftermath, Black womanhood is not constructed in the space of the domestic household as White womanhood is, but is always brokered through the state which limits Black men's ability to exercise control in the same way that White men can.

mistreatment of Black women to endure under new structures and institutions in order to sustain the gains made through capitalism. One of those institutions was higher education.

For both African Americans and abolitionists, the desire for higher education was a pathway to attain social and economic freedoms even prior to emancipation. African Americans and abolitionists saw education as a means to combat the negative, pervasive stereotypes about who Blacks were that centered on our inferiority and degeneration in addition to understanding that it was a means of Black self-improvement and general racial uplift (Baumgartner, 2019; Giddings, 1984).

But for whites, the idea of African Americans being educated posed a threat to their socioeconomic well being out of fear of labor competition (Baumgartner, 2019). For many whites, the education of Black people was only purposeful to the extent that it reinforced existent power and economic relations (Watkins, 2001). To ensure that it reinforced existent power relations, white people, including white philanthropists, went as far as only funding Black institutions that were dedicated to the trades instead of Black institutions that encouraged students to think critically (Watkins, 2001; Giddings, 1984). Additionally, in New England, Black education also undermined the work of Colonializationists, who supported African Americans being emancipated from slavery while also rejecting the possibility of a multicultural democracy. For Colonializationists, then, the best scenario for newly freed Black people was to go back to Africa. These fears materialized into hostility that either kicked African Americans out of college, or that refused to admit them into institutions of higher learning altogether.

Because of the hostility, Blacks were either kicked out of colleges or not admitted to them altogether. Committed to the dream of higher education, and not allowing the opposition of whites to be a deterrent, African Americans and abolitionists worked to build institutions for

African Americans. One of those institutions was a seminary for Black women in Canterbury, Connecticut that focused on teaching. The seminary was one of three distinct projects in New England instituted between 1830 - 1840 that specifically focused on creating spaces for Black residents to be educated. But all three institutions ultimately faced destruction, suggesting that it was not just the idea of integration that people opposed, but the idea of Blacks being educated altogether. Baumgartner (2019) explained:

> What troubled opponents was the possibility that educated African Americans could destabilize the racial and social order. Just as African American and white abolitionists recognized the impact of black education, so too did opponents who, for all of their claims about innate black degradation and inferiority, feared a rising class of free, educated African Americans in the United States (Baumgartner, 2019, p. 189).

The education of African American women also posed a significant threat for several reasons. First, as Baumgartner (2022) stated, opponents of Black education believed that allowing Black women to attend seminary would be an affirmation of their "legitimate inclusion within the broader project of nation-building, which conflicted with racial ideologies that refused African Americans an equal place in the nation, let alone recognized their ability to contribute to it" (2019, p. 20).

Secondly, the education of Black women, as Anna Julia Cooper (1892) recognized, meant the regeneration and progress of African American people. Black women held a significant amount of influence in the African American community because of the tendency to be more aggressive in protecting the race, a sentiment that was held by Black women and men, and white supremacists alike (Giddings, 1984). According to South Carolina's Senator Ben "Pitchfork" Tillman, Black women had always "urged the negro men on in the conflicts we have had in the

past between the two races for supremacy" (Giddings, 1984, p. 123), and was one of reasons that whites wanted to keep Black women away from the ballot box as well as other decision making opportunities that would benefit their community.

Black women also held a significant role in the education of children within African American communities which also posed a threat to the racist structure. Baumgartner (2019) acknowledged this stating that the threat of economic competition did not apply as much to African American women as it did to African American men, since the space of educated women was more in the private sphere with the influence of their children. Thus, the greatest threat of the educated African American woman was in what she would be able to pass on to her children and broader community (Giddings, 1984), which in and of itself, would threaten the ideas of racial inferiority that were projected by whites.

Finally, the idea of African American women attending a female seminary flew in the face of the image that broader society wanted to project about the role of the seminary in a woman's life. They were spaces that were specifically created for "white, middle-class or elite, educated (Baumgartner, 2019, p. 26) women. "Including young African American women in the female seminary movement threatened to overstep racial boundaries, but such a move insisted, too, on the students' status as women capable of striving for the same idealized femininity" (p. 26).

Because of the outright disregard for the rights of Black women and disdain for their inclusion in the rest of society, there was significant opposition to their advancement in higher education. Prudence Crandall, a white woman abolitionist and founder of the seminary, was put on trial for violating Connecticut's Black law which forbade the education of "coloreds" who did not reside in Connecticut. Crandall kept the school open until a mob violently attacked the school

building (Baumgartner, 2019). In addition, African American women who attended the school, particularly from out of state, were harassed. One student in particular, Ann Eliza Hammond, was served a warrant which mandated that she either leave the state or that the school put her out, with the penalty of a severe whipping for failure to do so. Eventually, however, opponents of African American women being educated backed away from arresting students and instead pushed for a law that would limit the school's reach, forbidding the "establishment of any school, academy, or literary institution, for the instruction or education of colored persons who are not inhabitants of this state…without the consent, in writing...of the civil authority" (Baumgartner, 2019, p. 32). When laws such as these did not work in keeping African American female students away, white residents turned to violence

Oberlin College, a coeducational institution located in Ohio that had an abolitionist pedigree (Morris, 2019), was one of the first institutions that accepted women and African Americans. Between 1835 - 1865, 140 African American women, many who were formerly enslaved, attended Oberlin College though most only did so to improve their literacy skills and did not graduate with their bachelor's degree. The first Black woman to earn a bachelor's degree from Oberlin and in the United States was Mary Jane Patterson in 1862 who went on to become a principal at a school in Washington, DC. By 1899, three Black women had earned Master's Degrees from Oberlin: Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, and Ida Hunt (Evans, 2007). The numbers of African American women with Master Degrees would not increase beyond single digits until after World War I. And the first African American women to earn PhDs also did not take place until 1921 - Georgiana Simpson, Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, and Eva Beatrice Dykes.

Though there were few numbers of African American women receiving PhDs, there was an underrepresentation of African Americans in higher education in general. The work of Stephanie Evans (2007) in "*Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History*" is helpful in understanding this complex history. Evans showed us that by "1876, 25 PWIs had already awarded 44 PhDs., putting Black scholars six decades behind in doctoral degree attainment" (Evans, 2007, p. 120). Moving decades ahead, by 1943, according to Evans (2007), of the 381 doctoral degrees given to African Americans by 1943, only 48 of those degrees went to women. In spite of the many barriers to higher education, African American women were knowledge producers, as Evans (2007) noted, contributing to the public narrative prior to the establishment of the United States as a country as early "poets, dramatists, novelists, elocutionists, activists, and autobiographers…yet American society did not acknowledge these scholars as educated" (p. 126).

Instead, African American women were steered more towards professions which did not always support advanced study. Teaching and service professions were just a few areas where African American women were able to thrive because they were considered acceptable vocations for Black women. Research, however, "was considered out of the purview of black women's reasonable aspirations or perceived capabilities" (Evans, 2007, p. 124).

The fact that research was not considered an acceptable vocation for Black women is at the heart of many of the difficulties that we have encountered in attempting to participate and matriculate in our doctoral programs including:

> problems with thesis committees; responsibilities for raising families or taking care of relatives; participation in necessary but time-consuming civil and human rights activism; trying to improve the working conditions for the majority of black women (who were

> employed in low-skill, exploitative, and dangerous work); and studying while under stress in a tragically oppressive academy (Evans, 2007, p. 123).

This suggests that the barriers that African American women encountered were as much institutional as they were social, stemming from the unequal responsibilities that fell on African American women in their homes and communities, after all women were to be "daughters, sisters, mothers, wives, and keepers of communal responsibilities" (p. 124).

The examples of African American women who faced institutional barriers are abundant. Ida Jackson encountered unsupportive committees when the two psychologists assigned to her committee would not sign off on her thesis because her research challenged racist notions of African Americans biological inferiority (Evans, 2007). Similarly, Anna Julia Cooper, Zora Neale Hurston, and Pauli Murray faced significant challenges in obtaining their doctorate. Like Jackson, Cooper's committee did not support her thesis and philosophical framework. "For her dissertation defense, she quickly had to decide what to change, what to keep, and how to rationalize her findings to a native French-speaking senior scholar with who she fundamentally disagreed" (Evans, 2007, p. 135).

Hurston's work flew in the face of conventional objective and positivist stances to research. The opposition that she encountered eventually pushed her out of academia, and even though she went on to produce a pantheon of works that would positively benefit the African American community, she was largely unrecognized for her genius until after her death. It took the work of other Black creatives and thinkers, including Alice Walker, to revive the memory of Hurston in the public eye (Walker, 1983). This included pushing for a work that Hurston wrote about the last slave ship, *the Clotilda,* arriving in the Americas decades after the slave trade had been outlawed. In the work that she produced in the 1930s, she interviewed one of the last

African survivors of that slave ship. The book, "*Barracoon: The story of the last 'Black cargo*,'" was finally produced in 2018, eight decades after she initially wrote it. The missing narrative from the archive of United States' history negatively impacted the way that we have understood slavery.

But it wasn't just committees that blocked Black women from receiving their degrees. Baumgartner (2019) and Evans (2007) were both clear on the combination of the law, the institution itself, and when all else failed, white mob violence that prevented Black women from achieving their dreams.

Such speaks to the intentionality behind the opposition to Black women pursuing and receiving their doctoral degrees. As Evans (2007) states, in the right hands, the degree was a powerful tool for pursuing racial justice and human rights. "When Black women gained access to graduate degrees, they infiltrated the academy in hopes of redefining scholarship and rechanneling resources of educational institutions to benefit the historically disenfranchised" (p. 138). Even so, over 60 African American women attained their doctoral degrees between 1921 – 1954, accomplishments that in no way justifies the mistreatment that African American women experienced and continue to experience, but speaks to our overall ability to endure, resist, and overcome oppression.

One institution stuck out as offering space and opportunity to Black women, Oberlin College. In truth, they were perhaps more progressive and open to African American women than other institutions during this time. However, African American women who attended the college, many who were formerly enslaved, still encountered significant barriers to receiving their degrees. Some of these women were mixed-race children of slave owners, including Martha Mason, Mary Townsend, and Laura Minor (Morris, 2019). Women like these were important to

Oberlin's stance against sexual licentiousness and the rape of Black women who were enslaved. In addition, African American women who were enrolled at Oberlin continued to speak up for those who remained enslaved throughout the South. Morris (2019) recounted,

> Fanny Jackson Coppin remembered that each time she opened her mouth to speak while at Oberlin, she felt the weight of her entire race upon her shoulders. No doubt students Mahalia Mcguire and Sara Margru Kinson, the youngest of the captives freed from the Amistad slave ship in 1841, and Mary and Emily Edmondson, both rescued from the slave ship Pearl in 1848, brought the extraordinary perspectives of victims of the vicious slave trade to Oberlin debates (p. 205).

In spite of the opportunity, barriers remained for women in general and African American women in particular. In a very real sense, there was an expectation that women would come to be educated in domestic roles and take a back seat to their male colleagues. Despite the very real pressure to stay in these roles, pressure that rebuked women for being outspoken and even giving public addresses lest they violate the "the natural sense of propriety which God has given us" (Morris, 2019, p. 2000), Oberlin women - Black and white alike - resisted the notion of limiting themselves. These women, stated Morris (2019), developed their own realm of influence in fighting against slavery being exposed to "abolitionist professors, taught to become critical and independent thinkers, imbued with the imperative to fight sin in all its forms, and steeped in the radical antislavery environment that was Oberlin" (p. 208).

The Intersections of Oppression

As we have seen, Black women within higher education experience oppression as a result of the various identities that we may occupy. These identities include but are not limited to race, gender, sexuality, and ability. Speaking to the intersection of race and gender, Essed's (1991)

concept of gendered racism helps us understand that Black women's experiences are similar to the racism experienced by Black men, and the sexism experienced by white women. However, Black women's experiences are also different because of the intersection of race and gender. Szymanski & Lewis (2016) also address this specific stress experienced by Black women in academia in their writing.

Overstreet (2019) identified how the pervasive caricatures of Black women present in media and throughout history emphasize the lack of regard for our race and gender. Many of these caricatures hinge on Black women's reproductivity (Kaplan, 2021), our sexuality, and our socialization around strength. The socialization around strength in particular has led to the caricatures around the superwomen schema or strong Black woman that we experience in academia (Overstreet, 2019).

In addition, gendered racism has rendered Black women both hypervisible and invisible in academia (Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Hills, 2019), where we alternate between feelings of being isolated and being in the spotlight. We have also faced the realities of double consciousness, the two-ness that Du Bois (1903) spoke about where Black women "feel caught in a constant state of moving back and forth between Black and White norms or ways of being" (p. 4). This is a duality, as Winkle-Wagner (2009) explained, that is often created by interactions between Black women and their peers/professors within academia, particularly when Black women feel a need to perform their racialized identity, "while also feeling ignored or avoided because of it" (p. 23). The hypervisibility and invisibility are also intensified by the fact that we only make up 1% of the faculty and administrators in predominantly white institutions or PWIs (Dowdy, 2013).

Overstreet (2019) also unpacked the realities of Black women who sit at the intersections of other marginal identities, including age and sexuality. Similarly to Anzaldua's (1987)

articulation of what it is to live in the borderlands, or margins of identity, Overstreet (2019) explained the challenges of Black women transgressing multiple boundaries in an institution that is ultimately committed to providing safe passage for whites (Vaught, 2017). She stated,

> Academics who are not White, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender men will inevitably find themselves Othered in complex ways. I am a conglomeration of marginalized identities. As such, I often find myself in spaces in which I simply do not fit. I am a woman in a patriarchal society. I am a Black woman, surrounded by White women. I come from poverty and am surrounded by affluence. My race and youth put me in an odd position with both my colleagues and my students. Finally, because I am married to a man, my bisexuality is erased and I am assumed to be heterosexual. I am isolated in both the heterosexual and Queer communities (p. 24).

Lewis-Flenaugh, Turnbow, and Myricks (2019) also expounded on the intersection of race, gender, and age, and suggested that younger Black women are placed in oppressive categories, experiencing sexism from male colleagues and ageism from female colleagues. In their study, they stated two prominent ways that this discrimination occurs. One of these ways is with Black women who begin to take time off from their academic careers as a result of motherhood or deciding to start a family. They stated that “90% of Black women participants agreed maternity leave negatively affected their career progression in middle management and leadership opportunities” (p. 57). Another way that Black women experienced ageism is with other white women colleagues. In their findings, Lewis-Flenaugh, Turnbow, and Myricks stated that 71% of women targeted, and are less likely to support, other women who are outside their age range due to feeling threatened within their position. Yet, the authors likewise suggested that these behaviors were often the result of implicit bias against Black women and other women of

color, that created unnecessary challenges for young professional women and have long-lasting effects on their careers (p. 60). Speaking to this specifically, Lewis-Flenaugh, Turnbow, and Myricks also stated that young Black women feel suppressed due to the lack of opportunities to demonstrate their competency.

As Love and Abdelaziz (2019) stated, "Blackness, queerness, and womanness are unprivileged in the academy…even in spaces that seemingly appreciate it" (p. 165). Expanding on this concept, and bringing in Lorde's essay "The Master's Tools" and Collin's concept of the outsider within, Alston (2019) shared how she saw herself as one who stands outside of the circle of acceptable women within academia because of her identities: "Black, lesbian, soft stud (masculine-of-center), ordained Reverend" (p. 67). At the same time, she recognized the ways in which she was inside of the circle because she was upper middle class, educated, full professor, and author. Wrestling with these two realms of being, Alston showed how we can be simultaneously oppressed and privileged at the same time.

How marginalization of Black women in academia continues in the present

As a result of the historical treatment of Black women under enslavement and afterwards, as well as the intersecting marginalized identities, Black women continue to face significant barriers in academia in our present day. These barriers include but are not limited to having our research invalidated, being isolated and tokenized, and being unable to make tenure or find other work opportunities.

Invalidation of research

Cozart & Generett (2011/2012), noted that in spite of the fact that more Black women are earning doctoral degrees, our research is often dismissed as not generalizable. Our ideas, that are often rooted in our backgrounds and commitment to bettering our communities (Woods, 2001),

are not recognized within academia. We experience this, in spite of the fact that we have always theorized and made meaning of our environment and experiences. Stated Cozart & Generett (2011/2012),

> Black people have always theorized – but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic...our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create... [in] dynamic rather than fixed ideas...How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault of our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? And, women, at least the women I grew up around, continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of their world (p. 144).

The lack of validation of our perspectives and research interests shows that white epistemologies are cherished and upheld within academia. As a result, we have often endured epistemic violence where our way of knowing is not only dismissed but is regarded as other compared to dominant knowledges (Shadid, 2015; Collins, 2019). With this, our own paradigms of resistance, including paradigms like intersectionality, get taken up by those in power and used against us (Collins, 2019) as a means to continue to wrest power from the margins and recenter dominant knowledges. Such is the case when Black women and other marginal groups attempt to articulate their experience from the vantage point of our identity. Collins (2019) explained the problem well,

> Instead of saying, ‘We disagree with your intersectional arguments about racism,’ the polite response became, “We disagree with the foundations on which your arguments are premised. Your self-serving identity politics limit your ability to see beyond your own

> standpoint. Your testimonial authority that is grounded in experience lacks objectivity (p. 142).

As a result of sentiments like these, the standpoint from which we articulate our way of being in the world, and how we construct knowledge, have been dismissed. This has compromised Black women in academia's ability to be recognized as philosophers or thinkers, with the notion that we are not able to think systematically, or intellectually which Evans (2007) explained. In her work, "*Black Women in the Ivory Tower,"* Evans (2007) highlighted the stories of several Black women who experienced the marginalization of their perspectives, including Fanny Jackson Coppin and Pauli Murray. Coppin, Evans explained, was one of many examples of Black women who constantly had to prove one's mental abilities. And Murray's thesis was rejected several times as she pursued her law degree at Berkeley. Her advisor also told her that she would have to work through the summer to meet the academic requirements and attain her thesis. Murray, so as not to be left behind, enrolled to take a bar preparation course and was subsequently told by her advisor that if she did not cancel the course, she would withhold her approval of the thesis. Quoting Murray, Evans recounted

> With my degree at stake, I was forced to accept her ultimatum, but…somehow I found the strength to complete the thesis and get her formal approval in time for it to be published as a leading article in the September issue of the California Law Review. I then astonished Mrs. Armstrong (and myself) by taking the three-day October bar exam and passing it (Evans, 2007, p. 101).

These are hurdles that no one should have to jump through to prove their research is valid. And yet, these are hurdles that Black women have routinely experienced. As a result, it is often difficult for us to find mentors in academia. Stated Dowdy (2013), "The need to find a

mentor, cultivate the relationship, being sincere in the process of developing the affiliation, and finding departmental support for the mentoring network brings into focus the thorny issues of learning to successfully navigate the academic environment as a minority person" (p. 2). The lack of institutional support in terms of mentorship leaves Black women immensely vulnerable in our research pursuits. This vulnerability likewise impacts our ability to find and sustain advisors, committee members, and other allies within the academic institution who will stand by us through to the completion of our degrees.

Feelings of isolation and tokenism

Black women also experience a degree of isolation within academia. In part, this isolation is related to being the sole Black woman on campus, or among a handful of Black women who are present. This was certainly the experience of Black women who attended college between the mid 19th and 20th centuries. Zora Neale Hurston, though cherished among her friend groups on campus, still felt as if she was the "sacred Black cow" of her institution (Evans, 2007). Similarly, Murray was the sole representation of Black women at Hunter College. As a result, she experienced deep feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. Additionally, Murray experienced isolation because she felt that she had to sequester herself in order to keep up academically. Performance, or academic achievement, is also affected by unsupportive professors who do not validate our experience, as was the case with Murray who only received passing grades in a subject which she traditionally excelled in (Evans, 2007).

Coppin likewise experienced feelings of isolation attending Oberlin College in 1860. In her isolation as the only Black woman in her institution, she felt overwhelmingly accountable to the whole race if she were to fail. Reflecting on her experience she wrote, "I felt that, should I fail, it would be ascribed to the fact that I was colored" (Evans, 2007, p 79). We cannot, however,

divorce Coppin's experience from the reality that she was born enslaved to a mother who was also enslaved, and thus felt obligated to succeed not only for her own benefit, but for the benefit of the entire race. Mary Church Terrell, on the other hand, was born two decades after slavery and enjoyed more economic and social access than Coppin (Evans, 2007). Terrell's access to privilege, however, cannot deny the real barriers that she also encountered as a Black woman, which included being encouraged not to take difficult classes, or what was considered at that time, gentleman's courses. Instead Terrell, as well as other Black women at her time, were encouraged to steer away from these classes so that they would not destroy their prospects of marriage.

Moving into the 21st century, Robinson (2013) spoke to the isolation she felt while completing her doctoral studies. The academy represented a place where she felt alone and disillusioned. This led her to simultaneously withdraw while also turning to Black feminist theory as a way to make sense of her experience. It was through her research and reflection that she came to her theory of spoke*tokenism.* Robinson (2013) stated that the words *spoken* and *token* were combined in her research to "convey the significance of voice and physical presence and to underscore the perceived role of the speaker to particular audiences" (p. 161). Speaking to the idea of tokenism, Overstreet (2019) explained that it ultimately isolates people of color and prevents them from being accepted for who they are so that they remain the other. She stated, "This pressure to speak for one's people, to represent one's people, and to constantly support one's people often feels like a responsibility we cannot refuse, but it is a responsibility that is both time-consuming and emotionally draining" (Overstreet, 2019, p. 28).

Although tokenism can appear to have some benefits, in terms of the illusion of being able to implement institutional change, the reality is that Black women in academia who are

utilized as tokens are often made to feel as if we have to represent the perspectives and needs of all Black people which is unfair because Blackness is not a monolith. Additionally, being a token does not automatically mean entry or acceptance. At times, being a token can go wrong when the Black women being tokenized moves from pet to threat (Stallings, 2020), a reality that explains when Black women in new professional roles are treated like pets, loved and cared for, until we begin exercising their power to make actual changes within institutions.

Inability to make tenure or find other employment opportunities

Because of all of the barriers that we face, Black women in academia work very hard to prove ourselves, including proving that our research is valid and that we belong. This has often led to us working harder than peers around us who are not Black women (Robinson, 2013), including the expectation that we will serve on different committees or take on additional work (Hills, 2019) that are not necessarily a part of our job requirements. Unfortunately, this labor has not always translated into being able to get tenure or finding other employment opportunities that we feel are meaningful.

Overstreet (2019) communicated the grim realities of Black people and Black women in higher education. She stated that Black people as a whole only make up 4 to 5 percent of full-time faculty, and only 1 - 2 percent of tenured faculty. In addition, the number of women earning PhDs is higher than those actually represented in the academy, signifying that a PhD does not guarantee employment within academia for Black women. Overstreet (2019) stated "Although Black women have greater representation than Black men, as of 2011, 23.5% of Black men academics were tenured or tenure-track versus 16.2% of Black women; additionally, 83.8% of Black women were contingent (or "term" faculty) versus 76.5% of Black men" (p. 21). Such exposes the gendered dynamics of being able to make tenure. Instead, Black women are often

tagged for service opportunities that do not always translate into their ability to make tenure. We have been called the maids of the academy (Overstreet, 2019), a label that defines our experience regardless of the research and service to community and the institution. Additionally, Black women who are faculty are often found in roles that pay less and are overwhelmingly employed in two year institutions (Dowdy, 2013), that do not grant the same opportunities for advancement as four year colleges and universities.

At times, our very own research interests, particularly interests that center around equity and justice, can be a barrier to securing tenure. This was the case with Nikole Hannah Jones (2019), whose "*1619 Project"* with the New York Times made her immensely vulnerable before the University of North Carolina's governing board (Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021). Such indicates that Black women in academia, particularly those whose labor pushes back against the status quo, face insurmountable barriers in navigating these institutions and remaining within them. Sometimes, the barriers can be quite volatile in nature, when we are forced to endure violence, including death threats and hate mail for calling out bigotry (Young & Hines, 2018).

Again, many Black women with advanced degrees are able to find employment opportunities within higher education, or desire to as Evans (2007) reminded us. However, the full-time opportunities outside of academia are also hard to come by. Evans (2007) highlighted the experiences of both Terrell and Murray, who faced the challenge of finding outside employment after matriculation. Terrell, while in college at Oberlin, felt that her experiences with racism were isolated incidents and that her lighter skin and higher social status brought her access not afforded to most Blacks. However, upon graduating, and entering the world outside of the college, she encountered barriers in securing employment in part because employers found it hard to believe that she was educated and that Black women scholars existed. Similarly, Pauli

Murray found difficulty in getting a job at a university because she had a higher degree than those who were interviewing her for the position (Evans, 2007). Even when we have proved ourselves academically, our identities as Black women continue to keep us from opportunities that are easily afforded to whites, showing that in spite of our qualifications, our race and gender always trumps our educational status (McCoy, 2021).

Results of Black Women's Marginalization in Academia

Spirit Murder

Research from Durant (1999) and Young & Hines (2018) showed that these academic institutions that we commonly labor in, Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) function as plantations in the way that they control and silence Black women. It is important to make the distinction here between PWIs and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), as many of the experiences that Black women have described take place within these institutions, and as such, is the focus of my research study. Although Young & Hines (2018) limited their findings to Black women who teach diversity courses and push against racism, the reality is that many Black women, regardless of program focus, experience this abuse or spirit murder. While it is not murder of the actual body, Young & Hines (2018) asserted that the violence Black women endure is in fact analogous to the literal killings of Black women by police. Young & Hines (2018) explained,

> We attest that black women professors are being spirit-murdered on the plantation of academia to kill their physical body through removal, to murder their minds, and to fatally pierce their souls. The spirit-murdering of black female faculty deserts them into a spiritual dying where they will ultimately not have the strength and ethos to unchain themselves. As we have seen with the murdering of black women by police, black female

> professors will often experience the cumulative effect of racial violence even before an arrest or police stop takes place (p. 20).

The concept of spirit murder is rooted in the work of Patricia Williams (1987), who defined it as racism that results in more than just physical pain, "it is a crime, an offense so deeply painful and assaultive" (p. 129). Expanding on Williams' definition, Love (2019) stated that "racism robs dark people of their humanity and dignity and leaves personal, psychological, and spiritual injuries" (p 38). Although Love focused on the experiences of dark children in K-12 who experience spirit murder as a result of white rage at the prospect of Black advancement, the work of Williams (1987), Young & Hines (2018), and Berry (2018), showed that spirit murder is a reality experienced by all Black people across institutions within the United States, which includes Black women within academia. Although all may feel too generalizable or essentialist, the reality is that because of the historical and persistent nature of racism, we all endure its impacts to some degree. To state that all Black people experience this is a bold step, but necessary in order to fully articulate the extent of the problem, particularly as it comes to Black women in higher education.

The impact on identity

Haynes, Stewart, and Allen's (2016) article, *Three Paths, One Struggle: Black Women and Girls Battling Invisibility in U.S. Classrooms,* is critical in understanding our experiences here. Their research made connections between the experiences of Black girls in P-16 and what Black women experience in higher education, and shed light on the ways that Black women and girls started to internalize negative images of self worth based on how they are treated in the P-16 environment. The authors noted how master narratives perpetuated cultural and gender stereotypes of who Black women should be in relation to what it means to be an American.

"Master narratives ignite an ideological script that denigrates Black womanhood, where Black women become property and their treatment as inanimate and disposable objects is justified" (Haynes, Stewart, and Allen, 2016, p. 381).

Because of these master narratives and other forms of indoctrination, Black women and girls quickly learn that the dehumanization we experience is socially acceptable. For the sake of capitalistic gains or advancing the economy, our humanity gets rendered invisible in comparison to white men and women (Haynes, Stewart, and Allen, 2016). Drawing from Franklin's (1999) concept of the invisibility syndrome paradigm, which was originally developed to understand the microaggressions endured by Black men, the authors indicated that Black women may "institute boundaries to keep the cultural, psychological, and physical representations of Blackness out to cope with racial stress" (Hayes, Stewart, and Allen, 2016, p. 384). Research from Patton, Crenshaw, Haynes and Watson (2016) further explained this concept of invisibility as it pertains to Black women in higher education well, "Between 1991-2012, a 22-year span, only 48 articles were published on the experiences of Black college women in juried higher education related, psychology and behavioral sciences publications. In contrast, since 2001, over 62 publications have been written that are geared toward the collegiate experiences of Black undergraduate men alone (p. 194)."

Within existing research, some Black women in academia also reported that they experience imposter syndrome where regardless of academic achievements, they feel extreme feelings of self doubt and competence (Overstreet, 2019) that are rooted in a sense that we do not truly belong in these institutions. In Overstreet's particular situation, she felt this way because of a discussion where colleagues undermined her qualifications because she had earned a PhD in three years while holding a full time job. After bringing up the matter to a white colleague who

she trusted, she was asked to consider whether or not she belonged in academia. “I don’t think it’s a here thing, I think it’s an academia thing. Maybe you should think about if you belong in academia” (2019, p. 27). Again, this sentiment came because against all odds, Overstreet completed her degree in three years, something that is almost unheard of for most people, let alone a Black woman who set this goal because she could not afford not to work or be saddled with student loan debt.

Pushing back on the concept of imposter syndrome and even the notion of belonging, however, Tulshyan & Burey (2021) stated that

> we don’t belong because we were never supposed to belong. Our presence in most of these spaces is a result of decades of grassroots activism and begrudgingly developed legislation. Academic institutions and corporations are still mired in the cultural inertia of the good ol’ boys’ clubs and white supremacy. Biased practices across institutions routinely stymie the ability of individuals from underrepresented groups to truly thrive (paragraph, 11).

Unfortunately, these sentiments expressed by Tulshyan and Burey (2021) prove that regardless of our accomplishments as Black women, and Black people as a whole, in spite of how well we do, in spite of what we produce, our legitimacy will always be called into question.

Our identity is also impacted by the Strong Black Woman schema, a reality that scholars have suggested is essential to Black women’s survival throughout society, which includes within academia. In a study focused on the perceptions and experiences of Black women in academia, Jones, Harris, & Reynolds (2021), recounted how participants related to the idea of the Strong Black Woman schema. In their research, they found that for many “Strength is a tool for survival that allows Black women to defend themselves psychologically against oppression and,

specifically, to push back against pejorative stereotypes about their gendered-racial group" (p. 347). Although there were positive, or at least favorable attributes associated with the schema, including resiliency, hardworking, and nurturing, Johns, Harris, & Reynolds (2021), also noted that the Black women participants believed that they were overwhelmingly perceived as angry, which included ideas that they were rude or had a bad attitude. This shows that strength can work to our benefit, in order to overcome insurmountable odds and to simply endure in the face of adversity, but can also be used against us, when in the face of that adversity, we are expected to be docile, humble, and deferental.

Mental and physical health impacts

The mental and physical health of Black women in academia is adversely impacted as a result of all that we have endured, including spirit murder and the need to shoulder the Black woman schema. These consequences include but are not limited to Black women having difficulty seeking and asking for help, maladaptive coping, and poor mental and physical health (Jones, Harris & Reynolds, 2021)

This is why it is important for us as Black women to push back against the schema, understanding that not only does it have negative effects on our health but because of the way the notion of being strong is perceived by others (Jones, Harris, Reynolds, 2021), as existing in the liminal space between being and non being (Kaplan, 2021), that strength becomes an excuse to not treat us with respect and dignity.

We must also understand that because Black women in academia are not exempt from the experiences of Black women within the larger populace, that many of the mental and physical health disparities are felt by those inside and outside of the academia. Spates, Evans, James & Martinez (2020) spoke to the impact of this on Black women, noting the higher levels of

cardiovascular disease as well as “infant and maternal morbidity and mortality, cancer mortality, hypertension, high blood pressure, and mental health complications, which may be associated with stress” (p. 589). Smith (1982/2015) affirmed this, stating that “we die sooner than white women; our deaths from pregnancy and childbirth are several times higher; and our death rates from a number of diseases are also higher. These facts clearly indicate that our political position as Black women affects our health” (p. 105). Within academia, Szymanski & Lewis (2016) recognized that the greater levels of gendered racism are correlated to higher levels of stress, depression, and issues with identity.

Black women have coped with these challenges in several ways. One of the ways that we have done this is through silence, negotiation, and resistance to survive and thrive in higher education (Robinson, 2013). We have also coped by trying to assimilate in places that are not designed for us. This can be taken as cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) when we consider assimilation as a tool to navigate the institution in order to make changes and open the door to other Black women coming in behind us. But so often, being the token comes with the expectation of remaining the only one, not necessarily creating opportunity for others to come in and be a part of these spaces as well, and not necessarily with the expectation that the institution will change on behalf of Black women. This is when the idea of navigation can become a reuse because at the institutional level, we have encountered significant barriers for trying to bring other Black people along with us.

For as many Black women who have stayed and attempted to make it work within academia without losing themselves, we must also recognize that for many, the only recourse has been to leave, which was the experience of Robinson (2013) among countless others. Robinson likewise identified four retention issues that affect whether or not Black women stay in academia

which included "funding issues, respect from professors, Black student networking and presence, and faculty supportive mentoring," (p. 159), many of the issues that this paper has already highlighted. Inaccessibility to these things that are so critical has created and sustained an environment that negatively impacts our health. Recognizing the tension, many of us have decided to leave.

Recommendations to Improve Black women's Experiences in Academia

Validating the experiences of Black women

There is a sense of urgency here concerning Black women in higher education that cannot be ignored. Given the dynamics of the last 5 years, living through the Trump era, the COVID pandemic, increased police violence against Black bodies, in addition to navigating our daily responsibilities in our families and community, Black women in academia are tired and burned out. Speaking to this dilemma, Young & Hines (2018) stated that

> it has become more critical for higher-education institutions to support the research, service, and teaching needs of black female faculty without allowing them to be spirit-murdered or for PWIs to permit other forms of racialized terror to persist. Black women professors who are instructing courses in cultural diversity *will* encounter soul-severing blows and spirit injuries when they are teaching in a constant state of emotional vulnerability and fear. Therefore, PWIs must address the plantation life, its racist and sexist culture, and the role of whiteness in the spirit-murdering of black female faculty (p. 24).

What Young and Hines (2018) demanded here goes deeper than reforming or tweaking education around the edges. Their analysis extended further than merely focusing on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, retention, or mentorship - though all of these things are

important. It lends itself to asking for those who do not present as Black women to be in solidarity with us and validate our experiences. Hills (2019), a Black male scholar, invited Black men to recognize and name the ways that Black women face emotional and psychological burdens that often go unnoticed. Stated Hills (2019), "Diagnosis is a useful endeavor, but more critical and necessary is the cultivation of spaces and practices that enable all black scholars—and black women, in particular—to inhabit professional *and* personal lives not marked by anti-Black racism or anti-Black misogyny" (p. 7). His analysis is important because we need others to stand in solidarity with Black women, in particular our Black men, for whom we have felt overwhelmingly loyal to in order to protect the race, at the expense of our own selves. In order to do this, Hills (2019) recommended a close reading of Black women's scholarship, particularly womanist texts, works that many Black men (as well as the larger population) are not familiar with.

Spiritual and cultural interventions

Healing likewise requires that we remember our spiritual and cultural selves, pieces of ourselves that we have been seduced to forget in order to navigate higher education (Dillard, 2012) as well as other institutions. Spates, Evans, James & Martinez (2020) affirmed how critical this is for the wellbeing of Black women, stating that the effects of gendered racism get worse as Black women age if certain cultural measures are not in place, including collective community identity and social connectedness. For many Black women, this would mean the validation of an African-centered perspective (ACP) or way of being in the classroom but also in spaces that are curated for Black women. According to Atta (2018), ACP "recognizes the presence of a Higher Power or Creator, the centrality of Spirit and our Spirit-ness (humans as Spiritual beings), a holistic mind-body-spirit connection, understanding that everything in the Universe is

interconnected in Oneness, with our individual identity grounded in the continuity" (p. 229). It likewise, "challenges the distorted narratives and misinformation about people of African descent and their contributions to the world historical stage" (p. 229). Also referred to as Afrocentricity, or African-centered pedagogy, it is ultimately about "claiming what is known rather than gaining new knowledge" (Bethea, 2018, p. 306). According to Madhubuti & Madhubuti (1994), African-centered pedagogy:

> legitimizes stores of knowledge; positively exploits and scaffolds productive community and cultural practices; extends and builds upon the indigenous language...imports a worldview that idealizes a positive self-sufficient future for one's people without denying the self-worth, and right to self-determination of others, supports cultural continuity while promoting critical consciousness (p. 22).

Practicing the Nguzo Saba, or the seven principles of Kwanzaa which emphasize values including self determination, collective responsibility, creativity, and faith, is one way to bring an African centered perspective into academia. Covington Clarkson & Johnson (2011) and Green & King (2002) speak to the difference that an application of the Nguzo Saba makes in the lives of scholars. Specifically addressing the K-12 context, Covington Clarkson & Johnson (2011), suggested that an education rooted in cultural relevance for African American students provides a strong foundation for academic success. Moreover, they stated that Afrocentric principles like the Nguzo Saba have to be fully integrated throughout curriculum instead of just an add on to check a box.

Green & King (2002) similarly addressed the ways that implementation of the Nguzo Saba can be applied in higher education for Black women. They highlighted a program called the Sisters Project, which aims to help Black women in higher education break through barriers in

the workplace. In addition, the Sisters Project aspires to create a caring village for Black women, where participants are able to "take collective responsibility for and assume leadership in identifying and challenging barriers to their career advancement" (p. 157). For participants in the Sisters Project, the Nguzo Saba served as a means to help them "reclaim their history and heritage and engage in a process of healing, renewing, and affirming themselves as women and as leaders...These seven principles further serve as a blueprint for the development of collaborative relationships and shared leadership that are essential if Black women are to (re)build their lives in the academy" (p. 159).

For African peoples - men, women, and nonbinary individuals - whose knowledge systems have been simultaneously denied and extracted, claiming or (re)membering, what we have forgotten is critically important for our healing and advancement as a people. Says Dillard (2012), "we must (re)member in order to be whole" (p. 4). Dillard's (2016) framework of endarkened feminist epistemology, which articulates how reality is known through Black feminist thought, invites us to (re)member through spiritual consciousness and sacred practice. Making a distinction between the two, Dillard states that "spirituality is to have a consciousness of the realm of the spirit in one's work and to recognize that consciousness as a transformative force in research and teaching...However, when we speak of the sacred in endarkened feminist research, we are referring to the way the work is honored and embraced as it is carried out" (Dillard, 2012, p. 60).

Making space for spiritual consciousness and sacred practice in academia gives Black women the ability to resist epistemic violence, or the "forceful displacement of knowledge and ways of knowing in order to maintain dominance over oppressed communities" (Shahid, 2015, p. 64). Recognition of spirituality, "the essence of African identity" (Davis, 2015, p. 159) also

empowers Black women to draw on an otherworldly energy to make it through challenging times in graduate school. Emphasizing the importance of ritual in African cosmology, Davis (2008) stated that we are able to tap into the healing and transformation of self instead of giving up. She rehearsed a story, which she calls a performance of care, where visited in a dream by three enslaved ancestors, she was able to tap into an inner energy to keep moving forward when she was ready to abandon the dissertation process. Though Black women may be marginalized for voicing these experiences in academia, the reality is that abandoning the spirit is what has caused us to be sick. Cut off from pieces of ourselves that have enabled us to survive generation after generation, we get exposed to spiritual attack and crisis. Fortunately, for some, like Davis (2008) and Shahid (2015), that crisis can lead us right where we need to be. “My spiritual crisis...helped me to recognize that my work in academe ought to reflect the spiritually salient African American Christian roots that anchor me. My spiritual walk is not separate from my intellectual journey in academe” (Shahid, 2015, p. 65). Speaking to this importance and role of the spirit within institutions not designed for us, I wrote:

> Then one day
> I hit a wall
> the stoic-ness broke away piece by piece by piece like fragile paint chips
> I screamed into the earth as the oppression I endured for years fell off
> piercing me as it was ripped from my body
> threatening to destroy me if I didn’t comply
>
> But it wasn’t me
> the Spirit was in control
> She who I insisted remain on the outside

who I stopped returning to at the end of the day

who I stopped walking with

playing with

talking to

and laughing with up into the wee hours of the morning

This Spirit had found a way inside

and was coming to rescue me from the shell I had become

from that day, I vowed to never leave the Spirit behind

I would not abandon her

I would love her fiercely

I would refuse to cut off pieces of me just to make it through the day

no, the Spirit was the only way I could survive the hellish ordeal that awaited me like clockwork between 9 - 5 everyday (Adedayo, 2020, p. 138).

Safe spaces and sister circles

In addition to (re)membering our cultural assets and reclaiming our spirituality, there are other solutions that Black female academics have used to pursue wellness and to resist. Brown-Glaude (2010) spoke to the importance of Black females in the academy creating spaces for ourselves in to "address the dualisms that separate race from gender, and black studies from women's studies (p. 801)." Alfred (2001) suggested that safe spaces give Black female academics an opportunity to "preserve their constructed definition of the self when the environment becomes disconcerting (p. 61). Citing hooks (1989), Alfred (2001) also described safe spaces as homeplaces where Black people can both affirm one another and heal from racism. For Brown-Glaude, spaces such as conferences and institutions, as well as academic

journals, give the opportunity for Black females in the academy to be ourselves without looking through the veil (Du Bois, 1903) that typically clouds our vision of ourselves and each other.

Unpacking the results of a research study that highlighted the efforts of 12 institutions where Black feminist activists have worked as change agents, Brown-Glaude noted even institutions where the issue of race might be considered to be a non-issue have had to be challenged to consider the needs of Black females and push against the projected culture of sameness. Spelman College is one of those institutions, noted Brown-Glaude (2010).[7] To address this, Spelman faculty created the African Diaspora and the World (ADW) program. ADW is "an interdisciplinary and gender-informed, two-semester core curriculum course required of all Spelman students. This rigorous program situates Africa and its diaspora at the center of intellectual inquiry and interrogates structures of difference and diversity among peoples of African descent (p. 807)." As a result of this program, students have been able to better understand how concepts of racial and gender unity have actually silenced Black people, not only on Spelman's campus but in general.

Similarly Cook (2013) emphasized the importance of spaces that support Black women in higher education. For her, "Support systems include opportunities for African American women to form sister circles and share counter-stories that refute some of the negative information they may have received during their daily campus routines" (p. 5). Green & King's (2002) research on the Sisters Network again pointed in this direction, emphasizing the power in Black women's coming together.

[7] It must be noted that Spelman is an HBCU dedicated specifically to Black women scholars. This is important because it shows that while attending an HBCU can be a protective factor for Black women, that it does not completely shield students from harm because of the ways that society at large, including internalized racism and misogyny, can influence policies, programming, and practices within the institution.

While formal spaces such as these are critical, we cannot underestimate the power in informal, one to one relationships such as the one between Fries-Britt and Kelly. In their article, "*Retaining Each Other: Narratives of Two African American Women in the Academy* (2005)," they spoke to the relationship that they had as a new faculty member and new doctoral student, in helping each other progress throughout their careers. Kelly approached Fries-Britt to ask if she would be not only her advisor but her research advisor, to help her along in her research process and capabilities. Fries-Britt, on the other hand, felt that she was newer in her role and still establishing her research agenda, and was not sure about her ability to nurture Kelly in the way that she wanted. Their openness, honesty, and ability to walk with each other through each of their experiences helped bring them together and keep them together. Stated Fries-Britt, "We were both willing to take some risks and to learn from each other throughout the process. We strengthened our own sense of self-efficacy with each new situation we faced. We trusted each other and under- stood that our needs were essentially the same and if we supported each other we could make it through the process" (p. 231).

Self Care and Self Efficacy

Hills (2019) stated that one of the strategies towards improving the experiences of Black women is self care. For him, a key component of self care is articulating and naming our experiences as such identification offers spiritual catharsis and sustenance. Additionally, he offered that communal lament is an "extension of self-care because it makes plain the systemic evils affecting human life in order to cultivate a sense of moral agency and responsiveness to confront and eradicate it" (Hills, 2019 p. 14).

Lewis-Flenaugh, Turnbow, and Myricks (2019) stated that strategies for improving Black women's experiences in academia are to have flexible schedules that focus on hours worked

rather than hours in the office, to encourage Black women to build self efficacy to maintain and increase mental health, to have a work organization that supports professional development opportunities for Black women, and for Black women to instill value in themselves. Building on the concept of self-efficacy, Alston (2019) offered Black women the invitation of living into authenticity. In spite of the challenges navigating higher education as a Black, lesbian, soft-stud (masculine-of-center), Reverend, she claimed that "I should be who I am, who God created me to be - that is, be authentic. In this authenticity, I bring it all to the table. The living and leading is my soul work that I do in a parrhesiastic voice that is grounded in authenticity" (p. 72).

Additionally, the edited volume done by Evans, Bell, & Burton (2017) "*Black Women's Mental Health*" lifted up strategies that Black women can employ that allow them to balance strength and vulnerability. Addressing two poles of the ways Black women are perceived in society, either as the StrongBlackWoman or as the angry Black woman victim, Evans, Bell, & Burton introduced a model that can positively impact Black women's mental health and wellness. Called BREATHE (Balance, reflection, energy, association, transparency, and empowerment), it is a "set of principles by which one can engage the process of restoration and lifestyle change as well as increase one's understanding of Black women's mental health (p. 4). While this model does not specifically address the needs of Black women in academia, and perhaps Black women more broadly, it promises to have a beneficial impact in its application. Speaking to the concept of transparency in this volume, Walker-Barnes (2017) showed us that there is a correlation between the "internalization of the StrongBlackWoman and health outcomes" (p. 51). For Walker-Barnes, in making explicit and transparent the ways that upholding this trope negatively impacts our health, we can see that the "StrongBlackWoman is not so strong after all. She is albatross, at odds with African American women's very survival.

She is a perpetual noose around the necks of Black women, which must be loosened if their lives are to be transformed" (p. 53).

Focus of Research/ Gap in Literature

While this research study focuses on the experiences of Black women PhD students at the University of Minnesota, the literature reviewed in this section demonstrate an unfortunate dynamic when it comes to Black women in academia that cannot be ignored. At every turn, Black women in academia have experienced a disproportionate amount of barriers that impede our ability to be well. This notion of wellness must not be conflated with ideas of success or retention, neoliberal approaches to addressing Black women's wellness, but must stand on its own in order to understand what Black women need whether or not we decide to stay within academia or decide to find meaning and purpose elsewhere. Again, the focus here is not on traditional models of retention, but is on a commitment to ensuring that Black women are well wherever and however we decide to show up in the world. As Domingue & Evans (2017) stated, "Black women must survive, but we must also move beyond basic actions of minimal preservation toward liberation and ultimately, joy. Thus, Black women's task is not only to survive but to survive well. Ours is a quest for sustainable struggle" (p. 347).

Expanding the existing literature, this research aims to understand what, if anything, enables Black women in higher education at the University of Minnesota to move beyond preservation and struggle to liberation and joy, examining what is possible when we center wellness as righteous praxis in the ways that we navigate academic institutions. This work fills a gap in the literature because it is contextual and specifically examines the impact of schooling at a PWI in Minnesota. Additionally, it fills a gap because it separates wellness from ideas of

retention, and asks whether Black women PhD students are well for wellness, or rather for our own sake.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Grounded in autoethnographic self study, this section first takes a look at autoethnographic principles that allowed me to engage participants and ask them questions about their experience as Black women PhD students. From talking about the methods, I moved on to laying out key theories that I used to analyze data and the conceptual framework, mainly focusing on the theory since the conceptual framework I took up heavily in the first chapter. The theories that I used allowed me make sense of the conceptual, but even more so, showed "relationships among these ideas and how they relate to the research study…conceptual frameworks are commonly seen in qualitative research in the social and behavioral sciences, for example, because often one theory cannot fully address the phenomena being studied" (University Library, n.d. paragraph 3). I then moved on to detail the ways that I implemented the research, highlighting the survey that was first issued before collecting data in a more intimate fashion in the autoethnographic self study process. Finally, I closed with how the data that was collected between the survey and writing process was analyzed, allowing myself to shift from originally conceptualized ideas to how the data would be analyzed based on my growing understanding of cultural self study and knowledge as a researcher.

Research Methods

Narrative Methods

This project sought out to address the following research questions - (1) what is the experience of Black women who finish their PhD programs compared to the experience of those who decide to leave their programs? (2) what are the protective factors that contributed to the overall wellbeing of both groups as well as the risk factors that contributed to unhealth and stress? (3) Whether Black women decided to stay or leave their PhD programs, did they feel that

they were ultimately able to achieve, or further, health and wellness in their respective lives and field? If so, what contributed to that sense of wellbeing? If no, what barriers keep them from doing so? In order to answer these questions, the following methodology will be used.

To answer these questions, I chose a collective autoethnographic self study process that gave me the opportunity to (re)member ourselves as Black women PhD students in the academy. I was inspired deeply by the work of Cynthia Dillard and her work centered on (re)membering within Endarkened Feminist Epistemology (2006, 2012, 2022). I was likewise inspired by the work of Black women authors, bell hooks, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Zora Neale Hurston, and so many more, who had taken up narrative work as a means to (re)member and thus understand themselves as Black women as well as the world around them in order to create in their imaginations the world that could be.

The ease of communication through narratives and storytelling for Black women could lead us to conclude that it is a method that not only connects with the storyteller but those within our communities who read these stories. Walker's (1983) "*In Search of Our Mother's Garden"* was so inspirational that Black women took her work and created an entire field of theological thought based on her premise of womanism. Similarly, Morrison and Hurston have not only influenced womanist theological frameworks but Black feminist epistemologies as a whole, as their texts brought us back to the point of (re)membering ourselves and our stories. hooks (1991) spoke to the importance of (re)membering in her piece, "*Narratives of Struggle*." She stated, "for people globally who fight for liberation, resistance is also 'a struggle of memory against forgetting.' Remembering makes us subjects in history. It is dangerous to forget" (p. 54). (Re)membering is the point of Walker's (1989) *Temple of My Familiar*, the sequel to "*the Color Purple"* (1982). In this work, Walker presented us with characters who (re)member not just the

happenings of their lifetimes but who went back in time to imagine a world before females lost their identities to males. Gloria Wade-Gayles (1993) also took us on a journey of (re)membering as she recounted the people in her life who held her together when she could otherwise become undone. Reflecting on the experience that is common to Black women, Wade-Gayles asked:

> What inspired them to plant flowers, to sing, and to plan days, even nights, for themselves and their families? What prevented them from becoming like the women we rarely talked to; the women who were splintered, scarred, damaged, destroyed. What was their armor? Their secret potion? Their magic?...The women remained whole because they were certain of their own goodness and equally certain that goodness, in time, wins over evil (p. 269).

(Re)membering, then, is a key function and purpose of storytelling for Black women. (Re)membering is a direct counter to the process of forced forgetting. S.R. Toliver, in her book "*Recovering Black Storytelling in Qualitative Research: Endarkened Storywork*" (2021) described what forgetting looks like saying, "It's a feeling of emptiness, an impression that parts of my brain are being blocked by some unknown, outside force. The brain is still functioning, but there are parts I can't access" (p. 23). (Re)membering helps us to (re)construct the pieces of ourselves that have been blocked so that we may begin to operate as whole persons in higher education. Recognizing its importance, Black feminist scholar Cynthia Dillard likewise drew on it to construct a framework to bring together the experiences of transnational Black women. Navigating the intersections of racism and sexism, Dillard's framework of endarkened feminist epistemology (EFE) offers us the opportunity to consider "How might our memories, our encounters, and the representations of our memories act as praisesongs in the world" (2012, p. 7).

(Re)membering offers Black women the opportunity to have our experiences be recognized as valid and serve as a testimony, a witness, to others who might otherwise challenge its validity. To be clear, spiritual consciousness and sacred practice are key components of Dillard's (re)membering process (2012). This is because, for Dillard as well as other Black women, spiritual consciousness and sacred practice is one of the ways that Black women articulate and access our knowledge systems. Though minimized in higher education, "the ability to express spirituality as a critical aspect of the Black community that had been silenced in our formal educational experiences and within our profession in the academy" (Cozart & Generett, 2011/2012, p. 141) is key to our ability to resist oppression and advance liberation.

Considering the inquiry that I took up within my work, to understand the experiences of Black women in higher education, Dillard's framework is a key research paradigm and theory in how I approach this question. With this in mind, I chose autoethnographic self study, because of its focus on the storyteller's responsibility in the (re)membering process rather than an outside storyteller constructing the narrative of the other. This was important because as Dillard (2012) stated, I wanted to

> See the work of defining and developing consciousness of Black womanhood through cultural memories as the work of both the teacher and the taught, the researcher and the researched, recognizing always that while the process may make more clear our collective identity as Black women, it is still subjective and always partial...deliberate work of engaging and preserving these memories, both the memory itself and our engagements and experiences with it (p. 13).

Autoethnographic Self Study

Autoethnography

Autoethnography offers the researcher the opportunity to do self-reflective work to change and transform systems. Drawing from Rachel Alicia Griffin's (2012) use of Black Feminist Autoethnography (BFA) and H. Richard Milner & Tyrone C. Howard's (2013) articulation of counterstories, this gives Black women who are seldom the focus of research in asset based ways the opportunity to articulate our experience on our own terms.

Griffin's work combined Black feminist thought with Black feminist autoethnography (BFA) to "critically narrate the pain and pride of Black womanhood" (p. 138). Likewise inspired by prominent Black women writers including bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Ntozake Shange, authors whose works she uses to locate and write her own self, Griffin utilized BFA to push back on the experiences of racism and sexism within her field. Stated Griffin, "the formal conceptualization of BFA renders Black women more visible in the realm of autoethnography, which in the academy is more often associated with and published by White women. Such writing exposes, politicizes, and narrates the ''subjugated knowledge'' birthed from a standpoint informed by intersectionality (p. 143)." The clarification that Griffin made here is important because it shows that BFA is something specifically designed for centering and articulating Black women's voices.

BFA, then, is a means to "...humanize Black women at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression; resist the imposition of controlling imagery; and self-reflexively account for how Black women can reproduce systemic oppression" (p. 143). In spite of the urgency here, however, Griffin noted that not many Black women who are communication scholars use BFA as a means to communicate their truth, likely because of the punishment that comes with speaking truth to power in the research and writing process. While the threat of punishment exists, the

reality is that we are punished whether we speak or stay silent. In the words of Audre Lorde, then, “it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive” (1978, paragraph 4).

Autoethnographic counterstories, a tenet of Critical Race Theory (CRT) used to disrupt dominant epistemologies (Milner & Howard, 2013), is also a vital element of the narrative process. It is useful for deconstructing “to complement, nuance, disrupt and counter storylines in teacher education that (1) are under-researched; (2) present people of color (teachers, students, parents) from a deficit ideology in teacher education; and (3) provide myopic, one-sided evidence and perspectives” (p. 537). Counterstories underscore the validity of lived experience in terms of research, providing the researcher an opportunity to name a reality that falls outside of dominant knowledge systems. Stated Milner & Howard (2013), “stories told by those on the bottom, told from the subversive-subaltern perspective, challenge and expose the hierarchical and patriarchal order that exists within the legal academy [any institution] and pervades the larger society’” (p 542). Like BFA, the concept of autoethnographic counterstories holds promise in articulating the experiences of Black women in higher education as our way of knowing and knowledge systems, that are as ancient as they are present, are often discarded. CRT suggests that our narratives and way of knowing are not only credible but are critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about race. This means that it is impossible to teach about race in higher education without teaching about the Black female point of view.

Naming is a powerful tool to push back on pervasive epistemology that centers whiteness and hegemony. However, it is because of its power that it is likewise threatening to those who would rather maintain the status quo. This is often why our research as Black women is counted as unreliable and ungeneralizable (Cozart & Generett, 2011/2012) unless someone white or white adjacent writes our stories. In doing so, they both validate and invalidate what we have been

saying so that our stories are only considered true if they are told from the mouth of someone who is considered trustworthy.

I brought together elements of autoethnography, Black feminist autoethnography, and autoethnographic counterstories to make sense of participants' experiences. I drew on these three methods to inform the ways that the research was ultimately conducted, believing that they each held promise in the way that participants were engaged in the data collection process, as well in the way that I made sense of their experiences. In addition, I combined these autoethnographic methods with a cultural self study process as explained in detail below.

Self study

Self study, a process that looks at one self in action, is autobiographical, historical, political, and cultural in nature. It contains five elements including being self initiated and self focused; focused on the improvement of practice; being interactive; utilizing multiple sources; and defining validity based on trustworthiness (Hamilton, Smith, & Worthington, 2008). Going a bit further, cultural self study is the process of African heritage people talking about what has happened to us within dominant institutions including the University. The Cultural Wellness Center (CWC), a community based institution located in South Minneapolis, described cultural self study as a process of healing for African heritage people to examine what is necessary to recover from pain and harm of violence over the last 400 years. CWC stated, "the mission is to learn lessons from the experiences we share in letting go of the residuals of paralyzing pain that comes with racialization as we move to learn to embrace and understand culture. The vision for this work is to take our community from a place of violence to a place of peace" (Azzahir, Azzahir, & Tezet, 2016, p 3). Through truth telling where the participant focuses on their truth and recognition of their life, "the details that have created the life I see in front of me" (p. 5), and

"observing, noting, and learning about who you are" (p. 5) they engage in self study. The purpose of cultural self study, then, is for participants to study themselves and their experiences within academia in order to (re)member what has been lost through 400 years of brutality, (re)membering a key element in Dillard's premise of endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2022).

In Milner's (2007) piece, *Race, Narrative Inquiry and Self study in Curriculum and Teacher Education,* he discussed his own process of self study. In this article, he shared a story about how he was mistaken for the janitor by an administrative assistant that he exchanged greetings with in the past. The experience was racialized because many of the janitors in the building wereAfrican American and he was the only Black teacher in the building. Through self study and reflecting on his own experience, Milner found that he was able to use this racialized experience to connect to students, and help them engage in topics about race and racism. It lowered their defenses and tension, in that even if they did not have the same experiences, they were able to also identify times when they felt hurt or harmed. Moreover it, "caused them to rethink what they thought they knew about race, teaching, learning, and curriculum" (p. 602). Up until having Milner as a professor, many of them were misinformed about race and did not think it was an issue any longer.

Pursuing Healing, Cultural Continuity, and Community

The combination of the two approaches, self study and autoethnography, was used so that participants would not only produce knowledge through the telling of their stories, but could understand themselves better in listening to their own truth about their experiences, and thus find healing. The healing component was critical in this research for two reasons. First, healing brought us back to the underlying intention of this research, and that, understanding the ways

that Black women have been able to attain wellness whether they stay or leave academia. Second, I recognized that as a people there is a deep desire within the Black soul for healing, or a "reconnecting with its roots, a healing that is both psychic and cultural. It seeks to reestablish a connection with the bonds of its ancestral knowledge" (Azzahir, 1999). Because Black women in higher education have been silenced and ignored, a research method that explored this unfortunate reality had to provide the greatest opportunity for Black women to work for liberation (Sullivan, Bhuyan, Senturia, Shiu-Thorton, & Ciske, 2005) which demanded that "we make a new language, that we create the oppositional discourse, the liberatory voice" (hooks, 1989, p. 29).

Additionally, I combined these two research processes, because as Dillard and Bell (2011) discussed, autoethnography can still feel insufficient to expound on the experiences of Black, African ascendent women. Instead, what is needed is:

> A kind of ethnography that truly honored the complexities of the Indigenous and the 'modern' that we'd experienced in our bodies, minds, and spirits. Something both dialogical and multiple. Both spiritual and sacred. Something both historical and cultural. Something that honored the fluidity of time and space, of the material and spiritual world. Mostly, w needed an ethnography that acknowledged both the joy and pain of location, dislocation, and the transformation of both in our stories: African women are not stories of a singular self but are stories of we, collective stories deeply embedded in African women's wisdom and Indigenous knowledges…so there can be no auto-ethnography from an endarkened feminist framework. What is needed is a different ethnography, beyond the prefix 'auto' or singular version of ethnography to gesture toward the prefix 'trans' or beyond the singular, multiple in nature (p. 344).

In terms of this particular research study, Dillard and Bell's (2011) words were particularly true for two reasons. First, these words honored the centrality of the spirit as a way of knowing that is key to the consciousness of many African ascended people (Tolliver, 2018; Azzahir, 1999; Ngara, 2007; Harris, 2018). Azzahir (1999) emphasized that spirituality is part and parcel to the African way of knowing, and is deeply intertwined with the concept of *Maat.* "Maat opens the door to a true and Divine ethical praxis. The injunction to 'speak maat; do maat' is obligatory on us as a people now, as in the past. We can only become (Khepra) the Divine people we are created to be if we follow the principle of maat" (Azzahir, 1999, p 18). Atta (2018) stated that an African-centered perspective is grounded in the understanding of a "Higher Power or Creator, the centrality of Spirit and our Spirit-ness (humans as Spiritual beings), a holistic, mind-body spirit connection, understanding that everything in the universe is interconnected" (p 229). For Harris, this spirituality includes an honoring and practicing of what could be called black witch magic. Thus, a research method that focused on the experiences of Black women had to be explicitly rooted in spiritual consciousness and sacred practice (Dillard and Bell, 2011; Dillard, 2012). This is one of the reasons that the research process was designed the way that it is, not only focused on capturing Black women PhD students' experiences in the autoethnographic process, but also giving space for us to (re)member our spiritual and cultural selves in the way that we began each of our sessions, grounded in meditation and song, in acknowledgment of the Creator.

The second reason why Dillard and Bell's (2011) words were helpful here was because of the nature of this research study itself as a collective, autoethnographic process. While as a researcher, I had my own particular experiences as a Black woman earning my PhD at the University of Minnesota (and could have easily focused the research study on those experiences

alone), I knew that my experiences also reflected those of other Black women. For this reason, I wanted this research process to bring us collectively to a space of writing and reflection, rather than having my experiences as an individual elevated above others in my community (Dillard and Bell, 2011). Speaking to the nature of the collective voice and experience in visiting Ghana and going through the slave dungeons, Dillard and Bell (2011) reflected:

> what we know is that time and place changed in that moment in the dungeons. Where our personhood stopped and our sister's personhood began became blurry, unclear to us. Where is the sound coming from? Is it my voice or my sisters' who wail and moan here? This dirge was coming from our bodies, collectively and uncontrollably, a spiritual response, a reflex of memory (p. 341).

Their experience spoke to the reason why this study is collective in nature, even as we studied the experiences of the individual. We wrote in community with one another, because we believed that through the collective, the individual appears (Dillard, 2006). In part, this is why this research study is called an autoethnographic (cultural) self study, because cultural self study, as practiced by my elders, is inherently sacred and calls on us to deepen our spiritual consciousness by being in conversation with ourselves AND because self study is not an isolated experience. Dillard and Bell (2011) also offered nkwaethnography as a pathway forward. Nkwa, as they explained it, is a Twi word from the Akan people in Ghana meaning sacred or life affirming. The framework they offered not only embraces community, but also engages the whole person in the process of research, including body, mind, and spirit. The engaging of body, mind, and spirit speaks to the intentionality behind how each session is structured within this study, making way for the spirit to show up through the sacred practices that help us remember.

As in a worship service that doesn't just get to the preaching first, this study intentionality made space for the rituals that awaken our spirit so that teachings can come through.

Speaking to nkwaethnography in practice, both McClendon & Okello (2021) and Allen-Handy have spoken to its importance as a method and philosophy. Furthering their work around Black aesthetics, McClendon & Okello (2021) stated that they use nkwaethnography to "meditate on the ethics of Black aesthetic theorizing in and beyond the classroom. Nkwaethnography offered ways of speaking to the differences of our experiences while acknowledging the commonalities that we share as Black bodyminds navigating academe with what Dillard and Bell (2011) called "sacred praxis" (p. 344)." Similarly, Allen-Handy (2022) drew on nkwaethnography because of its healing methodology, meaning that it is not just about sharing out data but healing the storyteller and community. Because nkwaethnography is perhaps the research complement to a paradigm such as Endarkened Feminist Epistemology, (re)membering is a critical component of how nkwaethnography is practiced. As a result, understanding where we have intentionally (dis)membered or have been seduced to forget is critical to our understanding of our experiences. Noting that she otherwise wrote every day, Allen-Handy described how she did not write when she was on the tenure track.

> In my self uncovering, I am wondering if subconsciously I did not want to remember this retrospectively. Perhaps, it is the hustle and bustle of everyday life as a wife, mom, daughter, sister, and academic. Perhaps it is the sheer exhaustion of publishing to not perish, teaching to transform, and serving without boundaries the university, the field, and the community. However, whatever it is, it seems as if I have tried to hide from myself and others...to keep these experiences contained only in my memory (p. 74).

In the uncovering that Allen-Handy does through her reflective process, she was able to

come back to herself and (re)member experiences of brutality within her tenure process that she perhaps would have preferred to forget including the feeling that her spirit was dying (spirit murder) as a result of "navigating the multiple marginality of academia, compounded by pressure to conform, social invisibility, isolation, exclusion from informal peer networks" (p. 76). This is healing and puts a voice to not only her experience, but the experience of other Black women like her who attempt to exist within the "dispirited space" of academia.

Concepts and Theories Used in Research

In both the surveying process, as well as in the collective autoethnographic self study, I used a combination of concepts to help me better understand Black women's experiences as PhD students including double consciousness, gendered racism, academic mammying, and spirit murder. These concepts served the basis for my inquiry because of the way that I found them to describe Black women's experiences (Essed, 1991; Hills, 2019; Love, 2019). In the inquiry process, I asked questions about how participants experienced these concepts and then used theories, including Black feminist theories, critical race theory, and Afropessimism to further contextualize and analyze what they shared with me.

Concepts used to understand Black women's experiences

Double consciousness

Double consciousness was a concept proposed by Du Bois (1903) to describe the experiences of Black people who are descendants of Africans who were enslaved. Said Du Bois,

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this

> double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (7).

Double consciousness, as Du Bois explained it, is a unique occurrence that takes place among people of African descent whose ancestors experienced the *Maafa*, a kiswahili word used to describe the destruction of enslavement. Kemetic scholars call this the *neriit*, the awful terror of enslavement. This terror is not just concentrated among Blacks in America but all Africans who have crossed the Atlantic under the duress of enslavement also share this experience including Africans in the Caribbean, Central and South America, and Europe. The Atlantic forced various and diverse cultures across primarily West Africa together and collapsed identities that were separated by country, language, and tribal affinities into ones that were based on racial oppression and superiority. Race is a socially constructed contract used to protect the institution of slavery and uphold whiteness. Mills (1997) explained:

> the general purpose of the Contract is always the differential privileging of the whites as a group with respect to the nonwhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them. All whites are beneficiaries of the Contract, though some whites are not signatories to it (p. 11).

As a result of the construction of race produced through enslavement, our sense of self has only been developed in the context of whiteness, leading to the ever measuring of one's self through the eyes of others. This is because, as Fanon (1967) stated, we have no ontology of self apart from whiteness, "For not only must the Black man to be Black, he must be Black in relation to the white man" (p. 110). The work of Azzahir (2019) further explained this reality, illustrating how the concept of the word "negro" emerged out of the abandonment of being and

negating the being of the African body in order to have the "will to power" (Azzahir, 2019, p. 38), over that body, birthed in the absence of empathy (p. 44). This process of negation or experiment of making the African oblivious of being is not over yet because whiteness can only exist in the absence of the Black body and racial capitalism can only thrive so long as the African is the Negro, 3/5ths human, are able to be conquered, subdued, and forced, not against our will because will articulates a differentiated sense of self which cannot exist for the Black (Young, 2017), the Negro because the sense of self is filtered through the veil. We are unable to think on our own without the veil because "on our own" is anathema to the experiment of making the African oblivious to their being.

Because double consciousness is such a foundational concept in relation to racism, I draw on it in my research as a starting place from which to explain Black women's experiences in higher education.

Gendered racism

Gendered racism, the second concept that this study explored, addresses the specific ways that Black women experience marginalization. Stemming from Essed's (1991) work, gendered racism explains the way that racism and sexism intersect in compounding ways. Essed stated that the image of Black women in the United States specifically is "rooted in the exploitation of Blacks as slaves, workers, and with respect to Black women, in particular as domestic workers. Racially specific gender ideologies rationalized the suitability of Black women for jobs in the lowest stratum of the labor market already segmented along racial lines" (p. 32).[8] At the same

[8] Essed also explained the ways that gendered racism applies to Black men who have had to endure racist constructions of the gender, most notably in stereotypes such as the absent Black father (a narrative that the Moynihan report exploits in order to further demonize Black women) or the myth of the Black rapist. Going further here, the work of Spillers (1987) and Ferguson (2004), additionally shed light on the ways that under enslavement, both Black men and women have been sexualized as female, with both Black men and Black women being sexually exploited for the purposes of reproduction (Wilderson, 2019; Kaplan, 2019) and pleasure (Hartman, 1997). Although my research shed light on the distinguishing factors of gendered racism on Black women, I also acknowledge that because of slavery and the construction of gender under this institution, that I hold these distinctions lightly,

time, they were sexually exploited, and forced to engage in the same arduous work as Black men.

Essed's work has to be taken in concert with the work of other scholars who describe the construction of gender as a product of forced reproductivity and forced labor (Spillers, 1987; Kaplan, 2021; Haley, 2016) under the constant threat and reality of brutal violence (Hartman, 1997). In this societal construction of gender, Black women have not been regarded as women in the same way that white women have been, and unable to take up the notion of the cult of true womanhood, a space only reserved for white women. Brittany Cooper, in her text "*Beyond respectability: The intellectual thought of race women"* (2017) explained "the ideology of true womanhood undergirded the racial nationalism at the heart of the white gender role ideology, which demanded that white women reproduce white citizens fit to propagate ideologies of white dominance in service of leading the nation" (p. 13). Instead of true womanhood, Black women were historically perceived as ugly, deranged, imbecilic, and even monstrous, characteristics that "defined black women's deviance from the category 'woman' and justified their imprisonment and assault during the nadir of American race relations" (Haley, 2016, p. 20). With this it is also important to recognize that for many scholars, slavery was an experience that collapsed the lines between Black men and women. At least for Spillers (1987), under slavery "one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into 'account' as quantities" (p. 72). Snorton (2017) also identities the fungibility of gender for Black people, and how "ungendered blackness provided the grounds for (trans) performances for freedom…the inhabitation of the un-gender-specific and fungible also mapped the affective grounds for imagining other qualities of life and being for those marked by and for captivity" (p. 59).

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meaning I recognize the fluidity in our experiences as Black women even as I identify and name common themes that I see emerging.

These distinctions are important to recognize in this research because I want to make clear that the understanding of gendered racism as it is applied in speaking of Black women's experiences as PhD students is entirely fraught with complications that are not easily solvable. As such, I used the term Black woman to construct a political and sociological category of sorts in which to articulate a standpoint epistemology[9] from which to tell about our experiences in higher education, experiences that lead to negative mental and physical health outcomes. These include depressive symptoms and negative affect, according to Moody and Lewis (2019). This research then, while being informed by Essed's framework, along with Moody and Lewis to address the intersection of race and gender for Black women in higher education, centers the ways that Spillers (1987), Hartman (1996), Haley (2016), and Snorton (2017) understand the construction of gender in ways that can help us understand that gendered racism is not just gender plus racism, but that gender is a historically loaded and complex socially constructed category that is always racialized.

Academic mammying

This study also employed the concept of academic mammying to describe what is happening to Black women that is specific to academia. This is the third concept that this research explored. According to Hills (2019), academic mammying is a feature of gendered racism that speaks to the ways that Black women bear a disproportionate, oppressive reality in higher education. Says Hills (2019),

> Academic mammying is an imposition upon black womanhood—a forced managing of black women's identity grounded in racist and sexist perceptions of black womanhood. I define it as a mechanism of mistreatment prompted by the burdensome

[9] I used standpoint epistemology even as I understand that Moten (2013) argued against, if not outright refused it, stating that an existence without standpoint would be what it means to "remain in the hold of the ship…what would it be, deeper still, what is it, to think from no standpoint; to think outside the desire for a standpoint" (p. 738).

> levying of undue expectation (or under-expectation) on black women scholars' performance, embodiment, and competence (p. 9).

The research used Hills' concept of academic mammying to draw connections between the ways that Black women were treated historically under enslavement and how they are treated in higher education. Starting with the historical, it is understood that the archetype of the mammy was the embodiment of reproductive labor. The mammy was forced to reproduce through her loins children that would keep the institution of slavery intact, while at the same time often being refused the opportunity to care for those children in order to care for others. And she was, according to the archetype, carefree, unencumbered, and delighted to show up in the world in this manner. Said Sharpe (2009) in her description of who and what the mammy was:

> a sexual and racial symbol that was used by men and women, North and South, white and Black, to explain proper gender relationships, justify or condemn racial oppression, and establish class identities…to all who have fed on the often sour breast of the wander Mammy-as-History it comes as no surprise that history has been declared dead…Mammies in popular consciousness cease to exist, She has no place…the big black mammy is the object of Oedipal longing within the plantation family romance…sucked and fucked she is the ultimate 'earth-mother' wholly submissive yet defiant…she is pairs in opposition she is incomplete and unknown and inconsistent and repressed (p. 161).

The description that Sharpe made between the mammy's breast and the mother's breast, illustrated that the two are not the same. This gave space for the mammy to take care of white children and still be denied of her own children because she was denied rights to femininity and motherhood under slavery, which carries forward until this day. Said Sharpe (2009), "In calling

the breast of the enslaved woman a maternal breast, we must remember that she is denied the rights and privileges of both womanhood and motherhood. Such naming would grant her a legal status as well as "a 'feminization' that enslavement kept at bay (p. 163)."

Hills' concept, which builds off of this historical conception as well as the strong black women schema (Overstreet, 2019), helps to understand that historical plantation realities are still prevalent in higher education which must be examined and dismantled in order for Black women to be well. In fact, academic mammying helps us understand that the way that we as Black women are forced to show up - with our labor exploited and undercompensated - reinforces white supremacy and protects the interests of whiteness including white students, faculty, and administration. Black women who resist complying to this arrangement face significant push back and stress. A 2005 article written by Carol Henderson affirmed this. Called *When and Where I Enter: Black Women in the Academy*, Henderson spoke to the ways that Black female faculty received unsatisfactory evaluations from students who feel uncatered to or un-mammied. She shared that in many ways, the presence of Black female faculty existed to clean up institutions that were marred by white supremacist heteropatriachal policies and decision making, and when Black female faculty did not cater to students, they inevitably leaved institutions exposed and thus, as both Henderson and Hills showed us, have face punishment for doing so.

Spirit murder

As a result of these phenomena - double consciousness, gendered racism, and academic mammying, our spirits - as Black women - are murdered (Aya, 2022; Love, 2019; Young & Hines, 2018). This was the fourth and final concept that this study examined. Love (2019) stated spirit murder is something that literally kills one's spirit. Young & Hines (2018) defined this fact:

> we contend that black women faculty at predominantly white institutions (PWI), or what Durant (1999) refers to as a slave plantation, are more at-risk of experiencing racism and racialized criminalization…we use the slave plantation as a metaphor to describe how black women professors who are instructing courses in cultural diversity experience spirit-murdering, or how "racism is considered a crime" (Williams 1987, 129) that is predicated against the black female body. We focus on the ways that white students and white faculty attempt to spirit-murder black female professors as an analogy to the killings of black women by police (p. 19).

Spirit murder is a powerful term to describe the impacts of racism and sexism on Black women's physiology in academia. It puts a name to our experience of stress and internalized hatred and shame, forcing those in power in academia as well as ourselves to contend with the violence that happens to Black women PhD students instead of ignoring them because we are not laboring on physical plantations, as our ancestors did, or being shot or killed in the streets, as many in our communities have and continue to experience (RIP Trayvon Martin, Rekia Boyd, Sandra Bland, Jamar Clark, Philando Castille, George Floyd, Ma'Khia Bryant and so many others). Understanding our experience forces those in power to stop reducing violence to a physical act, and instead contend with the abusive nature of many policies and practices, protected by gatekeepers that hide behind bureaucracy at the expense of students. Because of spirit murder's ability to name what is happening to us at a physiological level, I prefer using this term to microaggressions.

As a result of these challenges that Black women experience in higher education, we face significant and disproportionate health outcomes (Moody & Lewis, 2019; Carroll, 2015), which includes physical and mental health challenges. Additionally, many Black women PhD students

deal with an overwhelming amount of stress as a result of being forced into, and sometimes voluntarily taking on, stereotypes that we have used to survive including the StrongBlackWoman trope. Says Walker-Barnes (2017) of this particular reality: “many StrongBlackWomen find themselves caught in a cycle of socialization, stress, and distress in which their adherence to the archetype results in poor mental and physical health outcomes, decreased use of health-promoting behaviors, and increased risk of early termination from treatment (p. 46).”

Theories used to analyze Black women’s experiences

There were several theories that I also brought together to sort through and make sense of Black women PhD students experiences, and further contextualize the concepts that I worked with in the research. These included critical Black feminist frameworks like Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990) and endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2006 and 2022); critical race theory (Milner, 2007; Milner, 2013; Milner & Howard, 2013; Yosso, 2005), and Afropessimism (Wilderson, 2019; Hartman, 1997; Spillers, 1987).

Black feminist thought and endarkened feminist epistemology played the most prominent role in this research as they explicated Black women’s unique realities by building off of the literature and scholarship of Black women over the centuries. In addition, Dillard’s concept of endarkened feminist epistemology centered spiritual consciousness and sacred practice in the practice of (re)membering. Dillard (2021) explained “(re)membering is a central part of the spirit of Black women who teach” (p. 4).

I also used critical race theory in this paper, though most centrally in Milner and Howard’s (2013) discussion of counternarratives as a means to push back against racism. I also prominently featured and drew from Yosso’s (2005) concept of community cultural wealth, to make sense of the resources that Black women pull from in order to be well in academia. It is

from the basis of her work, and the research, that I begin to reimagine and redefine what it means for Black women to be well in higher education in what is called the *Integrated Ecosystem of Support,* a model that I introduce in the last and final chapter of this text.

In this research, I also explored the theory, or philosophy of Afropessimism as described by Wilderson (2019), Hartman (1997), Sharpe (2016) and Moten (2013).[10] Afropessimism, more than critical race theory, describes not just the permanence of racism but describes the very nature of anti-Blackness and the reality of Black people, of being in perpetual hold of the slave ship, with the belly of the ship as the birthplace of blackness and nonbeing (Sharpe, 2016). The point that these authors make is that emancipation, civil rights, and other legislation, does not somehow change the essence of what it means to be Black. It is more than just racism, to the extent that other people of color also contend with and experience racism and white supremacy (Smith, 2013). But it is suffering, born and maintained by our continuous proximity to the slave ship, a suffering that is not analogous to any other race or people (Wilderson, 2019). It is suffering that has no solution, even as the dreams of fugitivity (Hartman, 2007) loom near. I take up this philosophy in analyzing the experiences of participants, because I am clear that even as there are things that we can do to mitigate the suffering, that we are still bound and defined by

[10] Even as I use Afropessimism as a theory in my research here, I recognize the words of Wilderson (2019) who claimed that Afropessimism is "more of a metatheory: a critical project that, by deploying Blackness as a lens of interpretation, interrogates the unspoken, assumptive logic of Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and feminism through rigorous theoretical consideration of their properties and assumptive logic…it is pessimistic about the claims theories of liberation make when these theories try to explain Black suffering or when they analogize Black suffering with the suffering of other oppressed beings" (p. 14). I used this metatheory, realizing that I do so imperfectly, understanding that the other theories that I took up in this research, are the exact theories that Wilderson might critique for their tendency to humanize subjects (Blacks) who are not subjects but "instead structurally inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures" (p. 15). Additionally, I acknowledge that drawing on Afropessimism as a means to analyze or contextualize Black women's experiences with double consciousness, gendered racism, academic mammying, and spirit murder in academia (let alone society at large) can bring about tension in environments where it feels like the metatheory does not leave room for right praxis including political struggle born in the space of hope that things can change. My naming of Afropessimism is an acknowledgment that hope has its limits when it is not grounded in an accurate assessment of the barriers we are up against as Black people, while I likewise believe that nihilism produces apathy, inaction, and can lead to a type of despair that is destructive. I contend that while Afropessism is a metatheory created among Black intellectuals, that it is borne out through practices of violence that we leash upon ourselves and those closest to us.

our relation to the ship. I am careful here to not give myself to nihilism, or unbelief, as some Afropessimists might be inclined to go. Faith and hope, for me, are central spiritual practices that wake me up in the morning and help me not to be overcome by despair, or weeping as Fanon (1967) described.[11] Instead, this theory is a reality check that allows me to be motivated by faith and hope in something better for Black women, even if that means the end of the world[12] as I understand the gravity of what we are up against.

Research Implementation

Sampling

In this research process, I used a typical purposeful sampling strategy in order to "discover, understand, and gain insight" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96) on what was typical, or commonplace, regarding Black women's experiences in higher education. I did this by sending out a survey to as many Black women PhD students at the University of Minnesota who I was either connected to or who I knew might be connected to other Black women who would be eligible for this study. My criteria for eligibility was three fold:

- Participants had to be a Black/ African identified woman. Since this is the population that I wanted to focus on, I only wanted participants who identified themselves as a Black/ African woman. I also wanted to be laser focused in my research; not discounting the experiences of Black men or other marginalized identities in higher education, but to

[11] I say this even as I reflect on our state as Black people, and Black women specifically, brings me to the edge of weeping. I fight to not give myself to false optimism, and to simultaneously not be overcome by the sadness of it all. Spirituality for me, then, is not about escapism or some ideal afterlife where we do not experience this suffering, but a groundedness in knowing that there is a Divine creator who can help me move through the suffering without being overcome by it.

[12] The concept of the end of the world is taken up by Afropessimists to think about the acts that "through a Molotov cocktail - literally or figuratively - into a society in such a way that disrupts, even for a moment, this world which bars Black access to humanity. Where the goal is the end of the world, any action that disrupts state-sanctioned anti-Black terror serves as a destruction teaser" (ross, 2021, p. 8).

demonstrate the way that a particular set of circumstances was occurring when it came to Black/ African identified women.

- In addition, potential participants must have either finished their PhD program, still be attending their program, or dropped out of their program, as these are the two groups of people whose experiences are being compared in this research study. I could have easily examined the realities of all Black women who have come through the University's doors, and perhaps could do so in another study. But by focusing on Black women in their PhD programs specifically, I wanted to illustrate the barriers to pursuing and finishing an advanced degree.
- Participants must have attended the University of Minnesota, a predominately white institution. Though the experiences of Black women in higher education are similar across institutions, there are enough differences between institutions (private, small liberal arts, PWIs, HCBUs), that it makes sense to have an element of control in this study and not introduce too many variables. I also wanted to focus on just one university, rather than multiple, in order to be able to understand how these things show up in one institution. Future research will build on this and draw connections between multiple institutions.

The First Stage of Research (Pre-study): Surveying

This research study focused on the experiences of Black women who completed their PhD programs at the University of Minnesota and those who did not. In order to understand their experiences, there were two stages of this study. The first stage focused on capturing data from the largest set of participants possible through a survey. In this survey, potential participants were asked a series of questions regarding their experiences at the University of Minnesota, whether

or not they completed their programs, and what wellness looked like for them in the context of either completing their programs or in the context of leaving their programs. I secured these participants by researching records at the University of Minnesota's Black Alumni Association, seeking out the different colleges within the University, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn posts, and by use of social networks as well.

I started the research process sending out a survey to the people in my network, using social media and email to recruit Black women PhD students at the University of Minnesota for my study. In the survey, I hoped to recruit 50 - 75 participants, and believed that this number of participants would provide significant insight into the experiences of Black women at the University of Minnesota, whether they decided to complete their programs, leave their programs, or were still in their programs.

Of the survey respondents, 7 Black women indicated that they had completed their PhD program, 2 indicated that they had left their PhD program, and 34 were still pursuing their PhD program for a total of 43 survey respondents. Overwhelmingly, the population that filled out the survey were Black women who were still in their PhD programs. In part, this can be attributed to the fact that this was the group of women who were still connected to the various campus listservs, as well as the group of Black women PhD students who I had the greatest level of access to. On another level, however, the reality is that the University of Minnesota does not keep records of the Black women PhD students who have come through their doors because of legal policies such as FERFA that prohibit the ability to name and identify people by race within the academic institution. While the policy may appear to be race neutral, or stating that its aim is to prevent discrimination because of race, the implementation and observation of the policies has impacts that are inherently discriminatory because we do not otherwise live in a race neutral

society. Thus, race-neutral policies overlook the reality of Black people as a whole, and Black women specifically, as well as other racially marginalized identities, in its attempt to take a colorblind approach to justice (Milner & Laughter, 2015; Bedford & Shaffer, 2023). A paper written by Adewale Maye (2022) from the Economic Policy Institute further explained the matter,

> The premise that civil rights laws can eradicate racism within institutions founded on the doctrine of racism is not only a common fallacy, but harmful in achieving true racial equity and justice. It leads to the myth of race-neutral policy—the notion that if all groups are seen as equal under the law all will share equitably in social and economic benefits. This notion dismisses centuries of racist policies that have created and reinforced structural barriers to prosperity, safety, and equity for these groups (p. 2).

Additionally, race neutral policies undermine important policies, such as affirmative action, that actually do help to reduce disparities. Speaking to this reality, the Scholars Strategy Network identified eight states that as of 2019 had abolished affirmative action in decision making related to higher education. They stated that:

> since 2005 one of the hallmarks of the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Roberts has been a redefining of the scope of governmental powers. In this redefinition, the Court ignores structural inequality and instead focuses on the supposedly neutral results of processes that, in fact, may reinforce inequalities. The Court gives citizens the power to prohibit their state government from explicitly discussing and addressing racial inequalities in public policymaking. This is problematic because race must be considered and discussed at least, as one factor among many in order for governments at all levels to

> be able address the history and persistence of racial discrimination in many spheres of American life (SSN, 2019, paragraph 6)

The recent Supreme Court overturning of affirmative action in college admissions adds further complexity to what has already been a challenging situation to navigate in higher education. Legitimate fear of reprisal by the legal system thus shapes what we are ultimately able to know, and limits our ability to apply specific solutions to long standing barriers to access. Additionally, not being able to name and identify Black women in the University is a practice that closely resembles slavery where Black people were counted in terms of legislation and taxation (National Museum of African American History and Culture) but largely unidentified otherwise. Similarly, Black women are counted in terms of diversity numbers but our names are not legible within the University, which makes it easier for institutions to go on ignoring and failing to support our needs.

Though this project's initial aim was to understand the experiences of Black women in the University, in many ways it is also an archival project, working to put names to the ghosts of Black women PhD students that have darkened the halls of the University of Minnesota in the same way that archivists have worked to identify the names of Black people who were formerly enslaved. While the original focus of the project remained the same, the archival process couldn't be ignored and had to be a result that came out of this undertaking as a method of resistance as well as (re)membering. As Hartman (2007) in *Lose Your Mother* sought out to trace the slave routes in Ghana to truly understand what happened, this project served to trace the routes within the University, to understand then not only what Black women have experienced but also claim our existence. Reflecting on this, I wrote in December 2022:

> Tell me where the bodies are buried

Lead me down the path where I can trace their steps

Understand what led them here

So I can begin to identify them

Name them

Match the ghosts that haunt these halls with their face

Tell me where the bodies are buried

And the stories that lay beneath the pavement

The secrets that are etched within the walls that only the dead can hear

So I can learn from them

Learn why it hurts so much

And why we keep finding ourselves on this same path of pain and turmoil

The cycles we commit ourselves to breaking

Only to end up on the damned wheel again and again

Generation after generation

Tell me where the bodies are buried

Tell me about their lives

Who they were, who were their people, where did they come from

And just maybe I might find myself in the midst of the searching

In the midst of trying to understand these ghosts that have been left behind

The nameless, the faceless ones that have been obliterated from history

Who are supposedly only figments of my imagination

But I feel their breath and hear their words

I'm not delusional or misinformed

I must keep going

Tell me where the bodies are buried

So that at last, they can be excavated

Given a proper ceremony of last rites and headstones of their own making

And just maybe they might be able to finally rest

And we can finally move forward

Knowing where the land mines are

So we never go that way again

The Second Stage of Research

Taking stock of the population of Black women who did complete this survey - overwhelmingly Black women who were still enrolled and attending the University of Minnesota and a few who had completed their programs - future research studies will have to take a further look at the Black women who have been pushed out. Thus, I amended the second stage of my research study from the original intent of focusing on two separate groups (those who have completed/still attending and those who left) for the purpose of comparison, to one group and simply captured what the experiences had been without comparison.

In the second stage, survey respondents were asked to participate in a group process to write their stories about their experience at the University of Minnesota.[13] Respondents were asked to write on the following prompt in the first session:

[13] A visual capturing this process of collective autoethnographic self study can be found in appendix B of this paper.

What was your experience like as a PhD student at the University of Minnesota? To what extent did you feel belonging and connectivity as a student? To what extent did you experience spirit murder as a result of being a Black student, or gendered racism as a result of being a Black identified woman in the classroom? What tools and resources (cultural, spiritual, community, familial, material, etc) did you use to navigate the institution? How would you define your relation to wellness in the program?

In the second session, participants were asked to finish their writing on the first prompt, and then asked to write on the following prompt: *What tools and resources (cultural, spiritual, community, familial, material, etc) did you use to navigate the institution? How would you define your relation to wellness in the program?*

I initially aimed to get 4 - 8 participants and divide them between two groups depending on their relationship to their PhD program. Again, I switched this and kept all participants together because we did not have any participants who had left their programs complete this phase of the study. We met over a period of three sessions for 90 minutes each, where we wrote in community with each other and then analyzed our stories. Participants were selected through the surveying process, where a question about interest and availability in participating in the study was included on the survey. All survey respondents who indicated interest and were available to meet at the identified time (Monday evenings from 6 - 8 pm) were invited to participate. Ultimately 9 people participated, including myself.

Prior to the start of the first session, participants were invited to a google drive that contained the research questions we wrote around, summaries of what autoethnography and self study were, and a document where they could write their stories. The three 90 minute sessions for each group of participants looked as follows:

- First session:
    - Introduction and welcome (5 mins)
    - Cultural grounding and opening including song and reflection (15 mins)
    - Introduction into autoethnography and self study and the process (15 mins)
    - Introduction of the question we will write around (5 mins)
        - *What was your experience like as a PhD student at the University of Minnesota? To what extent did you feel belonging and connectivity as a student? To what extent did you experience spirit murder as a result of being a Black student, or gendered racism as a result of being a Black identified woman in the classroom? What tools and resources (cultural, spiritual, community, familial, material, etc) did you use to navigate the institution? How would you define your relation to wellness in the program?*
    - Writing (30 mins)
    - Debriefing (15 mins)
    - Close (5 mins)
- 2nd Session:
    - Introduction and welcome (5 mins)
    - Cultural grounding and opening including song and reflection (15 mins)
    - Overview of last session and where we are (5 mins)
    - Writing on research prompt and question (50 mins):

        - *What tools and resources (cultural, spiritual, community, familial, material, etc) did you use to navigate the institution? How would you define your relation to wellness in the program?*
    - Debrief (15 mins)
    - Close (5 mins)
        - In preparation for the next and final session, participants will be asked to turn in their writings, so that they can be analyzed and sorted out by themes prior to the final meeting
- 3rd and final session:
    - Introduction and welcome (5 mins)
    - Cultural grounding and opening including libations, prayer and song (15 mins)
    - Reflections and analysis on what they wrote over the last two session (35) mins)
    - Discussion (30 mins)
    - Close (5 mins)

Prior to the start of each session, participants were asked to engage in a cultural grounding of music and reflection, in order to create a sense of sacred space to hold the writing. The honoring of the sacred in our practice of writing, and throughout our work, was an important part of this work for me because of my history of church going, and the belief that creating a certain atmosphere creates space for the Divine to show up and come through the writing process. It also felt reflective of Dillard's work with the process of (re)membering through *nwkaethnography,* as well as the Cultural Wellness Center's process of cultural self study. Both

nwkaethnography and self study rely on and center the presencing[14] of the Divine in who we are being and becoming as African people, which again underscored why it was so important that we created the space through rituals and ceremonies for the Divine to show up.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this research was to understand the experiences of Black women PhD students and how we attain wellness, whether we ultimately decide to stay or leave academia. The heart of this research focused on our stories and self reflection, which is why autoethnographic self study was the method for capturing data. Reflecting on this, I wanted to be sure that as I analyzed the stories of participants, as well as my own, that I did so in a way that did not make our experiences an abstraction of the realities of Black women. This would be a departure from the intent of this study. Here I drew inspiration from Ellis & Bochner (2006) and their work on autoethnography where they distinguish it from other forms of research:

> We think of ethnography as a journey; they think of it as a destination. They want to master, explain, grasp. Those may be interesting word games, but we don't think they're necessarily important. Caring and empathizing is for us what abstracting and controlling is for them. As you just said, we want to dwell in the flux of lived experience; they want to appropriate lived experience for the purpose of abstracting something they call knowledge or theory (p. 431).

I used their words, then, as a guide as I thought through the analytic process and what it looked like for this research. Instead of solely being interested in theory, I was also interested in moving research on Black and African descended women "away from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer and toward the embrace of intimate involvement, engagement, and

[14] As a result of continued cultural self study with the Cultural Wellness Center, I use the word *presencing* here as a verb rather than presence as a noun. Using the word as a verb instead shows the active nature of the Divine unfolding in our lives, that we simultaneously play a role in.

embodied participation" (p. 434). Here I was looking for the story and themes related to how Black women live and make decisions about things that affect our lives, rather than an abstract claim of truth based on analysis. This is essential in analysis because of how important storytelling is to Black people, "it is vital to our very existence" (Toliver, 2022, p. xv).

As I moved through the analysis process, I felt the need to shift the way that I initially conceptualized analyzing these stories. Initially, I felt compelled to leave stories whole as they were written, and inspired by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Emerson, Fretz & Shaw (2011), had a set of questions that I wanted to walk participants through. After collecting the data, I took what was given to me by participants across all three of the sessions to analyze the body of literature before me. As I did, I began to augment my initial plan for analysis to (1) better accommodate my growing understanding of cultural self study, (2) reduce redundancies and (3) allow the conceptualand theoretical frameworks that I had already committed to work with to come through. This necessitated moving away from analyzing the stories from a narrative perspective as I initially conceptualized to center my own knowing as a researcher.

Accommodate my growing understanding of cultural self study

When I went into this study, I believe that I conflated autoethnography with cultural self study a bit too much. While there are definitely similarities, one of the distinguishing elements about cultural self study is allowing the participant, or the one doing the study, to be present with themselves and create sense making from their own self study. In my initial plans, I did not make space for such an encounter to happen as I was the sole person responsible for the analysis. But at the end of the second session, I realized that this was what needed to happen for this to be more reflective of a cultural self study process.

Also keeping with cultural self study, I realized that I needed to have an elder present to at least witness the unfolding process. Throughout the duration of the research and study, I received eldering and mentorship that I found valuable to the way that I engaged academia. The more I sat with people's stories, I understood that I needed to bring an elder in to not only hear from the participants, but to help make sense of the experiences that were being shared.

For me, this all necessitated centering the knowing of the participants not just in the form of storyteller, but in the form of analysis or knowledge producer. I began to understand that as lead researcher, for lack of a better word, that I had to give space for the knowing of other Black women PhD students to come through not just in the storytelling, or cultural self study, but in the analysis. With this, I began to see clear values of participatory research emerge (Akom, 2011; Houh & Kalsem, 2015; Collins, 2019). I also began to understand what my true role in this research process was and that I had a responsibility to bring together the disparate pieces of analysis to create this larger story that could be used to articulate the experiences of Black women. I began to see myself not only as a lead researcher, but a curator of a collection of valuable artifacts, which in this case were the stories of participants.

Reduce redundancies, Protect the identity of participants

In my original plan for analysis, I wanted to keep the stories as they were being written by participants whole in order to preserve as much as possible the integrity of what they were telling me. But as I got into the data that was given to me, I realized that I had to prioritize two other objectives: reducing redundancies and protecting the identities of researchers. With reducing redundancies, I wanted to ensure that I was not being unnecessarily repetitive in sharing themes across the stories. I began to understand the value in choosing fewer themes to create a framework that could be instructive about Black women PhD student's experiences, rather than

reporting on every trend that I saw. I initially felt obligated to report on everything but began to see that reporting everything would not allow the most important and salient themes from the research to shine. This led me to backing away from my initial plan and to go with a theme approach, without losing the integrity of the story, understanding that each theme speaks to the larger story being told about Black women's experiences.

With protecting the identity of participants, I realized that if I kept the story whole that there would be less anonymity between the stories. Even as I used pseudonyms to shield people's identities and by and large did not indicate which programs or departments that they studied in, I came to see that I needed to build in more measures to ensure that participant experiences were not trackable. For me, this took the form of allowing myself to use themes to organize thoughts on paper, even as the researcher, I still held the whole story to inform the way that I interpreted emerging trends.

Recentering EFE in my analysis

I wanted to ensure that endarkened feminist epistemology (EFE) had a central space in the way that I was looking at the research. For me, EFE was the pathway that I took to bring spirituality and wellness into my work within academia, in ways that I was unable to center womanist theology or other faith based frameworks. EFE was also flexible and broad in its reach that it has been able to hold me as the researcher in the midst of my shifting faith and theological commitments, with its emphasis on community, culture, and (re)membering. I wanted to ensure that the framework it espoused, including the concept that in the context of community the individual appears (Dillard, 2006), found its way in my research in intentional ways.

In keeping with EFE and cultural self study, I brought the analysis back to a wider group of Black women PhD students to discuss our overall process and ask them whether the analysis

felt true to their experience. I asked them the following questions about the research that was unfolding in this fourth and final session:

- *How does the data reflected resonate with your experiences of Black women in higher education?*
- *What comes up in your body as you (re)member the experiences reflected in the data?*
- *What narratives are missing from the data?*
- *What cultural and/or spiritual practices can be taken up to help us metabolize negative experiences in higher education and move towards wellness?*[15]

As I went through the research and participants engaged with the analysis of the data, a community elder from the Cultural Wellness Center engaged in a process of weighing of the words where they began to scribe and provide artistic detail to the conversation. The purpose of this community elder engaging in this way was to add even more meaning to our discussion, what was really being said and what was being left unsaid, and to also be a witness to the truth of our experiences as they unfolded. I used this last step in the analysis process as a means to engage a wider set of participants from the study and to bring survey participants and autoethnograpic collective self study participants together. Again, this ensured that it was not just me as the researcher extracted as an individual above community, but that community members are involved in the process of knowledge generation.

[15] These were not original questions that I originally proposed in the research. But after moving through the first three sessions with participants, felt that bringing them back in a last session to ask these questions would strengthen the research. To do this, in July 2023, I submitted an update to my original IRB application.

Chapter 4: Mapping the Steps of the Autoethnographic Self Study Process

I initially launched this research study through a survey in September 2022, sending an email out to my connections and networks at the University of Minnesota who I knew were either Black women or connected to Black women PhD students. I hoped to hear from 50 - 75 Black women PhD students - who were either still in their PhD programs, had graduated, or who had decided to leave. After leaving the survey open through the first week of January, I ultimately heard from 43 Black women students, the majority of whom were still in their PhD programs.

In the survey, I asked mostly qualitative questions to get a better understanding of Black women PhD students experiences. These questions were designed to help establish a baseline of data about the Black women PhD student experience, before going further in depth on these experiences in the second stage of my study. These questions included: (1) What were Black women PhD students' experiences with the University of Minnesota (2) What was Black women PhD students' relation to the conceptual framework - double consciousness, gendered racism, academic mammying, and spirit murder (3) Why Black women decide to stay in their programs (4) and how could the institution have better supported Black women PhD students.

The first question that I asked participants was how they would describe their experience at the University of Minnesota on a scale of 1 - 5, with 1 being very poor and 5 being very excellent. Of the 43 participants who completed the survey, 2 participants stated that their experience was really poor, 3 were poor, 13 were somewhat ok, 18 were good, and 7 were very good. Of the 5 participants who stated that their experience was either very poor or poor, 2 decided to ultimately leave the program. One of the respondents who left noted that their mental

health was one of the reasons that they ultimately decided to leave, and that the institution "could have made less excuses about its blatant anti-black practices (e.g., promote black scholars and provide a pathway to serve the black community)." Similarly, the other respondent who left stated that they were not the only Black woman PhD student to leave a program due to the lack of cultural competence. Other than these reflections, neither respondent went into detail about why they decided to leave. I reached out to one of the respondents to see if I could glean more information about her experience, and to even inquire if they would be willing to participate in the autoethnographic self study portion of this research study, and was not able to get in touch with them after three attempts.

Of the questions, I focused mainly on the ways that the 43 participants interacted with the conceptual framework. Responses varied in regards to experiences with double consciousness, gendered racism, academic mammying and spirit murder. These ranged from being unaware of one's racialized experiences to identifying with the concepts that were articulated in the questions. Among those who identified with the concepts, participants noted feelings of isolation and that being among the only Black women in their program deepened those feelings. Participants also noted that they did not want to be perceived as angry for expressing what they felt.

> There is a constant pressure to perform and be perfect that is not realistic. It almost feel like for Black women we must hold it together because we do not represent ourselves, but every other Black person. People lean in hard to the Black exceptionalism trope which is isolating and not sustainable. Rather than feeling like you can reach out when you are struggling, it feels like you have to keep up the trope or you are just an imposter.

With experiences like these, one has to wonder about the factors that cause Black women to stay in their programs and what are the factors that ultimately cause some to leave. While I initially set out to understand the dynamic between those who stay and those who leave, I was only able to hear from two respondents who decided to leave. One said that "the program and professors did not provide a safe space for me to feel comfortable to not go above and beyond due to my race…both white women and men did not support learning, especially during George Floyd's murder."

Respondents who decided to stay in their programs shared that they stayed in the program because they did receive support of some kind, either from advisors, professors, peers, or other resources both inside and outside of the University. Additionally, some participants stayed in the program because they saw value in the program itself and what it offered, feeling like they were being offered quality experiences that gave them opportunities to "publish, present research, teach, build strong relationships."

For some, however, the reality that they had already invested so much time and energy in the program was a factor that kept them in it. The old refrain sung by elders within our families and communities, "come too far to give up now" rung characteristic of the sentiment of many participants who felt that "come hell or high water" they would endure through to completion. Several named specifically the sunken cost fallacy of not wanting to have what they had invested already in the program counted as a waste, or amount to nothing. Finishing was and is a source of pride for so many that they did not just want to quit. But our desire to finish should not be mistaken as an acquiesce to or acceptance of the mistreatment that we have experienced as PhD students. Instead, it should be interpreted as an ability to endure against all odds in situations and

systems that are not designed for us, that vehemently hate us, that consider our presence and existence a liability to the function of white supremacy.

After administering the survey and going through participant responses, I implemented the collective autoethnographic process which consisted of 9 women, including myself, writing about our experience as Black women PhD students. This process consisted of three 90 minute sessions spanning two months where we came together on Monday evenings to write, and every participant was given a summary of survey responses prior to our first meeting. Each session opened up with a song, prayer, or meditation, and a check in before moving to the writing process, where participants were given a series of questions to reflect on in the course of 30 - 50 minutes, depending on the session. In the first two sessions, participants wrote from the basis of their own thinking and experience based on the questions that were before them. In the final session, participants were given the opportunity to respond to their initial writing, identifying key themes. I then spent several months analyzing data from these sessions before bringing both survey respondents and participants back together for a final 120 minute session so that they could have an opportunity to reflect on the themes that came up from my analysis.

In working with the data and reflecting on the process as lead researcher, I began to see three clear layers of analysis come through. The first layer centered the responses from participants to their reflections captured during the collective autoethnographic self study sessions. In this layer, I went through their responses and saw key themes emerge that shed light on what they experienced as PhD students. The unfolding of this first layer is detailed in the first part of this section. I call this out as a separate and distinct layer to leave room for what participants said about themselves to be centered first in my analysis.

The second layer of analysis consisted of me as the lead researcher going through the stories to (1) consider the conceptual framework that had been proposed including double consciousness, gendered racism, academic mammying, and spirit murder (2) utilize a framework that centered Black women's agency and voice in storytelling which included truth-telling, empathy, and self-care, and (3) speak about the ways that examples of endarkened feminist epistemology, both as descriptive of Black women's experiences and prescribers of solutions emerge. It is in looking at participants' responses against these three aspects, along with theoretical frameworks, that I named key themes that were indicative of participant experiences. The unfolding of this second layer is detailed in the next section.

The third layer of analysis consisted of me bringing together participants' responses to reflect on the analysis derived from the first two layers. The purpose of this layer was to further refine the stories that were being told about Black women PhD students' experiences and to ensure that participants had a key role in shaping what that narrative is. Additionally, this layer included feedback from an elder who was present at this session, who in line with cultural self study, provided a weighing of the words to help us better understand the weight of what was being said. The unfolding of this third layer is detailed in the last part of this section.

As the lead researcher and curator of this analysis, I also began to see the layers of analysis as enactments, or as stages in a play or performance that were deeply connected. Each section, or piece, built upon the one that has come before it. Though similar, in particular the first enactment and the last enactment, they are also distinct from each other. For example, the first enactment reflected what participants said about their writing and study before I as a researcher started to analyze and interpret their words. Since cultural self study is about the self, I wanted these participants to have the opportunity to interact with themselves in context first. The third

enactment differed from this for two reasons. First, in it I brought together participants' analysis of their experience from the first enactment and my analysis of their experience from the second enactment. Additionally, I considered the perspectives of survey respondents who were not able to participate in the collective autoethnographic self study for one reason or another. Each enactment is discreet and adds a unique layer of depth on the experiences of Black women in higher education, particularly at the University of Minnesota.

The First Enactment: Black Women Reflecting On Our Experience Collectively

The first layer of analysis consisted of Black women PhD students, or participants, reflecting back on the writing that they did over the course of three sessions. While I did not initially set out to have participants involved at this level of this process, as I continued through the data collection, I began to see a need for participants to reflect and interpret their own writing. This felt more in line with a cultural self study process, where those undergoing the study interpret and analyze their own experience other than someone outside of themselves. It felt appropriate to have participants be the first to interpret or derive meaning from what they said before I went in and analyzed what they said. There were several key themes that emerged from their analysis of themselves.

Key themes reflected in participant analysis

Lack of community spaces

After reflecting back on our writing, several participants identified the importance of community space within the University in order to mitigate against burn-out and feelings of isolation.

For Satara, the lack of formal community space for Black women taught her to reach out to connect with Black women in informal ways. She said in doing so, she wanted to create

relationships where Black women felt like they could be “curious and creative and sensitive and soft and imperfect” or in other words, she wanted Black women to be able to put our full humanity on display. And she wanted to be able to protect other Black women from the consequences of such vulnerability, understanding the ways that Black women were often punished for showing up in spaces like academia with flaws in comparison to others in our population.

In reflecting on her writing, Dele noted how much she saw that current institutional structures did not nurture relationships or spaces of cultural affinity. Instead, she saw that the reverse was true. “They reward us for our commitments to individualism, constant production, and extractive relationships— for our ability to sever our bodies and spirits from our minds,” she said. Dele’s reflection was immensely critical because she showed the connection between individualism and racial capitalism operationalized in the academic setting. Community cannot be rewarded because individualism and extractive relationships have to be prioritized in order to produce at the highest level. This is what keeps academia enduring as it does. We have to be divided and unsupported in order for academia to thrive as it is currently structured. Understanding the benefit of cultural relevant community spaces, Dele continued, “my continued participation in relevant and sustaining communities that affirm my cultural identity, mind, and spirit have allowed me the proper space in which to metabolize knowledge and my experiences.”

From my writing, I noted that one of the themes that I concentrated on was the inaccessibility or unavailability of supportive, community space on campus. I likewise noted how in my writing, I identified how unsupported I felt, as if I was navigating the institution without a compass. As a result, I felt like burn out was inevitable and commonplace. My reflections pushed back against the idea that we just need to ask questions if we are unsure of

where we are going; sometimes we don't even know the questions that we should be asking and who we should be going to in order to get those questions answered. The process of asking for help can feel intimidating, not necessarily because we do not know how to ask for help but because we may not be aware of the kind of help or supports that we actually need, we just know that we need them.

Reflections of harm

Participants also identified incidents of harm in their writing. Through her writing, Blessing noted the occasions where she expressed deep dissatisfaction with her program. "I provided examples of the ways I feel that my program failed and/or harmed me. I could feel my anger and resignation throughout my words." Similarly, in her words Imani noted how she resisted the tendency to feel argumentative, angry, exotic, and disconnected because of the actions and words of others. She felt that she shallowed incidents of harm to make herself more palatable, or agreeable, but that in doing so, she felt even more resentful and angry. It was as if no matter what she took on, or owned, that those with power had it out for her and did not want her to succeed or to thrive.

Satara also reflected on the incidents of pain that she saw emerge from her writing, and how she felt that her pain was not legible to people around her. Or they were "unwilling to reach out to help lessen it. It taught me even the best intended people with the best imagined politics will run through black women and our minds and labor until we are sick and used up if we are not careful. They will watch us burn ourselves up and then shake their heads sadly." What Satara spoke to, unfortunately, is not an anomaly, as there is precedence of Black women being treated in similar ways in academia. Additionally, Satara's reflection also spoke to the dynamics that hooks (2014) addressed in "*Sisters of the Yam"* when she wrote about addiction among Black

women as a result of being pushed to the point of breaking. The nervous breakdowns, chemical dependency, health issues, and self harm are all indicative of the undo stress and violence placed upon Black women, only to be shamed and further isolated when in our humanness, we are unable to hold up to the Strong Black Woman misnomer. There simply is not a whole lot of compassion and empathy for Black women. And there are very few safe spaces where we can be held and cared for to safely break and come apart.

Participants acknowledged the profound way that harm had on their emotional, physical and spiritual health. Satara noted the way that she felt the grief of her experience led to illness within her mind, body, and spirit. Understanding that the stakes were high this led, however, to more self sacrificing behaviors to make it through her program, behaviors that reified stress and that did not promote wellness.

Blessing was left vulnerable because of her experience, and felt that most acutely in her housing situation. Because of the "toxic" circumstance that she found herself in, she felt the need to move during her course of study. Moving on its own is quite difficult, and when this stressful life circumstance is compounded by the need to flee, as in Blessing's case, it makes it even more difficult. Rather than minimizing her experiences, Blessing noted that she had to "come to terms with and acknowledge the mistreatment, manipulation, and abuse that I went through in grad school shouldn't have happened."

Internal resolve and determination

Understanding this, participants identified in their writing that internal resolve that they had to have to ensure that they did not succumb to the pressure and violence directed at them as Black women PhD students. In her writing, Satara noted how she learned how to be her own advocate. She also felt that she was faced with an unfortunate reality that perhaps she learned the

hard way: not all skinfolk are kinfolk. Because this is an oft quoted phrase within Black communities, one can only imagine the amount of blind trust that Satara, and each of us really, put into relationships with people who looked like her - advisors, faculty members, cohort members - only to be deeply hurt when those she trusted either took advantage of her or operated in ways that upheld existing power dynamics.

Part of the internal resolve reflected in the writing was a sense of understanding of what needed to be done to get done so that one did not have to be involved any longer than necessary in the University setting. Lisa stated,

> I'm focusing on me and what I need to get out of here as soon as possible. It seems like my key word would be boundaries. If I had to add another - maybe (healthy) perspective…Stuff gets me down, and things don't always work out the way I'd like them to, and I do experience anxiety about things - but at the end of the day I'm me and I'll get shit done and do great things. That comes from my family and from my relationships with other Black woman who are also doing amazing things always.

Lisa's perspective gave her to have a healthy sense of reality and not get too bogged down into the politics of academia, even as she dealt with mental health issues. The level of differentiation is rare among people in general, but particularly Black women, who because of our environment and relationship to authority, have often found ourselves in codependent situations where our very survival is dependent on our being able to care and prioritize someone else's wellbeing at the expense of ourselves.

Satara stated that her spirituality was a protective factor in providing her the strength to endure the obstacles she faced. "It taught me to hear God talk back in my own voice," she said. Satara's experience is in line with the conversations with the Divine that other Black women

engage in to withstand the oppression. Sometimes that talk has taken the form of questioning, if not outrightly resisting God who seems to side with the oppressor as Womanist theologian Delores Williams (1993) explored in her text, "*Sisters in the Wilderness: the Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*." But other times the conversation has looked like visions from those who have gone on before us that we are moving in the right direction as Davis (2008) showed us in her encounter with her ancestors. And still, other times the dialogue between the Divine and self looks like expressions of grief and lament even in the midst of holding onto hope in the possibility of change.

A sense of internal resolve, however, was also deeply connected to feelings of belonging for participants, particularly in balancing the responsibilities between work and school. Denise stated, "I have some work to do in order to continue navigating through both worlds. I'm getting better at appreciating my contributions and believing that I belong here." Her writing reflected feelings of the imposter syndrome, and needing to push against those feelings in order to be able to persevere. This can be challenging when we understand that the imposter syndrome doesn't exist because of an inferiority complex, but because spaces like higher education were indeed not created for Black women to be able to exist and navigate in them. Every time we stand up in these places, we not only have to counter the internal narratives but we have to resist the external barriers that make it difficult for us to complete what we started.

Actions participants saw themselves doing as a result of their experiences

In spite of what people experienced, there were many examples of personal agency. It is important to highlight these actions because they reveal the ways that Black women have refused to be victims, or sitting ducks, but have desired to take matters into their own hands in order to ensure more favorable outcomes.

For Dele, agency looked like discerning between community spaces that were generative as opposed to spaces that felt extractive, and then choosing not to participate in those spaces. She stated,

> I chose to search for the community and spaces that the institution did not have the foresight to structurally support. Student organizations within the university have structured supports for space, time, and accountability through writing group appointments. However, that is still just another space to perpetuate individualistic, knowledge production, and relationships that cause us to only interact with one another based on what we can extract from one another. I am not opposed to sharing and furthering one another's understandings; however, sociocultural context along with the body and the spirit are critical elements in how we construct and interpret knowledge.

Dele's analysis here was important because needing the support, we have sometimes let our guards down and assumed that writing spaces or any other type of accountability space would honor our needs and experiences, without having to be so protective or resisting. We have gotten hurt, and had our emotional and mental health shattered, when we have anticipated a loving space, and found ourselves once again resisting oppression and defending ourselves. As Dele alluded to, agency here has looked like deciding which spaces we will be a part of and which ones we will not in order to protect ourselves. More than safe spaces, then, Dele's reflection pointed to the need for hush harbors. As defined by Dillard (2022), hush harbors were historically spaces that gave our ancestors the ability to bring their African knowing, culture, and spiritual practices in spaces out of the purview of their slave masters. Similarly, hush harbors that might be enacted in academic spaces, would similarly allow Black women PhD students to gather and be fully present without the intrusion of the white gaze, or demands placed upon them

by the institution.

In reading my writing, I noticed how I reflected on how much I saw myself striving to achieve balance between all of my roles and responsibilities. As I discussed the need to find a sense of equilibrium between work and home as the main wage owner for an extended period of time, I saw myself viewing school as an outlet, or at least, a necessary means to an end that would bring about greater opportunity. “At the time going back to school was an attempt to make life situations better,” I stated. But the idea of making things better was erroneous because no matter the level of certification that a Black woman attains, we ultimately are not able to certify our way out of the experience bound up in being both Black and female.

Still, I went deeper and asked myself the question of why I did not leave the University when I left other highly stress inducing situations. To this self inquiry, I responded,

> Because it was time stamped. I had come so far and almost done; it didn’t make sense to quit. Instead, I had to stand up and fight against what was happening instead of continually allowing others to take advantage of me. I had to face me and my tendency to retreat at the first sign of danger. I had/have to mature into myself and increase in my ability to handle conflict.

To some extent, my desire to remain in higher education in spite of the stress is an act of agency. I did not express feeling trapped, but rather, expressed my desire to use the situation as a growth opportunity, learning how to stand up for myself and fight back, even in the face of uncertainty. Understanding the need for a vibrant support system, I strove to accomplish this by relying on the resources that were right in front of me that promoted wellness, while at the same time curating new ones. This included “spiritual and cultural rituals including prayer, self study,

reflection, writing and movement. Going to Ghana and overall becoming more centered in African ways of being and knowing."

While the majority of her school experience was positive, Lisa also expressed the need to speak up about her experience with someone who was causing her angst in the project that she worked on for her assistantship. She stated, "I did talk to her about as I planned to. But I also tempered my energy around it by reminding myself that this is temporary and not my primary work, so I needed to give it less of my energy and pour that into other things - like preliminary exams." Lisa wasn't the only one who spoke up about her experience within her assistantship; many participants did this in their own way as a practice of agency and self care. I was one of the participants who did speak up and unfortunately experienced a significant amount of pushback that compromised my mental health. "How can you speak up about your experience when those in leadership over you have the literal power to silence you and push you out of the program," I asked. Power imbalances reified through colonial practices that are still bound up within the University threaten the prospect of true agency. Young (2017) affirmed this explaining that historically,

> Consent and coercion rests on an Enlightenment notion of the self in possession of a rational, self-contained individuality…the European, bourgeois man was the epitome of this conceptualization, with women, children, and Others (both male and female) needing various degrees of education and guidance to fully realize their selfhood (p. 19).

Young's explanation demonstrated the level of acceptability that women must attain in order to be able to be truly agentic beings. However, racism and the history of slavery further complicates the matter as quoting Spillers (1987), Young (2017) stated that our "plight [as African and diaspora peoples] marked a theft of the body-a willful and violent…severing of the

captive body from its motive will, its active desire" (p. 20). Though describing an experience related to the period of enslavement, Spillers' (1987) work, as well as the work of Hartman (1997) and Sharpe (2016), illustrated how much we are still in the hold of the slave ship, forever marked by the Atlantic. Being so, we must understand that even as Black women PhD students can and do take agentic actions, that we are always constrained by these realities and can thus be punished as a result.

The Experience of Blackness for Black Women

The experiences that participants endured taught us several things about ourselves as Black women, particularly related to how we were expected and even bred to be resilient without breaking. Several participants spoke to this dynamic and how they chose to relate to it. Avery reflected that being resilient was "an unfortunate burden that we carry. Inheriting so much emotional labor is detrimental to our health, well-being, and ability to thrive. We could prosper at a higher level much quicker if given the space not to be the anchor for everything." What she spoke to was the need to not have to hold so much so that we are not merely surviving but thriving in our work and in our respective lives.

Denise stated that her writing process revealed "just how much is on the line for a Black woman when she decides to enter academia. We have to be prepared to endure so much alone without any meaningful support and have to fend for ourselves and try not to go crazy in the process. But I am proud of myself for still trying to put myself first and staying true to who I am." Going crazy feels akin to losing oneself, to breaking sometimes beyond the point of repair. Again hooks (2014) shed light on the consequence of breaking for Black women; for many of us it is not an option because of the ways that our vulnerability is feared and our frailty punished. We have simply not been allowed to be human, and have gravitated towards the tropes of the

StrongBlackWoman or the angry Black woman victim, feeling as if we can find some dignity at least in holding it all together. In fact, that we have to hold it together because of the way that systems have preyed on our vulnerabilities like vultures. This is what gave birth to my own stance in her program, feeling as if there was no other option but resilience. “I put up with a lot during my studies at the University of Minnesota. Because of the expectation, you can do it all without complaint,” I said. “And when I reached a breaking point, rather than harming myself, imploding, or breaking down, I looked at the things that were causing me stress and got rid of them. I also drew on a lot of resources outside of myself and within myself to be well.” My actions reflect the tough decisions we make to be well when we feel unloved and unsupported.

Because of her experiences, Dele took it upon herself to foster the conditions she needed to be well. “I create the proper soil in which to ensure my own growth because academic spaces of all sorts have never meant for me to be culturally and spiritually well,” Dele stated. Her actions were so similar to other participants, and Black women in general, who have developed a deep sense of responsibility in order to respond and thrive in our environment. Her actions reflected Walker’s (1983) definition of someone who is womanist, as someone who is responsible and in charge, not necessarily because they want to be but because of the dearth of leadership and direction that they are often surrounded by.

The Second Enactment: In Search of Truth and Wellness in Black Women’s Experiences

In the first layer of analysis, I looked at participants' analysis of our own experience and concluded that Black women PhD students experienced significant harm in our studies, and not having communal space to be with other Black women to process what we were experiencing, added salt to injury. In spite of what we experiencing, however, there was a deep sense of internal resolve and determination, which included exercising personal agency to the furthest

extent possible, that has given us as Black women PhD students the ability to endure for better or for worse. For better because, characteristic of the nature of Black women, it has meant not backing down in the space of violent acts of spirit murder and instead pressing through in order to reach our personal and professional goals. For worse, because, our endurance has often been used against us to reify mistreatment because of our ability to endure, or strength it.

Looking at the themes that emerged in the first enactment that emerged from the participants own analysis, I went deeper in the second enactment as the lead researcher by asking myself a series of questions to understand our experiences even more. Specifically, I asked myself what I saw taking place as participants, including myself, told our stories. Again, I wanted to know the degree to which participants related with the conceptual framework. In relating to the conceptual framework, I wanted to see what themes would emerge in how Black women described their PhD experiences.

I also wanted to see how Black women participants operated from a place of agency (truth telling, empathy, and self-care). Drawing from Williams' (2017) work, this framework of truth telling, empathy, and self care was applied because it showed examples of Black women PhD students acting from a sense of agency and power to talk about our experience, rather than only feeling victimized in response to what we have endured in our PhD programs. Utilizing this lens enabled me to think more concretely about Black women PhD students could move from a place of hurt and harm, to healing just in the act of truth telling, being empathetic towards themselves, and practicing self-care.

Finally, I asked myself where and how I saw examples of Dillard's (2006, 2012, and 2022), framework of endarkened feminist epistemology at play, both as a descriptor of Black women's experiences and a prescriber of the solutions to those experiences. Here I also wanted

to understand the ways Black women PhD students fought against the seduction to forget ourselves for the sake of being in higher education, and the ways that they were (re)membering or pulling themselves back together. This lens allowed me to think through the impact of spiritual and cultural consciousness on participant experiences.

Utilizing these three lenses in this stage in the analysis, I believed, could be a model for how we could get on the road to wellness, moving from a place of mere survival in academia to a place of liberation and joy, as Evans (2017) described. As I went through this process, several risk factors emerged that demonstrated just what Black women PhD students were facing as students. These included feeling gaslit and experiencing abusive behaviors, questioning whether or not they felt belonging and connection in their programs, and being overworked and undercompensated.

Risk Factor #1: Feeling gaslit and experiencing abusive behaviors

Being gaslit about one's experiences

Gaslighting can be defined as someone explaining their experience, or reality, and being told that their perspective is wrong. Psychologists have used the term to define the manipulation that can sometimes take place in domestic relationships, including romantic relationships as well as between a parent and child (Conrad, 2023). But the reality is that gaslighting can occur wherever there is a power imbalance, particularly when those who may have less power in a relationship, such as between an employer and an employee, seek to address the harm. This includes in relationships where there is a difference in power because of racism, such as when a Black person, or person of color, seeks to name the harm that they are experiencing as a result of race. When this happens, the one seeking to address the harm may be told that "they're overthinking it or wrong or criticized for how they brought up the issue. Sometimes a person

may even be characterized as violent, stupid, or mentally unstable for calling out racism at all (Neela-Stock, 2020, paragraph 2)."

Participants discussed the ways that they had been gaslit, or manipulated into questioning their own sanity (Davis & Ernst, 2019) as PhD students. Speaking to her experience, Denise explained

> People in power, people who "claim" they support me and my well-being, blatantly denying the racist experiences I have had. For example, towards the end of my second year a white faculty member in the program told me that 'I didn't understand the standards of the program.' When I went to tell my advisor he immediately told me "Oh she just says that to everyone to encourage them.' That felt like a blatant lie to me. But even if that was true, could he not stop to see what those words meant coming from a white faculty member to the only black student in the program?

The denial of racism, or presence of harm, as Denise experienced, has compounded the negative mental health impacts for Black women in academia. It has made us question whether or not what we have experienced is real, and if perhaps something is wrong with ourselves - our thought process, our system of beliefs, or even who our people are. As a result of the gaslighting, the onus has fallen on the shoulders on those who have been harmed to repair the harm, in this case, Black women like Denise. However, repair for those in power, often has equated to fixing ourselves so that we no longer see racism and sexism, and seldom has implicated the system to change.

Further explaining her experience, Denise stated, "it's not just the beating me down that is hard, it is the fact that it feels like I'm villainized and made out to be the problem for trying to advocate for myself or for just giving up and breaking down." Denise illustrated how students

were made to feel villainized as a result of speaking up and setting boundaries. She also demonstrated how often Black women were chastised when we gave up or had a break down as a result of the oppression we felt (hooks, 2014). For Black women, in particular, being villainized can show up in the form of being labeled angry and ungrateful. In my reflections, I noted similarly, not wanting to come off "argumentative or feel like the angry Black woman." In essence, it was another example of gaslighting, putting the onus on those who are harmed instead of the system taking accountability for the violence it perpetuates. These perceptions deeply reflected feelings of double consciousness as well, where again, one's self perception is brokered through the lens of how others perceive us, or how we think they perceive us (Du Bois, 1903; Yancy, 2015).

Another experience of gaslighting that participants wrote about was being told by advisors, faculty, and others that they had way too much going on, while at the same time having unreasonable demands placed on them for their time and labor. This happened with Zahria, who explained that professors told her that because of what was already on her plate, she shouldn't take on additional responsibilities. "They had low expectations for me and at the same time they were disappointed. It is as though they were somehow practicing a self-fulfilling prophecy." Reflecting on Zahria's experience, I saw the behavior here existing for two reasons - keeping us as Black women away from resources and opportunities that could benefit us in the long run, otherwise known as gatekeeping, and the expectations of the University which demands that everyone produce at the maximum level regardless of what we may be experiencing. These dichotomies, as Wingfield (2015) described, "elucidates the fine line African American women walk in terms of 'self naming and being named by others' (p. 84), and thus caused double

consciousness in the lives of Black women PhD students, who were unsure of where they stood in relation to the institution because of the dichotomies at any given moment.

As is noted in the examples above, participants' perceptions of reality, and of ourselves, were manipulated. This is not something to be ignored or dismissed, as Davis and Ernst (2019) showed us that the "manipulation of perception is powerful because our reality–how we perceive the world and our place in it–is socially constructed" (p. 762) and illustrated how dismissal of our experiences actually "silences one's political voice and, at the same time, compromises a valuable source of self-worth and self-trust" (p. 762). Here again is another example of double consciousness, as the participants' perception of self was often brokered through others. This is because with gaslighting, we have been manipulated out of our own truth about ourselves and our experiences. We have been forced to no longer see ourselves through our own eyes, but constantly tricked to see ourselves through the lens of others.

The hope reflected in these reflections from participants is that we are able to recognize the instances of gaslighting, or double consciousness, and call them for what they are, instead of not understanding what has happened to us. The struggle, however, is in the gaslighter, the institution, recognizing its behavior and changing. Because academia, like all other institutions in our society, are built on a foundation of abuse and marginalization, this will be much harder to accomplish.

Epistemic violence

Another example of abusive behavior that participants experienced was epistemic violence, or being told that one's way of thinking is inferior to dominant ways of thinking. Shadid (2015) defined it as the "forceful displacement of knowledge and ways of knowing in order to maintain dominance over oppressed communities" (p. 64). While the term was

originally used to talk about the ways marginalized peoples' ways of knowing were colonized, she noted that epistemic violence also referred to the ways that "the academy professes a commitment to critical thinking and social justice but continues to prescribe to standards, traditions, and ways of knowing that maintain hegemony" (Shadid, 2015, p. 63).

It's the maintenance of hegemony, even as espousing a commitment to social justice that participants pushed back against. Dele was one of them who pushed back. She stated that even in a program that emphasized the importance of racial diversity, she felt she was not accepted. Instead, she was made to feel that she could not access the parts of her "racial, ethnic, and sociopolitical identities and context" as she engaged in research. "I must return to my community for knowledge, restoration, joy, and the radical future we deserve," she stated.

In my writing, I reflected on how grieved I felt about content matter that centered dominant ways of thinking even as it championed diversity of thought and perspectives. I shared that it felt like I was not able to truly enjoy what it meant to be a student, "because I had to be on guard about what I was being taught." Clear in the fact that so much of the material we were given to understand research paradigms were written by people from majority culture, I entered into my program with a hermeneutic of suspicion. This continued until I brought the authors who spoke to and validated my humanity to be in conversation with the texts that I was given in class, and in a sense, talk back to these texts, affirming my worth as a person of African descent and as a Black woman, lifting up the importance of the way that I engaged culture and spirit in my approach to my studies. I noted that "I am grateful that I had a plethora of authors and resources that I could draw on to enhance my learnings in the classroom."

The epistemic violence that Black women PhD students experienced, I found, was ultimately rooted in ideas that our ways of knowing and being were irrelevant. Instead, our ways

of knowing have been seen as inferior because Black women as a whole have been socially constructed as sexually and morally deviant (Haley, 2016), alternating between the jezebel and sapphire stereotypes. Here, our truth, or witness, wasn't regarded as gospel (Adedayo, 2020) or otherwise true, but had to be denied of us, filtered through the voice of someone much more socially acceptable in order for it to have the chance of being validated. This has made it harder for Black women PhD students to stand in our truth, and bring our ways of knowing into the classroom, because we have not wanted to face the ridicule and aggression for decentering dominant ways of knowing in embracing our own epistemologies.

Risk Factor #2: Being overworked and undercompensated

Abusive behaviors, manifested through gaslighting and epistemic violence, were one of the themes that emerged as barriers to our wellness. Closely related, if not altogether indistinguishable to these behaviors is that of being overworked and undercompensated for one's time not just spent as a PhD student but as student workers in order to receive funding for our programs. Looking specifically at the ways that they experienced academic mammying, participants wrote about the ways we felt tricked into taking on more than we should, the uneven expectations between ourselves as Black women and other students, and the lack of empathy for our lives outside of the classroom.

Being deceived

A theme that I identified that spoke to participants' experiences in higher education was that of being deceived into taking on more work than one should. Writing about her experience, Denise explained what happened to her. She started off by sharing how she was sent an email stating that she was chosen to lead a project from among many in her program, which made her feel a sense of pride in rising to the challenge. Taking on the work, it was other students who had

worked on the project in previous years that made her realize that she had been foiled again. She explained,

> I realized I had been tricked into handling a 2-4 person job entirely by myself. This happened just about a month before the pandemic occurred so it very quickly got swept under the rug. The only acknowledgement I received of any "wrongdoing" was a faculty member telling me "we know what it looked like but we didn't mean it this way.

It's the sentiment of being tricked, that was paramount in Denise's reflection. She was tricked into taking on more responsibility than she should have, under the guise of being exceptional or chosen. But this isn't just a case of being overworked, as many Black women PhD students have been; this is a case of as she previously stated, of "being set up for failure," as one person handling a 2 - 4 person job would be exhausted, even as it might cause them to make a lot of mistakes along the way. Had Denise not been clued into the fact that she was being exploited, she could have easily been blamed and punished for not measuring up to bogus standards that no one else in her program were being held to.

Zahria explained the way that they felt deceived in regards to compensation specifically, which ultimately led them to taking out an unnecessary amount of debt. She said,

> I have children and my program explicitly asked me not to work. At the same time, I am expected to support myself and my children on 1400 dollars a month. Moreover, I got a fellowship this year and they conveniently pay quarterly and the first payment was in December. What was also ridiculous was that I was made to feel like I did not have enough research experience compared to those that came from social sciences whilst I have worked in five different labs and worked in the Masonic Cancer research lab. This was a very prestigious thing to have in the biological sciences however, in the

> social sciences you need to publish papers and attend conferences. Thus, I attempted to do that by attending as many conferences as I could the past semester. Thus, I came to realize that the university/department that provided me funding are willing to pay after I pay for registration fees, flight, hotel, and my own food and submit reimbursement. And, what I end up spending on each TRIP was always MORE than what I was given. I started the program with 0 dollars in credit card debt and here I am with over 10,000 dollars in credit cards.

Zahria's experience reflected an instance of deception because in order to belong within the University and receive an assistantship, she was instructed not to work. There was an unwritten expectation and rule that while a student, especially if receiving an assistantship, that the student belongs to the University and has to let go of other work obligations (and personal obligations as well) in order to belong, or be seen as loyal to the University. But the reality is that very few students, not just Black women, have been in a position where they could completely leave outside employment because of the cost of living for a single person, let alone for an entire family. Thus, placing on students an obligation to let go of previous sources of employment, in order to be supported by the University, has felt like a ruse. In addition, it sets up a very challenging power dynamic where the University is almost completely in charge of one's livelihood in regards to employment, housing, and health insurance. This makes it even more difficult to challenge abusive practices within academia.

Uneven expectations

Changing, or unrealistic expectations, also caused participants to feel a sense of disconnection in their programs. Crystal explained that while she initially felt excited about pursuing her doctoral studies, her confidence waned as she was confronted with "the

ever-changing expectations of my graduate program in contrast to the consistent expectation for my work as a researcher, scholar, and clinician to be deemed 'exemplary."

> My thesis research project involved original data collection surrounding the class-wide behavior of students and I planned to use two measures for my outcome variable. Then my advisor recommended that I use three measures. So, thinking this was in-line with the expectations of my program, I proceeded to collect original data using three distinct measures that required a minimum of spending 20 additional hours a week at my practicum site. Then, a year later, my advisor allowed her other advisees in the cohort a year before mine to refrain from collecting original data for their thesis research projects because of complaints from these students that it was 'too difficult.' This became a pattern: I engaged in work that I considered congruent with the expectations of my graduate program, only to be told *after* I completed the work that it was "above and beyond the expectations." This pattern of experiences more than anything made me feel disconnected from other graduate students in the program because I felt like my work was viewed as an "exception" when from my perspective I engaged in work that was "expected" by my professors, advisors, and mentors.

Here Crystal keyed in on the expectations related to her research that felt disproportionate in relation to the other students. But she also shared how in engaging in class discussions she also felt similarly, where she noticed that she was expected to participate in class in ways that her peers were not and still received the same points for participation that she did. When she attempted to test her assumption, and modeled her behavior after another student in the class who said nothing, she received an email from the professor saying, "You did not seem like yourself today. I just wanted to make certain everything is okay. If you need anything, let me know."

Finally, Crystal experienced the same level of expectation during her clinical practicum, where she was treated as a "fellow co-worker rather than a student/supervisee."

As a result of these experiences, Crystal did not feel as if she could receive mentorship or be cared for as other students. Instead, she was put in positions where she had to care for others at the expense of her degree, without being compensated for this level of care. In many ways, these situations represented examples of academic mammying where unrealistic expectations for labor and care were placed on Black women PhD students, without any hint of reciprocity in return. In this way, burdens that were not placed on other students were placed on Black women PhD students, in part, because of the way that Black women across society have been socialized to be responsible, as Walker's (1983) definition of womanism explained. The responsibility can be a benefit when it comes to taking care of those around us; but at the same time, that responsibility can be exploited and demanded of us from those who are not ultimately invested in our wellbeing. This is what we saw happening here with Crystal, as her sense of responsibility was demanded of her not for her own benefit, but to ensure that others - in this case, her professors, were taken care of. She did not receive nurturing or care in return, because as the Black mammy historically, she was not only deemed unworthy of it; she didn't need it.

Satara validated what Crystal shared, and in doing so, illustrated that what happened to Crystal was not isolated to her as an individual, but an experience that other Black women PhD students shared. She stated, "the Black women in my department, especially when teaching, were expected to fulfill a kind of mammying role, to embody a kind of un-challenging gentle and motherly support to white peers and students." Satara, like Crystal, understood the dynamics at play here, dynamics that have a punitive response if they are not adhered to. She continued to

explain, “When we would disrupt this narrative, the response was swift: white woman tears, anger, alienation.”

What Satara picked up on here was important and cannot be dismissed as she made sense of the swift response of “white women’s tears,” a strategic weapon that when used has caused significant harm to Black people historically and in the present. What these tears have often signified to white men, especially, is that their women - fragile, docile, female, human - were unsafe among Black people - mutant, ⅜ human, deviant. These tears have led to Black men, women, and children being lynched; having the cops called on us at cookouts, family gatherings, or walking in the park; and getting away with murder (cops, vigilantes), through the act of crying which signaled that white women felt unsafe. In higher education, the tears have been used to dismiss the way white supremacy showed up in a space, as Satara explained, and redirect power to those who already have it. Authors Wallace and Kline (2019), used a storytelling framework to speak against this dynamic and draw attention to not only the harm that white women tears do, but how they have negatively impacted Black women. In their story, Nova drew attention to the ways her resistance has led to white women tears and being reprimanded.

> Why is it when I speak up about something that they have done that has negatively impacted me or one of my students that I get accused of hurting her because she starts to cry? My only options then are to back down and feel sorry for the person who ACTUALLY caused the harm or to get so upset that I’m not being heard that I end up embodying the same stereotypes they accuse me of. So, what am I supposed to do (p. 48)?

This illustrated that Black women PhD students, who have recognized academic mammying at play and have tried to move beyond it by demanding accountability, resisting, or

simply saying no, face extreme punishment and isolation because of the way white women tears have operated. In addressing these things, we have been labeled angry, aggressive, bossy, and uncooperative (Wallace & Kline, 2019), compounding feelings of inferiority and inevitably, spirit murder. Not wanting to lose or compromise our positions or standing within the University, that already does not love or care for us, many of us have backed down and resumed the role of the mammy to keep the peace.

Risk Factor #3: Lack of belonging and connection

Feeling isolated and alone

Denise stated, "When I look back, I often feel as if my program set me up to fail from the beginning." She recounted how others in her major went through their programs with a cohort, and that not only was her cohort small, consisting of herself and only one other student, but that she felt unacknowledged by her cohort mate. "Even when we shared an office, the only time we would be in the office together is if he was in the office first and I entered after. If I was in the office first and he saw me he would not enter or say hi." While some may not read Denise's experience as a big deal, the reality is that the invisibility she felt was common to Black women's experiences both inside and outside of academia where were not only rendered invisible, but also aspects of us, hypervisible.

I also spoke about the feelings of isolation that were expressed by other participants. Reflecting on my experience, I stated that

> I entered the University of Minnesota jaded because of the experiences that I had working previously in other settings, and just did not want to put up with racist behavior any longer. So I showed myself friendly, yes, but I did not really associate with many white folks and tried my hardest to connect with Black students, faculty, and staff, Black

> women specifically. In many ways, I felt like an exotic creature in the University, this is how I felt I was being treated by other students at times.

The feelings of exoticism were not new to Black women inside or outside of academia, where we were gawked at for the way we wore our hair, our style of clothing, or just occupying space that isn't designed for us. This again echoed the sense of hypervisibility that we experienced. And yet, there is a very thin line between exoticism and disdain, disdain because ultimately to exotify something is to objectify it, to dehumanize it, and "will to power" (Azzahir, 2019), over it. Ultimately, it reflected the process of making the Negro, or a nonbeing, for the purposes of exploitation. This signaled that our only sense of belonging in the University has been tied to objectification and labor, and that we cannot enjoy any true belonging outside of these roles.

Zahria explained her experience of feeling isolated and alone as a PhD student, among faculty as well as among her peers. She first drew on her time in undergrad, where she connected the experiences between her younger years and what she endured as a PhD student. She explained,

> When I was an undergraduate student at the university doing Biology as a major, I felt so alone and did not have partners in the laboratory because students assumed that I would not know the material and did not want to work with me. I felt like the same thing happened to me as a graduate student who already has a masters. I had four projects I was working on in my department and it was all my project only and no one else was working on it with me. At the end of my first year many of my cohort members had published articles and I was surprised that no-one invited me. I brought this up to my advisor and he

> said I have so much on my "plate" already and he did not know if I can do more without me ever telling him. I was very sad because those students were not even publishing with their own advisor but other individuals in the department. After that experience I tried to be proactive and connect with students. None of them were receptive to working with me, including faculty, specifically a faculty that had me write a proposal and said this is great but she does not have time for it now. After she had specifically asked me to draw a proposal and that took about 15 hours of my non-existing time going through the literature and putting together a research proposal. That was very disheartening. Needless to say I did not feel like I belonged. However, the icing on this cake of being a lone scholar. When it was time for a departmental fellowship I was told that one of my weaknesses was that I did not have projects that I was working on with others. That I need to be a team player. Furthermore, this led to me getting less funding.

Wrapped up within Zahria's experience were not only examples of isolation, but also gaslighting, as previously articulated under risk factor #1.[16] This was an example of gaslighting because she was also told that what she perceived to be real about her experiences was not. It is important to call out in the context of her experience with isolation, because as a result of being told that what she was experiencing wasn't true, or real, she could not ultimately solve the experience of being isolated as a Black woman PhD student. It was the experience of being gaslit, and told that she was not experiencing things as she was, that reified the feelings of isolation and kept her from finding a sense of community, or belonging that she needed. All of these things had a drastic, material impact on her wellbeing, and ability to provide for her family, because the perceptions, judgments, and actions of others ultimately led to her receiving less

[16] Even though I have talked about gaslighting before, it bears repeating now to illustrate the ways that these experiences are often intertwined and not so easy to distinguish from each other at times.

funding than others in her program. While this could be mistaken as an oversight, the experiences of Black women like Zahria were far too common than not to just chalk it up to coincidence or a mistake. Her experience also showed that Black women pay a tangible price in being isolated within our programs; it's not just about having community and making friends, though that is a big piece of it. Being able to belong, as Zahria showed us, is directly tied to livelihood.

Not feeling supported within the program

Denise shared ways that she did not feel supported in her program, both among her peers and from faculty and staff. She explained,

> I used to feel it among other students within my program, but for reasons unknown to me, I was kicked out of the support network and later found out that people I had trusted and had supported me through the bullshit that the program/faculty had put me through, were talking behind my back. So yeah. I felt some connection or care at one point, but don't any longer. I often feel like no one was prepared for what it would mean to have a Black female graduate student in the program and no one was prepared to meaningfully support or care for me.

I want to first address how Denise initially felt that she had support within her program, and then lost it as a result of being kicked out of the support network that she belonged to. Her experience was reflective of other Black women experiences within higher education who struggled to maintain connections, or have small support networks where those involved must fend for themselves (Woods, 2001). This was directly connected to her sentiment that no one was prepared for what it would mean to have a Black female graduate student in the program. What she was saying here is so critical to how we understand the experiences of Black women PhD

students not only at the University of Minnesota, but also in other education spaces that have assumed they are able to cater to all students (with their colorblind approach) and failed to acknowledge that different students have different needs, assets, and preferences when it comes to teaching. This hasn't only been true at the K-12 level, where it seems like the most efforts towards culturally relevant pedagogy, or culturally responsive teaching are the most applied, albeit inaccurately. This has also been true, if not even more, within higher education. Yet the underlying premise of integration efforts like *Brown vs. Board of Education* assumed that white teachers can teach all students, even if they need a little coaching or redirection along the way. It is hardly ever assumed that Black teachers are able to teach Black students, which is why the conversation about improving educational outcomes has often relied on capacity building efforts for white teachers, and not recreating a pipeline for Black educators at all levels to engage Black students.[17]

In part, this is because Black students, and in particular Black women's, needs historically within academia were not considered valid, if they were recognized at all. Black women were often shamed into preserving the StrongBlackWoman misnomer, at risk of punishment or isolation, because in preserving it, systems that thrived off of Black women's labor did not have to change. This also relates to academic mammying as it has been in the perseverance of our this misnomer, that the institution has thrived well: it was able to have us as students to satisfy diversity quotas without having to make serious investments in our wellbeing because we were labeled deviant (Haley, 2016), considered nonbeing (Azzahir, 2019), or nothing (Fanon, 1967; Moten, 2013), existing in the liminal space between nothingness and eternity (Fanon, 1967).. As a result, Denise's impression that the institution was not prepared to serve

[17] This is not to assume that all Black educators teach in liberatory or anti-racist ways, but to suggest, that the absence of Black educators at all levels of education (K-12, undergraduate, graduate), have forced the few who inhabit these spaces to exist in such a way that perpetuates behaviors and attitudes that marginalize Black students.

Black women PhD students was accurate because in essence, the University did not have to serve Black women.

Dele also noted her experiences of belonging and connectivity as a PhD student. She noted that even though she felt supported by faculty, with her interests and needs taken into consideration, that by and large, the majority of these faculty were of color and women of color. "During my first year, outside of my own meetings with my advisor, I did not feel that peer community, faculty mentorship, and cultural affinity were structurally or systemically evident or prioritized."

It is unfortunate that Dele could only feel connection among faculty of color, but it should be noted that having supportive faculty and staff of color did not always protect, or insulate Black women PhD students in a space, like academia, where plantation politics are currently still in operation where Black faculty can be separated from and against other Black students. Satara's experience reified this, where she was separated from her Black co-advisor who left for another institution during her course of study.

Dynamics among faculty members

Satara took the question of belonging even further and described her experience of being isolated as a result of things happening among faculty members that had little to do with students. Though she felt support and belonging in her studies initially, the situation that developed during her second year not only disrupted that support, but left her feeling physically sick. She explained her experience at length:

> I was sort of embroiled along with other graduate students in the department's politics. It created a lot of tension and anxiety in us as grad students. I remember feeling like every move I made was make or break in terms of getting an academic job, maintaining a good

> reputation, or receiving funding. Faculty developed into two major camps over an issue that really had nothing to do with grad students and had mostly to do with toxic behaviors and ego. I felt compelled toward one camp– which contained my advisor and a woman I worked directly with, and my friends were drawn into the other. It wound up destroying my relationships with a lot of my peers in the department. It was incredibly isolating, and I wound up feeling on guard and on edge every time I was around. I was teaching a lot throughout grad school, and I remember feeling sick to my stomach whenever I had to head into the shared grad office space for office hours. I remember a racially-charged moment in which a non-black peer cornered me and told me I needed to come back into the fold and to stop being such an "iceberg." I wound up feeling sort of hunted all the time, which made me avoidant of all of the built-in support available to me as a student– the writing group I had been a part of now felt sort of dangerous, the grad office, even a large portion of faculty.

Though Satara was one of the few participants to speak so truthfully about the unfortunate situation of getting caught up in the politics of the department or institution as a whole, the reality is that situations like this were more common than not. Though students may not have always known the specifics of what the politics are, there is this sense of knowing for Black women when something just isn't right, and when we might be put in the middle of a situation that has nothing to do with us. As a result of being in a codependent relationship with our society and institutions therein, another example of double consciousness, we have learned how to survive by being able to read situations by interpreting information that our bodies tell us.

The internalization of things that have nothing to do with us has been our response because we have understood that if we cannot keep or balance the peace and appease the right

people, the question of appeasement as elusive as trying to grasp for air, that we could be punished through alienation as Satara ultimately experienced. This has made it immensely difficult to move forward as students, as we haven't known who we can reach out to without making it seem like we have betrayed someone's trust when in all actuality, we have been betrayed. Constantly.

Risk Factor #4: Spirit Murder a Result of Black Women's Experiences

What spirit murder looks like

Dele spoke to the ways that she experienced spirit murder. What was unique about her statement was that she doesn't just name her experience, but also felt the need to share her own positionality, or culpability in it:

> I understand spirit murdering as the dehumanizing material and psychological harm of white supremacy. I am grateful that I am learning that my positionality, even as a Black woman, must be interrogated as to reduce the harm that my commitments and experiences can cause my research participants (predominantly Black communities).

Dele's statements are true, as even as Black women researchers, we have done harm to our own communities when we have not been aware of our own power in the research process (Hill, 2006; Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003). However, it is striking that in the midst of talking about the ways that she has been harmed by the institution, she felt the need to discuss her own positionality and power. Likely, she felt the need to discuss it because of the ways that it had been shoved down her throat as a PhD student. I've experienced similarly, and wrote about it in my reflection stating,

> I have heard it said by professors and others that we are fortunate, privileged, even blessed to be here as students. That there is a certain privilege that comes with that. And

> there is no argument there. But at the same time, our experiences get dismissed because we are here. That because we are not being killed in the streets or are locked behind bars, that we are not experiencing violence or if we are, it is nothing in comparison to what our brothers and sisters who are trapped inside of crazy situations are experiencing. I feel like the comparison can be a means to silence us into complicity, causing us to not speak out about the insults to our intelligence or a denial of our experience.

We must acknowledge and name the ways that we, even as Black women, can be part of the problem within academia, when we have colluded with the institution instead of done our work in such a way as to resist it. But we must also acknowledge that others have not taken on ownership in the same way, and that owning our shit, does not necessarily lead others to doing the same. If we examine the dynamics between interpersonal relationships, where violence and gaslighting are commonplace, revealing our shortcomings only provides additional steam for perpetuators to abuse; it does not lead to shared accountability. The same is true within institutions that hold power at a much higher level over our wellbeing, so that when we inevitably name our complicity and role in oppression within academia/other institutions, people will chastise and blame us for being complicit, without chastising and blaming the institution. We are scapegoated to own up to things, often, that have very little to do with us, and even if they do, the disparity in power is glaring.

Additionally, Dele shared that another experience that caused spirit murder for Black women PhD students is when the practices of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) actually served to further marginalize us. She explained, "This wholly inadequate manner of talking about racial equity, cultural pluralism, and inclusion while still prioritizing capitalist white supremacy is itself spirit-murdering for Black Ph.D. students who have come to understand that what they

need to feel as human and as radically imaginative as they are lies outside of predominantly white spaces and institutions." For her, freedom for Black women was not found inside of DEI commitments or practices when at a base level, predominately white institutions were still committed to capitalistic practices in order to survive. In essence, much of the DEI work that currently exists, does not express a desire to dismantle or disrupt systems of power and oppression; instead, they've encouraged more diversity and inclusion of marginalized identities within those systems, while leaving the system largely intact.

Ultimately, the premise of equity as a superior economic growth model (Treuhaft, Blackwell, & Pastor, 2011) as well as other equity axioms, while appealing, are examples of Bell's concept of interest convergence, a principle of critical race theory. In this principle, Bell demonstrated the reality that civil rights gains over the years came about as a result of the way these gains benefited existing power structures (Bell, 1972; Milner, 2013). *Brown vs. Board of Education* was an example of interest convergence because of the way that this legislation allowed the United States to be seen more favorably internationally during the height of the Cold War. On the ground, the integration of schools effectively disrupted the ways that Black communities educated Black children, displacing Black teachers and forcing Black children into educational environments where their cultural ways of being were called into question (Bell, 1972; Brewer, 2019; Madhubuti & Madhubuti, 1994). While DEI sounds good in theory, within the academic setting it has been used to increase retention rates and bring more students into systems of power that often do not make any noticeable efforts towards change other than having a browner population on campus. Thus, Dele's assertion that what Black women PhD students really need is not more DEI, but more access to spaces that decenter whiteness, was true. Hers was a call for change that challenged power at its core.

Results of Spirit Murder for Black women in higher education

Impacts on Black women's mental and physical health

Participants expressed a range of other impacts of spirit murder on their psyches, including being depressed or feeling physically ill when having to interface with the college campus. Some participants, like Crystal, kept their reflections here general, stating that their experiences in their programs negatively impacted their health and wellbeing. "Both my physical and mental health took a monumental hit that to this day I don't know whether it will recover from the chronic anxiety and stress that I experienced these last 6 years," she said.

Others like Satara explained in more detail how their health was impacted,

> I finished up my PhD in 2020, the spring semester that turned everything upside down with COVID. I feel a little ashamed saying it was almost a relief to finish the teaching year and to defend my dissertation online– I was so physically stressed and ill that I'd told my advisor if I didn't defend that year I wasn't going to defend at all. I literally felt I physically may not make it between the extreme depression and symptoms ranging from chronic vomiting, brain fog, and worsening chronic illness. Every time I had to go into campus I would get sick and wind up at Boynton. It was awful.

The unfortunate truth was that even with such visible expressions of pain, our stories were still not taken seriously. Stemming again back to enslavement, Black women's pain has never been seen as legitimate, which is why a doctor could have the audacity to perform surgeries on Black women's reproductive systems without anesthesia (Snorton, 2017). In our present day and age, Black women's pain tolerance is still considered to be higher than others, which is why we are often given less pain medication during the birthing of our babies, and considered to be overacting when there are complications during the delivery process. If this is

the treatment of Black women at large, how could we expect to be treated any differently within academia when the compounding stress and depression began to manifest as physical symptoms? Many of us, myself included, have run to academia believing that it could be a safe space to exist in this society under the guise that our research, our work ethic, our passions would see us through. But the reality is that it is not a safe space, it is not a safe space at all.

Protective factors participants drew on to survive spirit murder

As participants reflected on the resources that they drew upon to navigate the academic institution, the lens of self care as Williams (2017) highlighted in her research emerged in ways that were not previously articulated. Here participants began to speak about the communities that they involved themselves in, the practices that they took up, and the boundaries that they had to sometimes set in order to be well in higher education.

Protective Factor #1: Communities of care

One of the main resources that participants drew upon to navigate the University setting was finding nurturing relationships and communities that they could be a part of. This was certainly the case for Blessing, who relied on friends after the passing of her cat. She stated, "I found a community and made friends and i am really happy that I did because the people I met I want to stay connected with." Additionally, Crystal found communities that she could be a part of on campus that gave her the tenacity to care for herself and continue her studies. She explained,

> Despite all of these hardships and frustrations, I experienced support from the broader Black graduate student group on campus, specific members of my cohort, and from my spouse. Without this social support, I would not have continued my studies at the University of Minnesota. I also relied heavily on talking to and learning from students

who were further along in the program. These more advanced students successfully completed coursework and milestones that I had yet to face. Hearing their advice and recommendations were monumental in helping me move forward and believe that it was possible to have success in graduate school.

Avery, similarly to Crystal, found resources in supportive communities or affinity spaces - both those within and outside of higher education. She stated, "I've always believed that 'It takes a village.' My village of family, friends, and other people in academia have truly blessed me in ways I couldn't have imagined. Regular meet-ups, kind words/prayer/scripture messages, celebrating my successes (every last one) until I'm red in the face. They hold me accountable for being the best I can be."

For Denise, examples of self-care included allowing others to advocate and support her. She stated, "I experienced a lot of anger. I still do at times, but I don't have the energy to stay angry. And anger also made it difficult to put on my smile and interact cordially with people in my department. So, for now, I let other people be angry on my behalf." This strategy can be an effective strategy when one's own voice in spaces of power is not listened to or acknowledged. At the same time, however, it has reinforced power dynamics because it reifies the idea that Black women's own voices cannot be trusted or validated. Research on Black women's experiences, without Black women writing in our own voice and for our own benefit, is common practice within fields like sociology, anthropology, and educational studies. Though these projects have often amplified issues of poverty and racism, they have also invalidated the voice of those experiencing the issues most acutely, suggesting that the experience is only valid if told by a white man.

Extending the concept of community a step further, I reflected on the need for space that was more intentional about creating space where the Divine as expressed through culture and spiritual practices could show up and be a part of the academic process. I stated,

> I desired more Black space and space for Black women within this PhD program. I wanted it to be more community oriented, more sensitive to spirit and divine practice, more space for me to be me with the support from mentors and elders. When I entered the University, I had just finished a program where I had a champion and elder to help me through a project that I was doing for the Aya Collective at the time. Perhaps what I needed was a champion and elder who would help me in my PhD program as well.

The Aya Collective, formerly called the Kinky Curly Theological Collective, was a space that I created prior to starting my PhD program out of a need to center Black women's sacred and spiritual practices through writing in ways that were not always honored or recognized within professional spaces. The fellowship that I was a part of exposed me to concepts, including the concept of eldering, that I was not exposed to before. In that fellowship, I had an elder walk beside me as I engaged in my cultural self study process. As I reflected back on my time at the University of Minnesota, I recognized the role that an elder could have played in my academic wellbeing, particularly an elder who, like me, had been through the academic process.

Protective Factor #2: Cultural and spiritual practices

Some participants also began to describe the cultural and spiritual practices that they drew on to navigate the institution. For Zahria, prayer was a resource in being able to navigate through the muck and mire of the higher education. For Avery, this included a myriad of practices that allowed her to find a deep sense of resilience. She recounted

> I start my day with a workout at the gym and meditation at home. The peace that nurtures my soul and the endorphins that flow through my body keep me at ease…I don't care what anyone says. Taking care of plants is soothing. Yes, it is a slow process, but it has tremendous rewards. I'm a fan of propagating, bringing life from one plant to another. It means so much to me to do that successfully and then pass the plant on to bring someone else joy.

Other participants did not describe their cultural and spiritual practices at length, if they mentioned them at all. This is not because they did not have practices, but because they felt the need to protect what they felt sacred from academia. This was true of Blessing who said that t they didn't often write about or name their spiritual relationship and how it sustained them in academia as a means to protect it. She stated, "Academia has stolen all of my free time and it has stolen all of my energy. That is one of my very hard boundaries and why I did not bring it up. Very adamant and conscious about keeping those things far apart. I don't want academia to negatively impact the other." Dele expressed similar sentiments. She stated, "I just see them as so separate. I can't even fathom the institution and spirituality together. I desperately want it to be together; it causes hurt and pain because its dismemberment. I intentionally separate the two even though I long for them not to be separated."

I understood the position that participants like Blessing and Dele took, feeling myself the tension between sharing our cultural knowledge as Black women in order to be collectively sustained by it and the risk of further extraction and exploitation we take when we share what has been private with the world. In their stance, these participants engaged in a practice of refusal as articulated by Tuck & Yang (2014) where they refused to have their sources of resilience and resistance coded. It was as if these participants were willing to share and be vulnerable about the

ways that they were harmed by the institution, but were reticent to share how they made it through so that their joys would not be coded and their strengths wouldn't be packaged and used against them.

I also reflected on the practices that sustained me. Because just as much as I understood that including these stories in the archive could be disadvantageous, I also understood that leaving them out could reify the dismemberment and fragmentation of our bodies in higher education (hooks, 2017; Dillard, 2012). I explained,

> My primary resources were drawing on cultural and spiritual practices to keep me grounded. This included prayer, self study, reflection, and writing, and studying material that held up an image of me in them. I prioritized my spiritual awareness and sacred practices as tools that will always bring me through and help ground me. I also drew on my community, specifically my cultural community, centering activities, events, and opportunities that would give me back to myself. Which meant engaging in a lot of Black and African spaces. Going to Africa. Attending a Black church for a few years, participating in as many Black spaces was paramount for my survival in higher education, which also included creating and being involved in those spaces on campus to the best of my ability.

Spiritual awareness and sacred practice, as has been articulated by Dillard (2006, 2012), had been such an essential part of my sense of self in the context of my life. I fought to ensure that this remained a central part of the way that I completed my program. For me, this meant engaging in sacred practices that included prayer, meditation, study, and engaging in sacred practices with other people. Even as my faith and theological convictions shifted in the course of my program, and I felt led to redefine how I engaged in certain practices that I once held dear, I

never lost the need for me to create the sacred space through ritual. In the times that I did not create those spaces, it had more to do with feeling so stressed and overextended that I did not feel as if I had the time to access these things. Gardner's (2015) scholarship, among others, served as a constant reminder that I had to take the time to first walk, surrender, pray and then write as part of the research process in order to listen and hear the spirit within myself.

Protective Factor #3: Leaving the institution

When the totality of Black women's experiences as PhD students is considered, it is any wonder why and how Black women decided to stay and endure in an institution that produced so much harm. Going back to the initial intent of this research, I originally sought out to understand the factors that caused some Black women to finish their programs and others to leave their programs. Not being able to secure any Black women PhD students who decided to leave programs that they once started at the University of Minnesota, I focused on the narratives of those who stayed.

Among the 9 participants, including myself, who came together around this research project, all had either finished their degree or were currently in the process of completion. Our progress, or matriculation through the program, however, should not be mistaken as acquiescence to the institution, or that they never felt like leaving. In fact, many of us did feel the longing to leave as a result of the impacts of spirit murder. Satara was one of them. She stated that as a result of what she experienced, she questioned the validity of staying within the institution and said,

> I felt very little interest in remaining in a space that fostered the kind of relationships to self and others I'd experienced while I was there, and I was unconvinced I'd be reaching the kind of students I was interested in (one of my advisors went pale when I brought up

> teaching at community college, and told me never to say it out loud again for my career's sake.) I knew I loved teaching and I knew I loved Black feminist theory. My side hustle had been DEI consulting but I hated the packaging and polish and cheapening of what happens in that industry. I didn't want to deliver anti-bias trainings to white folks for the rest of my life, but tenure track sounded like a slog. And they don't tell you that there is a whole world out there that will value your skills. I didn't even fully realize how 1) traumatic grad school had been 2) how outrageously toxic my department had been until I held positions elsewhere after graduation. All the rhetoric about how it's just hard to be in the academy and I needed to have thick skin was mostly.

This showed that some participants, even if they felt like leaving, did not ultimately do so because of time that was already invested in their programs; they did not want all that they had worked for to be done in vain. However, like Satara, while they may have decided to finish their degrees, not all were convinced that being in higher education or pursuing tenure track positions after graduation was the preferred path. Zahria felt committed to academia because of all of the time investment and labor, but wanted nothing to do with it when she was done, not only because of her own experience, but the experience of her advisor, a Black woman, who she witnessed go through significant hurdles to do her work. Looking at the example of this Black woman, who she identified with, she was able to see herself in her experiences and understand that she did not want the same level of pressure to proceed in academia beyond getting her degree. Crystal expressed similar emotions, stating that she felt hesitant in considering a career as a full time professor after all that she experienced. Others found ways of escape throughout their programs, including participants like Lisa who saw online learning as a protective measure or folks who found ways to get away from campus as much as possible like Denise who tried to leave the state

once a month, have friends or have come support her, and who found a way to do the last year of the program remotely. “I realized that the only way to navigate this institution and keep myself safe at the same time is to put as must distance (physical and emotional) between myself and the program,” said Denise. Even though these participants stayed in the program, we each in our own way also found ways to leave and detach for our own wellbeing, even if momentarily.

Protective Factor #4: Responsibility of the University

For some participants, wellness was directly related to what the institution could and should do. In instances like these, wellness not only necessitated self care but it also required telling the truth about our experience in order to get to that wellness. This was true for Blessing, who in thinking about how she could have received better care from the institution, spoke the truth about what that could have looked like. For her, wellness would have meant that it would be easier to “switch advisors and report professors. Training and workshops for both students and professors and faculty and staff on proper ways to engage with students; racial, gender, and sexual training…how to be a good and bad advisor (maybe given by previous graduate students both PhD and PhD’s who did not finish and masters).” Blessing’s sentiment addressed the power differential that exists between not only the advisor and the students, but the institution and the student. We feel immensely vulnerable to the institution, knowing that when we push back or stand up for ourselves for any reason that we compromise our ability to finish.

For Denise, an acknowledgment of the harm that had taken place was a way that she could have been better supported in her program. She explained,

> But if I had to go back I think one thing that would have greatly helped my wellbeing is a genuine acknowledgement of the harm caused to me. With the event surrounding the welcome program I discussed earlier, no one has claimed ownership or giving me a

> good explanation as to how it occurred. The only apology I received was that of the professor who told me "we know what it looks like but we didn't mean it that way." That fundamentally broke my trust in my program and also is how future concerns I brought to them were handled.

The lack of acknowledgement of the harm done kept Denise from engaging more fully in the institution. It created a wedge where she could not trust those in leadership to be honest, and could also not trust others to have her wellbeing in mind in decisionmaking. In many ways, Denise's reflections here again echo what we have already discussed as incidents of gaslighting, I chose to bring gaslighting back here, because of how deeply connected Denise's concepts of wellness were tied to her experience of being gaslit by the institution, and her expectation that the institution take responsibility to do better by her and other Black women. She herself went on to admit that as a result of the behavior she encountered, she spent so much time gaslighting herself in attempts to convince herself that what she was experiencing was okay.

Avery referenced the need for external systems of support in completing her degree as a resource that could enhance her wellness. She explained,

> On the one hand, there are friends and family members that understand the commitment going to school and working full time requires. I'm truly blessed to have them in my life. On the other hand, I have endured strains in my relationships because people couldn't appreciate the work and sacrifice needed to reach my goals. It just doesn't feel as though there's much intention in keeping the spaces and change alive. It's more of saying they tried it and just moved on. Who's pouring into our resources so we may be able to go out and make a change?

What Avery picked up on is the lack of empathy that Black women PhD students experienced inside of the institution and outside of it. There was a lack of empathy and consideration - from within the institution and without - that in order to be here, we had to juggle multiple priorities which included jobs, assistantships, family (including children and aging relatives), and social networks just to name a few. We were unable to separate ourselves from our lives, and though I am not recommending that we should be able to do so, the University did not always account for the complexity of our lives inside and outside of the classroom.

Protective Factor #5: Financial Resources

Financial resources was a stated theme for many participants as a risk factor, but it came up again when asked questions around what we needed to be well in higher education. Many reflected on the near poverty wages that they earned as PhD students, wages that could barely support them as students let alone their families. Participants, like Zahria, noted how the process affected their credit because of the expectation to be present at certain conferences in order to ensure that their research was relevant, while at the same time, not being paid enough to afford it.

Lisa also affirmed the need for more financial resources as students, explaining that even though she had a partner that worked full time and was in school, things were still tight financially. She stated,

> The amount we get paid as graduate students is not just about whether or not we're getting by. The amount of work I do at the U is astounding and I'm not even teaching this year. I'm part of a research project and the upkeep with emails and emotional support, on top of just the actual research part, is work that should be valued. And that value should be reflected in how much we all get paid. I am lucky in that my GAship does pay a fair wage - but when this GAship is over, I will revert to CLA's hourly wage unless I have a

> fellowship. That is simply untenable given the cost of everything these days. Gas in Minneapolis costs as much now as it did in California when I left in 2020. I went to Target the other day and eggs were $5 for a dozen.

The amount of work that students are asked to do, particularly Black women students, does not translate into wages that are sustainable. This is particularly true for us who in entering our PhD programs, are often coming into the programs saddled with debt, raising families, and carrying a host of other responsibilities in a state like Minnesota where the living wage for single adults with no children is $16.98 an hour, with one child is $35.61 an hour, and with two children is $45.87 an hour (Living Wage Calculator, Minnesota). This is not a matter of participants overexaggerating, but a matter of illustrating true disparities that keep Black women PhD students from being well.

Third Enactment: Reflecting on Participant Engagement with Analysis

After spending several months going through the data and analyzing it, I brought participants back for a final session to go over the major themes that I pulled out from the collective autoethnographic self study process. The purpose of this session was to give participants the opportunity to respond to the analysis that came forth in the sitting with the data derived from the survey and first two enactments. In doing so, I wanted to first share the research and then ask participants a series of questions to help me better understand how they related to the research. There were four questions that I asked – *How does the data reflected resonate with your experiences of Black women in higher education? What comes up in your body as you (re)member the experiences reflected in the data? What narratives are missing from the data? What cultural and/or spiritual practices can be taken up to help us metabolize negative experiences in higher education and move towards wellness?*

Sarah and Tawanna were two participants who only filled out the survey, but were invited to become participants in this session. The other four participants - Dele, Blessing, Denise, and Avery - filled out the survey and also wrote about their experiences in the second stage of the study with the autoethnographic self study process. At the time of this session, two of the participants had completed their programs. Others were at various stages of their programs, including myself and Denise, who were finishing up our 5th years. To witness our coming together was a community elder who in the witnessing, provided a weighing of the words, a culturally based practice of discerning the meaning in what was spoken. The elder who came together with us, though not a graduate of the University of Minnesota, graduated over 40 years with a doctoral degree in medicine and practiced at the University of Minnesota for quite a while in her career before retiring.

As all of the other sessions that I have facilitated with this group, I opened up the session with an opportunity for participants to center themselves through a grounding song, and then shared a poem from an anthology that the Aya Collective[18] recently produced. I then asked participants to share where they were in the program before sharing the research and asking the series of questions that I had prepared for our time together. In sharing out the research, I highlighted components of the literature review, the methodology, survey results, and results from the first and second enactments. In sharing these results, I concluded that Black women PhD student experiences could be surmised as experiences of spirit murder. Spirit murder came up due to the impact of the harm that they went through as students, assaults on their psyche that literally murdered their spirits, which had negative impacts on their mental and physical health.

[18] The Aya Collective is a space that I curate for Black women to come together and write in community with each other. As part of our work, we wrote and published an anthology in 2022, " *Let the Black Women Say Ase*" that spoke to the ways that Black women can affirm and validate each other.

Moving from the research, I asked participants if there were any questions about the research. Tawanna asked me a clarifying question about the literature review, and how I saw Black women's experiences in slavery akin to our experiences in higher education. Here, I went back to my research to talk specifically about the way that slavery was sustained by forcing Black women to reproduce children and also discussed the mammy figure as described by Sharpe (2016), Hills (2019), and Kaplan (2021), in the literature. I explained how I saw parallels of these experiences in higher education, specifically through usage of Hills (2019) concept of academic mammying and the way that he connects current practices in the institution that exploit and extract labor from Black women, to practices on the plantation.

After clarifying and holding fast to my commitment to illustrate the through lines between slavery and academia for Black women, I presented participants with the questions and gave them a few minutes to reflect on them before opening it up to a discussion. Several themes emerged.

The feeling

Looking at the data, all participants said that they saw themselves reflected in the data, and as a result, found themselves simultaneously affirmed that they were not "crazy" as Denise described. Participants also felt immensely overwhelmed and sad seeing the data presented. Sarah said that she began to lay down her head as her body (re)membered the experience of being in that space. "Even articulating it is hard for me right now," Sarah said. Vanessa felt tightness in her chest, along with feeling anxious and frustrated over what we have collectively experienced.

Avery said that she felt suffocated, in a sense, from the mental and emotional weight that fell on her shoulders as a result of being in academia. The experience of Black women in higher

education made her think about Henrietta Lacks and all of the benefits and advancements that have been made because of what we have sacrificed. “Our contributions to academia have really moved things forward,” Avery said. “But at what cost?”

Avery’s reflection brought into question the whole validity of higher education research when we know what has been done to our people in the name of it. The research by Tuck & Yang (2014), as well as Linda Smith’s work on *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (2012), are both critical here as they both demonstrated the real ethical dilemma associated with research of indigenous and marginalized peoples. Tuck & Yang (2014) defined the process as “Inquiry as Invasion.”

> Inquiry as invasion is a result of the imperative to produce settler colonial knowledge and to produce it for the academy. This invasion imperative is often disguised in universalist terms of producing “objective knowledge” for “the public.” It is a thin disguise, as most research rhetoric waxes the poetics of empire: to discover, to chart new ter- rain, to seek new frontiers, to explore, and so on. The academy’s unrelenting need to produce “original research” is what makes the inquiry an invading structure, not an event (p. 813).

Reflecting on Tuck & Yang’s thinking here left me challenged in my own research, even as the research was about me and my own community who are similarly positioned within academia. It brought into question who and what the research on behalf of Black women was for, and if in pursuit of that as Black scholars in particular, if we were able to accomplish the good that we were hopeful the research would bring. Additionally, it brought up the question of consent and who gets to consent. As Tuck & Yang (2014) stated, individuals get to consent to processes that give away their and their communities stories and knowledge; communities are

not empowered to do the same. But even in the individual consent process, I had to grapple with whether or not consent was trite and redundant for persons who had no rights, or no ontology apart from whiteness. As Hartman (1997) stated, "the slave is indisputably outside the normative terms of individuality to such a degree that the very exercise of agency is seen as a contravention of another's unlimited rights to the object" (p. 62). So even as the lead researcher of this body of work, bringing along other Black women PhD students, the question of our own consent raised serious doubts about whether we could ultimately belong and have our work, and our very selves, legible inside of the institution.

For the sake of legibility, we have given away precious pieces of ourselves that we cannot get back. This was Dele's experience as she reflected on the analysis in the context of her own experience as a PhD student. She stated

> I have often wondered what unseen things were being transactioned when I was in conversation with white students and faculty. I knew that I spoke with passion yet many conversations ended with me feeling as if though I had just unconsciously given them something – validation, representation, social positioning – and it made me think about Black teachers as curriculum texts; that's beautiful when talking about Black students…but in academia, it feels like we're (Black women) used as curriculum texts. So when it talks about what comes up in my body, it was this feeling exploited or knowing that I gave something but not always knowing what I just gave.

Dele's reflection allowed me to reflect on the same questions of consent, power, and legibility, and the lengths that we taken to be found legible, human, in academia, in search of an "objective" place that will take us for who we are without bias or discrimination. What we haven't realized, perhaps, is that the notion of objectivity, and what constitutes real science, was

constructed as a means to justify oppression (Ladson-Billing, 2000; Tuck & Yang, 2015). If this was the case, even our acts of agency and resistance only reify our current reality, as do our acts of passivity and acquiescence. It's more than a damned if you do, and damned if you don't; because in this place as Black women we lived in a constant state of damnation, "that we are Black peoples in the wake with no state or nation to protect us, with no citizenship bound to be respected" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 22).

Understanding this, Tawanna questioned what the point of the struggle, of deciding to be in this place, was profound and necessary. All of the work that we have done as Black women PhD students, to wrestle with theory, concepts, and present our best work: what has it ultimately led to and who has it ultimately been for, when we were so disposable, so unacknowledged, so disrespected (not only on campus but also in our homes were we can encounter more violence if we are living with white or white passing folks, or others who are antagonistic to Blackness, as Blessing reminded us). And perhaps, the point is to figure it out, to figure out collectively how we will live in the "wake of slavery, in slavery's afterlives, the afterlife of property" (Sharpe, 2016 p. 50).

Wanting to feel validated

One of the ways that we have attempted to live in the wake is by seeking external validation and affirmation from others, and we – as Black women – have sought this validation from academia. And it makes sense that we have when we have been so disregarded and beat down as Black women, when our whole ontology has existed in proximity to whiteness and what we were able to reproduce, that we would go to the highest source of validation in the land in order to attain a sense of being that we have not had before.

Based on the research and the comments from participants, I believe that we have to understand our need for validation as Black women, period, before we can begin to understand that academia cannot and has not provided that to us. Tawanna questioned, "What drew us to these institutions only to experience these things? How much knowledge has already come before us? What was I trying to gain?" At an intrinsic level, Tawanna was like the rest of us, searching for meaning and belonging in a society that not did not give that to us, but that routinely embarrassed, insulted, and demeaned our person as Black women. She, like the rest of us, was wise in going to the institutions that have named us for that validation, to prove to the rest of the world that yes, we breathe, we are human, we are legitimate. What else were we supposed to do in order to escape the hold, as we still believed that there was a means to escape the madness?

Dele was left with the need for the validation to come from within, understanding that what she needed was already inside of her. But she acknowledged that she was looking for validation from other Black folks, without being seen as a threat. Was there room for more than one of us, or two of us, she questioned? She also expressed the desire to be validated within and among Black communities, a need that many of the participants considered important. She felt like she was stuck between two realities, needing to feel accepted within academia, but also needing to prove her Blackness, how authentic and legible she was as a Black person. Her sentiments echoed those of Du Bois (1903) expressed in his framework of double consciousness - *one soul, two unreconciled strivings.*

Needing to (re)member our stories of strength and resilience

As participants reflected on the data, one of the things that they did see missing was the telling of the resources that we drew on to get us through academia. Reflecting on her own

experience, Sarah inquired about the tools of resistance that we each took up. “What is the wisdom list,” she asked? Connecting our experiences to those who have gone before us, she asked what are the paths and the pedagogies that we are leaving for those coming behind us. I appreciated Sarah’s question because it helped me (re)member the practices that came up from the research that I mistakenly left out of the analysis. I was so focused on getting the data right, feeling pushed up against the clock as I waited for IRB approval for this last leg of my research, that I forgot to tell the whole story about our experience. I forgot to share that while there has been a lot of harm done, there have also been things that we have done to resist and stand firm in spite of the harm.

Tawanaa helped me to (re)member as she shared some of her strategies which included getting back in tune with mind, body, and spirit. This included coming to terms with where she was, refocusing during times of unexpected tragedies, going to therapy, and having experiences that allowed her to renew her commitment to stay in academia for her own sense of purpose. She noted how after her first semester in school, she felt lost because she didn’t see herself reflected in the texts, and couldn’t hear her own voice. But this all changed once she had a chance to (re)connect to the continent and (re)claim her identity as an African ascended person.

> Being able to go to Jamaica and then go over to Africa that latter part of the year, to Cameroon, Ghana and Liberia, and have time for self-reflection but also like to be in spaces you know that were really powerful…I went to some of the slave markets and the other Slave castles that what they call them but those dungeons and like really filling in by like just filling all of that, having my feet to touch some of the war like all of that like just was ..it was like a confirmation for me to, to stay the course, and to really center my wellness.

Sarah likewise shared how (re)connecting back to the continent was pivotal for her wellbeing throughout her time as a student. She found herself unexpectedly going back home after her grandmother suffered a stroke within her first year of being a student and passed away. Reflecting on the experience, Sarah stated,

> I didn't care about not passing my class. I didn't care about anything. I just cared about being with her on this last voyage because it was taken away because I was pursuing a degree. So that for me was the biggest shift. And I came back with a resolution that I had to learn my language and I had to learn my history. And that's how I set my path. Through the PhD program.

It is important to emphasize that for the participants who were present, two of them noted having such powerful moments in going back to Africa and named them as sources of resilience in getting through academia. I also named this as a protective factor for me in the second enactment, sharing how my time in Ghana was so critical to my wellbeing that it not only allowed me to refocus my energies, but it allowed me to produce a text about my experience, "*Incomplete stories: On loss, love, and hope"* (Aya, 2023). Additionally, this practice of going back to the land was echoed in Dillard's (2006, 2012, 2016) premise of EFE, and in the framework outlined in her most recent text, "*The spirit of our work: Black teachers (re)membe*r" (2022) which spoke to the process of (re)membering consisting of acts of (re)searching, (re)visioning, (re)cognizing, (re)presenting, and (re)claiming. I expanded on Dillard's (2022) framework by also including the concept of (re)connection, specifically as it related to the continent, but also as it related to (re)connecting with the pieces of ourselves in order to belong or be found legible in places where we are discounted.

These acts of (re)connection, if only momentarily, have allowed us to (re)member who we were prior to the stench of enslavement and the process of forced forgetting, if only partially. Partially, because, we must forever contend with the fact that enslavement, just as much as it has harmed those in the diaspora, harmed those who remained on the continent as well – even if in different ways. Patterson (2018) (re)minded us that wherever slavery was practiced on the continent, that relationships were drastically impacted. Hartman (2007) (re)minded us that those who remain on the continent, out of shame of slavery, have gone through a process of forced forgetting and distancing of themselves from those of us who went through the Atlantic – "who and what are you?" (p. 56), she recounted being asked by an older African man during her stay in Ghana. *Obruni.* Someone who doesn't belong, who doesn't share a common identity. Hartman's (2007) work (re)minded us once again that we are without position, or citizenship in this space in the hold. We return, then, not because we are returning to some elusive place free from conflict and willing to embrace us who have been left wanting in the diaspora. We return because it is the only process that can put us on the path of beginning to (re)member who were before we were strangers. And maybe in the process of (re)turn, we help those who remained to (re)member our names, the shapes of our faces, and our likeness. Dillard (2022) clarified this and stated that to go back to the continent is not about curing "whatever is inside of us that diaspora has wrought. But this is about the absolute necessity for Black people to affirm who we are as Black people, grounded in our knowledges, our cultures, and who we really are wherever we find ourselves on the planet" (p. 29).

Weighing of the words

After spending some time in dialogue, our elder for the evening offered her wisdom through the process of *weighing of the words*. Again, weighing of the words is counted as an

African spiritual process of hearing the beat between the words, not just the lyrics, to discern the meaning. It's not just about what is said, but what is left unsaid, through facial expressions and other nonverbal cues.

The first thing that the elder noted was the missing vulnerability as a result of being on zoom, as opposed to in person, and not being on the camera. She helped us (re)member that we have all been deeply impacted by the social distancing required during COVID that has and continues to impact our relationships. We have become immensely comfortable in not showing our faces and distancing ourselves from each other to protect ourselves and our environment as there is something that happens, I believe, when people have visual access to our intimate spaces. This went back to what Dele was saying about access and what we allow people to have access to, what is being transactioned in merely being on camera? But it also brought to mind the limits of this research, and caused me to question what could happen if we were all doing this work face to face. What other things would transpire and rise to the surface that were not present in the online space?

Elder continued and began to recount the heaviness that was felt among participants as I described what was happening. "Double consciousness, gendered racism, academic mammying, spirit murder – the terms were there as little explosions that bore out on how our bodies reacted to the words that we heard, feeling overwhelmed and anxious, our body (re)members what has happened," she said. As we re-narrated the experiences that were shared of making ourselves smaller, crouching, and feeling anxious, she stated that what we were describing was the experience of trauma. "Articulating it is difficult, but naming it is powerful," she said.

Elder compared what was happening to us as the devastation of war and the ravaging of the countryside where war has taken place. And explained that there was a real sense of betrayal

because the war took place in an institution that promised us an education. She stated that there was almost a sense that even if we weren't necessarily better off, that at least we understood the dynamics if we had stayed in the hood surrounded by its violence. "I went to education and the war was worse because I didn't have my armor on," she said. Her words again made me consider the necessity for us to figure out how to consider the cost of what it really means to be here, the material cost yes, which includes not just the financial cost, but what it costs our spirit. "Stuck in the fact that a degree could give us validation. Working so hard to find value, that I lose capacity to belong to self and community," said Elder.

If we must stay, then, we have to be committed to cataloging the practices that enable us to stay. Reflecting on Elder Semerit's words here, I am reminded that there are Black women who are coming behind us, just as Sarah stated, and the tension that I spoke about in the second enactment around how and if we show the fullness of our stories in the archive. For the sake of the Black women coming behind us, who will undoubtedly struggle with the same thing that we struggled with, who will be isolated, who will be called crazy and led to believe that they are overacting, we have to write the practices down that have allowed us to endure, to be resilient; or we must commit to leave and never return to this place, so that another Black woman does not have to be counted as chattel for this institution that accumulates bodies.

Elder closed her reflections where I opened my remarks, reflecting on the impact of slavery and its connection to higher education for Black women Phd students. She underscored the fact that the violence within academia parallels the same violence that happened in slavery, as we consider the way that Black women were obligated to take care of white students and white people in a way that we could take care of our own within higher education. But the care that we provided is dismissed; there are layers of devastation and dismissal, the way that our bodies are

available, accessible, and used without permission, she noted going back to Dele's reflections. "You took something from me, and I participated in it," she said. Her words were reminiscent of the choreopoem from Ntozake Shange, "*For Colored Girls*,"

> Somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff
>
> not my poems or a dance I gave in da street
>
> but somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuf
>
> like a kleptomanic working hard and forgetting while stealing
>
> this is mine/it ain't yr stuff (p. 63).

As in slavery, there has been a ravaging and drying up of Black women's bodies, in a literal and metaphorical sense, something we cannot get back even if we tried. The reflections of the participants, during this session as well as previous sessions, illustrated how we were trained to not talk about it, under the adage that we are somehow privileged to be here, or rather, we were not only been seduced into forgetfulness (Dillard, 2012) but silence as well. "There are incredible insults to our intelligence, to deny our experience but we can't really talk about that because we are privileged," she said.

As we closed out that evening, and I asked participants to share a quick word regarding how they were feeling as they left the space, I heard several state that while they felt affirmed in their experiences, that they also felt tired and drained as a result of being confronted with the truth of those of experiences as articulated in their own words. Leaning into the spirit, it felt appropriate to model in that moment a resilient practice that has gotten us through as Black people, from generation to generation. Scrolling through my Spotify playlist as others continued to offer their words, I landed on a song that I wanted us to dance out to. As the last person offered their words, I invited those who were interested to stay and dance in order metabolize or

discharge (Menakem, 2017) negative energy. As the song began to play, I noticed that no one left, and that though most cameras were still off, I imagined that those on the other side of the screen, began to move. I myself got freer in my expression, dancing in my seat initially because I felt a little self conscious, before I got up and began to dance more expressively, lifting up my hands in worship because the moment felt divine and sacred.

I'm grateful for this work that was hard in so many ways even as it was rewarding in others. I am grateful that I had the ability to bring other women, other Black women into the sacredness of the work. The heaviness that reflecting on our own stuff can cause and how we move through it is our secret dance that the world doesn't always get to see. In a way, I was grateful for the zoom screens that were blank that evening so that even as we made some things transparent by our collective witness of what has happened to us, the dance still remained secret.

Chapter 5: How Then Shall We Live?

Through the stories, layers of research of analysis, and time spent reflecting on these things with myself and others, I came to see that the experiences of Black women in higher education PhD students in higher education could be defined along the following lines: experiences of gaslighting and abuse; struggling with belonging and connection; and being overworked and uncompensated. These three themes themselves were connected to the much larger conceptual framework that I drew at the beginning of double consciousness, gendered racism, academic mammying, and spirit murder.

Summary

Violent and abusive behaviors

Reflecting back on the research, it was evident that Black women PhD students experienced abusive behaviors in the form of gaslighting and epistemic violence. Participants showed, through expounding on the depths of their experience, just how much the academic institution regularly practiced acts of violence to marginalize, humiliate, and sometimes silence Black women PhD students. Gaslighting took place when Black women PhD students pushed back, or talked back against some of the harm that they were experiencing, and those claims were met with denial or demands to prove that assault had taken place. Yet the burden of proving harm, particularly when the harm isn't physical, is tricky and complex, and often left students more confused and isolated.

Epistemic violence among Black women PhD students took place when their ways of knowing or perspective were not validated. Moreover, this violence occurred when course curriculum and content did not center Black and African voices, or when there was content that did have Black and African representation, but only as a cursory to what the main, or

predominant framework was. In naming these abuses, it is important to note that very few participants discussed the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion, other than to push back against this framework that often still avowed the institution and marginalized students.

At its core, these behaviors reinforced feelings of double consciousness, where Black women PhD students saw themselves through the eyes of others. In enduring or rather surviving violence, it was simply impossible to see oneself in any other way, unless one decided to separate themselves from the institution and take up practices that allowed themselves to (re)member and (re)claim who they were.

Belonging and Connecting

The issue of belonging and connecting was another theme that was picked up from the research, as participants discussed the degree to which they felt belonging or connection to the institution. By and large, participants did not feel belonging because, in addition to the violent behaviors, they were routinely isolated and left out of opportunities to receive mentorship, publish, or be recommended for funding opportunities. Moreover, participants discussed that there were very few places where they were able to bring their full selves and find connection within the institution.

These practices were very much indicative of double consciousness and academic mammying. Double consciousness because as Dillard (2006) told us, it is within the context of community that the individual appears. Without community or belonging, students cannot realize their full selves and can take on perceptions about themselves that do not actually reflect who they are. At the same time, however, I noted that some students, as an act of resistance and agency, choose not to belong. “It is also possible that when we encourage belonging, we are inviting students to belong to historically violent institutions, or acculturating students into the

academy as opposed to radically shifting existing structures" (de Bie, Marquis, Cook-Sather, and Luqueno, 2021, p. 67). Here it was clear that there was a politics of refusal at work to resist not just belonging itself, but the tendency to assimilate, acculturate, or become adjusted in a place that is violent. This is some of what Lisa alluded to in her writing. Whereas other students longed for belonging, her stance against belonging could also be read as not wanting to be complicit or associated with the harm that the university causes.

Being overworked and undercompensated

Another theme that was prominent in the research was that of being overworked and undercompensated. Here participants discussed the ways that they felt deceived or tricked into taking on more of their fair share of work. They also felt unrealistic expectations attached to their assistantships where they felt coerced to bear responsibilities that should have fallen on their advisors or those who were receiving a salary for their work. Finally, there was a sense that there was an absence of empathy for the lives and responsibilities of Black women PhD students outside of the classroom.

Instead of being a space where participants felt like they could talk about the ways that they were experiencing these uneven burdens, some held back their concerns out of fear of retaliation. Instead of speaking out, they grinned and bore it, or strength'd it, as other Black women have done within and outside of academia for generations, showing that our experiences here were so much a part of academic mammying.

Spirit murder and surviving the institution

The more that I sat with the research conclusions, the clearer it was for me that spirit murder was the result of all of these things, significantly impacting our mental, physical, and spiritual health. As a result of this, Black women PhD students were often left with one of two

choices in regards to pursuing their studies: either stay in and try to survive or leave. While there were only two participants from the survey research who left out of 43 participants, and no one among the participants who did, it was clear that the prospect of leaving was at the top of mind for many. The main incentive to remain in the program, even in the midst of the spirit murder that they endured, was the time that they had already spent in the program, or believing that they would have more agency with what they could do professionally once they finished their programs, even if that wouldn't be in higher education.

In staying, Black women's main resource was to take up a variety of tools or resources that could support them and enable them to survive with their sanity intact. These resources included support networks, wellness practices, and spiritual and cultural practices that allowed people to (re)member themselves by (re)connecting with the continent of Africa in various ways.

Discussion

In talking through the research findings with a dear friend of mine who was also a PhD student at the University, I discussed with her the lack of support that some participants experienced throughout their program. And how much they craved that from advisors, professors and the institution itself as they tried to navigate an environment that was more concerned about output and what students were producing, than the condition of the human spirit.

"I'm going to share with you what someone shared with me," my friend said. "From this point on, don't think that you can share what you may have going on personally. It doesn't matter. You cannot think that you are going to get support as a student. You have to operate as if you are not going to get it. And if you get the support, that's great. But if you don't, it won't trip you up. I learned this the hard way with my own advisors. I felt that they were trying to teach me how to navigate the space without them, and to figure things out on my own."

I listened to her words and felt grieved in my spirit. “It is heartbreaking to hear this,” I said. “That we (Black women PhD students) have to go about the institution like this. Many of us are first generation college students and are unfamiliar with the hidden curriculum and what is expected in higher education. Many of us just need that love and support from other folks who are going to be in our corner.”

“And you will get that,” said my friend. “Just not from the institution.”

Her words left me feeling misty eyed and heavy hearted, understanding that for all of the research, all of the programming, all of the words that we write to change the conditions, that this was ultimately the experience for Black women PhD students. But it was not that Black women are asking for something that others do not receive; we were asking for something that was part and parcel to the human experience, something that flowed to our white counterparts with relative ease. The inability to support Black women PhD students, then, was an absolute refusal to recognize our needs, our humanity, and our complex identities under the guise of rigor. And for all of the policy and programmatic changes that we could advocate for, and even institutionalize, the reality was that institutions built on the unacknowledged and uncompensated labor of Black women PhD students won’t change. The premise of racial capitalism, or that of racial exploitation and capital accumulation, can help us understand the near improbable reality of change in higher education, when white advancement is paramount. Bringing together critical race theory and Black marxism to examine the implications on higher education, Cowley (2022), explained,

> The reality is that non-whiteness is primarily and disproportionately beneficial to white people and white institutions, so even as universities enroll increasingly diverse student bodies, Black students still suffer. The logics of race and capital

> interlock to produce 'educational injustice and, more broadly, in the neoliberal economic, spatial, and social restructuring … for capital accumulation and racial exclusion and containment.' Inclusive excellence extracts value from Black students by ushering them into predominantly white institutions in the name of *fairness and opportunity*, but ultimately leaves many of them dissatisfied, underemployed, and in debt — reproducing whiteness (p. 212).

Taking racial capitalism and the realities of higher education, born out by research including the experiences of my participants, I asked myself what was our obligation to continue to participate in an institution that not only has murdered our spirits, but has made us second guess ourselves, exploited our labor even as they insist that we are not working hard enough. Here I had to reflect on the ways that we have navigated and survived institutions like the University of Minnesota across generations. How we have survived across generations is not akin to getting out of the ship's hold; it's a testament to the enduring spirit, the tenacity, the vigilance, the endurance of Black women, a spirit that we inherited from our grandmothers and grandfathers before us, that gave us the tools, encoded on our DNA to make it through. Our bodies (re)membered the pain and the horror, but our bodies also (re)membered the ring shout, the call and response, the calling on the name of Jesus, and our ancestors, singing and clapping, laughing and tears, signifying and testifying. In order to tap into these resources moving forward, we cannot separate ourselves from our peoplehood, as the institution has seduced us into doing - *forget the spirit, forget the legacy, you are better off here than there*. This is the lie that we have resisted, and in so doing, have come full circle so that we can be truly whole and resilient human beings. This is the beginning of our healing.

Yet and still, sometimes, I think we want to rush through the hard narratives because of how they make us feel. The despair, the lament over being continuously in the hold of the ship is too much to bear. In the space of the last session with participants, we felt this. We felt the overwhelm, the tightness in the chest, the fawning, and the shrinking as we heard the truth of our experience and the way that we have been harmed. We did not know how to stay in this place of despair, of weakness, because we did not know how to cope with it without drowning our sorrows with maladaptive practices. In other words, we were terrified to grieve (Gay, 2022), terrified not only to bear witness to our own sorrow, but the sorrows of other participants. Yet, in the space of lament and grief, we not only are more able to acknowledge the sadness, despair, and a whole host of emotions inside of us, on the other side of grief, and sometimes in the midst of it, there is unspeakable joy. Gay (2022) inquired, "what happens if joy is not separate from pain? What if joy and pain are fundamentally tangled up with one another? Or even more to the point, what if joy is not only entangled with pain, or suffering, or sorrow, but is also what emerges from how we care for each other through these things" (p. 4)?

Ultimately, this sense of joy is where we must get to in this work as Black women PhD students, and why I believe, we must hold theories such as Afropessimism in concert with EFE, among other theories that center our beingness as African ascended people connected to the Divine. In spite of our peculiar existence, joy is always accessible and cannot be taken away. This is why our ancestors, in spite of what they faced danced and shouted (Adedayo, 2020) because they realized that though their bodies were chained, their spirits could not be completely held captive. And perhaps, this is where the endurance of Black women – wherever we are, including as PhD students – truly comes from: our ability to access joy regardless of the awfulness of the situations that we found ourselves in, joy nurtured in grief and sorrow that

recreated life and opportunity again and again because we refused, as a collective, to give up on ourselves, even if we give up on the institutions that have caused us pain. And in the space of joy, we really are able to imagine the otherwise possibilities (Crawley, 2017), the possibilities of being well as Black women whether we decide to exist within academia or not.

Implications

Integrated Ecosystem of Support

The study illustrated the complex factors that go into ensuring not only Black women's success but our wellbeing in participating in doctoral programs. It is not enough for Black women to matriculate through our programs; we must be well. Our minds must be intact. Our spirits must be whole. In order to realize this, the Black women at the academic institution in Minnesota, in particular, showed that they needed circles of support to be well in higher education. A circle of support includes actual people: colleagues, mentors, sister circles and family. But it also includes material (money) and nonmaterial (spirituality/passion/conviction) factors that keep Black women going in their programs as demonstrated by Davis (2008) and Dillard (2016).

Love (2019) spoke about the importance of her own circle who allowed her to thrive during her K-12 experience and eventually make it out of the hood. Love's circle was full of teachers, mentors, caring albeit struggling parents, coaches, and other individuals who connected her to opportunities that enabled her to excel. Reflecting on this, Love stated, "as grateful as I am, it saddens me that it took so many people to get one little dark girl out of economic and racial isolation" (p. 83). The reality is that economic and racial isolation is the very thing that necessitates the circle. Very few of us make it out and up on our own. Instead, we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us as well as those who support us in the present.

This circle of support, as evidenced by Love, is not only a protective factor but reflects community cultural wealth, a model constructed by Yosso (2005) to articulate the immense amount of nonmaterial wealth that students of color possess. Yosso's model, which highlighted aspirational, navigational, resistance, familial, cultural, and social capital, showed that when students can tap into these things, they are empowered to "recognize and affirm the wealth they already have to fight racism" (Love, 2019, p. 139). While Yosso constructed this model focusing on K-12 students, and in particular Latinx students, and Love (2019) focused on dark students in K-12, Black women PhD can also draw inspiration from their findings to consider its application in their own lives.

Reflecting on this circle of support that is needed, I am proposing a model that fully supports the needs and experiences of Black women called the *Integrated Ecosystem of Support* (IES). The IES is based on the premise that Black women need more strategic, integrated support systems to be well in the academy[19].

The Internal System of Support

Building on our values as Black women, the model places a high priority on one's internal support system, including spirituality and sacred practices, cultural practices, self-care practices, and/or a self growth plan. The internal system serves as the center or grounding of one's sense of support because it is the place from which we build resilience and capacity through sacred practices such as prayer and meditation, self care rituals, acts of resistance, and rest. For many Black women, and Black people as a whole, the sense of spirituality and utilization of sacred practices is essential to our wellbeing, and ability to navigate difficult spaces, including academia. Speaking to her own experience, Davis (2008) described the importance of sacred practices in her own life: "ritual has been for me a way of helping to create

[19] I provide a framework for this model in appendix C.

the focus and silence for the journey . . . the essence of ritual is the silence at the center, the place past preoccupation, boredom, restlessness, where belief can occur (178).” The belief in a higher power, or something bigger than ourselves, keeps us grounded and gives us the courage to face insurmountable obstacles. Drawing on that something bigger, her foremothers, is what gave Davis the ability to keep moving forward in her doctoral program instead of giving up:

> I was visited as in a dream by three enslaved Black women. They came to me collectively, but each of them spoke individually. The first woman said. "Little daughter, you must not give up. You have got to be here to tell our stories. You have been trained to tell the world about us….Chile, you got to hang on. just fo' a little while longer, it ain't gon' be long now. Whatever you do. dontcha* get turned around, girl. You come too far now (p. 180).

Sacred acts of resistance are also part and parcel of strengthening the internal system of support for Black women PhD students. These acts of resistance allow us to (re)member ourselves and (re)claim rituals, practices, and ceremonies that we have long forgotten, and are things that we bring to bear both privately and publicly to resist the violence that we experience through the institution. This can involve movement, bringing an ancient act like the ring shot and performing it on the institutions’ land as an act of (re)clamation and (re)membering that the institution that regularly practices violence against Black women exists on stolen land wrought by the hands of the stolen labor of our ancestors. It can also include private and public grieving to commemorate the atrocities that have happened to Black women PhD students over the span of generations. These things speak to our individual and collective ability to conjure and transform spaces through rituals and ceremonies. And while some of these acts may have a very

public element to them, they also have the ability to strengthen the internal system of support for Black women.

Familial and community support

Familial and community support is an integral part of the IES because it was such a highly referenced point of resilience for Black women participants. They desired spaces, both inside and outside of academia, that could give them the supportive environments that were often found in the family setting. The desire for places that looked and felt like home mentioned in Love's (2019) text drew on a reference from hooks (1990) where she recounted homeplaces as sites of resistance. hooks stated that homeplaces, in spite of how tenuous these places can be, have been spaces that have provided a radical political dimension for Black women. "Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist" (p. 384). hooks and the experiences of research participants illustrated the importance of homeplaces in the lives of Black women PhD students, and that in order to be able to simultaneously resist racial apartheid and be affirmed in our identity, that these places are needed.

Family networks that are nurturing and sustaining are critical. This includes natural family relationships - significant others, parents, and extended relatives. But it also includes fictive family networks that Black women, and Black people as a whole, form out of necessity and proximity. This stems from a long tradition in the Black community, of forming families and communities along the way as a means of self preservation and belonging in the harshest of environments, including the plantation. The ability of Black people to reach across culture, language barriers, and other identity markers, for the sake of solidarity in the midst of chattel slavery was critical to our survival. The research of Taylor, Gebre, and Tuzo (2016) on the

ethnic-racial identities of African American students validated this showing that "female college students were more likely to use social supports for emotional coping than males…students from low-income households were more likely to use social support than those from high income households" (p. 181).

These family and community networks need to exist both outside of academia and within it. We cannot isolate ourselves from our social networks simply for the sake of our degrees, and must, to the furthest extent possible, remain rooted and grounded in these spaces that have been nurturing for us, even as we do our part in making sure that these spaces remain healthy by reciprocating love and care. And while academia can mirror the plantation in many ways, the point here is that Black women need to be able to find spaces within the institution where we can create these fictive kinships, and where we can find a sense of home even if not to the fullest extent. These are places where we can show up, be our full selves, and be accepted for who we are.

Sista Scholar Friends (SSF) are one way that I have conceptualized the integration of family and community for Black women. SSF's are Black women, who are similarly situated in higher education, and are folks who you love and do life together with inside of the institution and outside of it. SSF are people who show up for each other, research and do work together as the occasion arises. They will be your biggest champions, they will be those you celebrate and who will celebrate with you. You know their families, their triumphs and their heartaches. And it goes beyond surface level relationships, this your tribe. And yes, you will have many different sets of friends, but it is something unique about SSF because they will understand you in ways that your friends and family outside of higher education won't. They will understand the

dynamics of higher education, and what it takes to get through the process without losing your soul or sense of self.

My SSF have been a saving grace for me throughout my PhD journey. My SSF have been there through seasons of loss (transitioning out of the clergy, divorce, my mom suffering with dementia) and have also been there in seasons of triumph in the same ways that I have been there for them through celebrations of marriage, completing their degrees, etc. Though I never pledged in a sorority, these women embody everything that sisterhood means. And I am eternally grateful.

Faith and cultural spaces

The value of faith and cultural spaces for Black women in higher education, as PhD students, faculty, and staff, serve as means of (re)membering in spaces where we have been forced to forget. In line with the concepts of cultural study, this can take the form of being mentored by champions and elders who can support one's navigation through challenging spaces. According to the Cultural Wellness Center, a champion is someone who exists within the institution or line of work that you are in and helps you move through it by showing you the way that they survived. An elder, on the other hand, though they may be connected to the same institution, also provides a level of spiritual and cultural connection.

Further centering Dillard's work, and specifically the model around (re)membering that she initially presented in her article, "*Turning the Ships Around"* (2016) and later in her book, *"Spirit of Our Work"* (2022), these spaces enable us to (re)claim the parts of ourselves that we have abandoned as they serve as invitations to be in community with others and also enable us to create sanctuary away from oppression. Speaking to the way that this has been practiced historically in the Black community, Dillard (2022) expounded on the history of hush harbors:

> Hush harbors, sometimes called brush harbors, were places of freedom and worship for our ancestors, even after emancipation in the US and beyond…a hush harbor enabled Africans the freedom to combine African knowings, culture, and spiritual practices with the required practices of Christian religion they enacted in front of slave masters and white families (p. 151).

This history appears to get to the heart of what participants reflected on in their lifting up of spaces and places that honored their cultural and spiritual selves. Though participants did not identify these spaces and places as hush harbors, I applied the same line of thinking to further illustrate the importance of having spaces for Black women where we can be ourselves apart from the white gaze.

This, I believe, is one of the reasons why it is so important for many Black people to travel back to the continent in order to be immersed, if even for a little while, in an environment where we can "(re)member our spiritualities as Black people and our legacies of resistance, persistence, and responsibility…because when we (re)member our covenants with the ancestors on whose shoulders we stand today, it is our living demonstration of the commitment that is required to teach Black students in their wholeness" (Dillard, 2022, p. xvii).

Academic support

Black women PhD students can and do create examples of hush harbors outside of academic institutions everyday. This is important for our wellbeing and sanity. While we can and should look to shore up support for our studies in communities and spaces where we find the most belonging, we likewise cannot accept the treatment that we receive as Black female students living at the intersection of multiple marginal identities. This means distinguishing between the work that will help us be better researchers and scholars, and what is actually spirit

murder and epistemic violence. This is why there is a need for Black women PhD students to also find hush harbors within academic institutions, even as we understand that unless dismantled and abolished, academia will be a space that always reinforces racial capitalism.

This has to start with having a pedagogy that is not only liberatory in its content (what we teach) but in its praxis (how we teach). In her work, *Teaching to Transgress* (2017), hooks reflected on this, asking the purpose and impact of supposedly liberatory theories like feminism that assaults the learners that are oppressed. Asked hooks (2017), "what use is feminist theory that literally beats them down, leaves them stumbling bleary-eyed from classroom settings feeling humiliated, feeling as though they could easily be standing in a living room or bedroom somewhere naked with someone who has seduced them or who is going to" (p. 65). While hooks' description may feel crass, the reality is that one of the needs of Black women at the University of Minnesota is not only to have liberatory pedagogy taught in the classroom, but to have it taught in such a way where we leave feeling esteemed rather than further marginalized. This includes validating the lived experience and perspectives of Black women PhD students, including when it comes to research, rather than dismissing them as ungeneralizable or irrelevant (Cozart & Generett (2011/2012).

Fortunately, there are many examples of Black women who have created spaces for us to exist inside of academia, many of which focus on sister circles or mentoring of some sort (Cook, 2013; Green & King, 2002; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005). Speaking to the importance and existence of sister circles for Black women in higher education, Davis and Peters (2022) wrote about their SistUH Scholar Initiative which was "simultaneously a grassroots initiative - in response to needs articulated by Black doctoral women in the department - and our intentional approach to

group mentoring and socialization. Furthermore, the SistUH Scholar assisted us in achieving alignments between our scholarly and service commitments" (p. 95).

In establishing their SistUH Scholar network, Davis and Peters also drew on the history of this intervention, calling it a sista circle methodology as articulated by Johnson (2015). Johnson recognized the throughlines of sista circles not just in higher education but starting in the late 1800s. She wrote, "During this era, Black women transformed sista circles into formalized Black women's clubs, Black women's clubs provided a space for Black women to discuss the issues that impacted them and ways to uplift the Black race" (p. 44).

Additionally, we need supportive faculty and advisors. Throughout the research, many participants mentioned how necessary it was to have faculty and advisors who were supportive of their experience, as well as advisors that looked like them. Several of them named the benefits of working with BIPOC faculty members, and how it reduced their experiences of spirit murder. The reality, however, is that BIPOC faculty, including Black women faculty, have often encountered the same types of difficulties as Black women PhD students but at higher levels since they have likewise gone through the tenure process. Similar to the concept of champions as previously expressed, we need supportive faculty and advisors who will help us get through the academic process in one piece.

Material support

In order to have the material support to be well as PhD students, Black women need full ride academic scholarships that pay a competitive wage so that Black female students, who are usually already overextended, do not have to work multiple jobs to make ends meet, take out an exorbitant amount of school loans, or subsist in poverty. The reality is that the wages that we earn through assistantships are poverty wages. Many Black women, even as PhD students, are

heads of households or primary income earners, and caring not only for their immediate family but extended family and community networks. The wages are not enough to sustain these financial obligations. In addition, there are unrealistic expectations on what Black women PhD students should be prepared to do that sets us up for failure and stress that only adds to the health disparities.

Furthermore, the unfortunate reality is that regardless of our degrees or qualifications, that Black women are still among the lowest paid within our population. Even if there is an assumption that Black women PhD students will make up the difference after matriculation, the reality is that Black women hold the lowest percentage of tenured faculty positions and often end up needle stitching together a combination of adjunct faculty roles, or departing higher education altogether, in order to irk out a living. Because of the debt, we end up starting our professional careers behind our peers financially. Here we need an approach to closing gaps in higher education so that Black women PhD students can complete their PhD programs without the added stress of figuring out how they will make it financially.

Loving Black Women is a Revolutionary Act

The Integrated Ecosystem of Support is a culturally based approach to understanding and meeting the needs of Black women in the academy. It is culturally based because it reflects an African-centered perspective which recognizes “the presence of a Higher Power or Creator, the centrality of the Spirit and our Spirit-ness (humans as Spiritual beings), a holistic mind-body-spirit connection, understanding that everything in the Universe in interconnected in Oneness, with our individual identity grounded in community (Atta, 2018, p. 229). It draws on and centers the culturally based assets of Black women, validating our ways of knowing and meaning making. This is important because rather than only looking at Black women’s academic

experiences, it looks at a Black woman's entire support system both within and outside of the institution. As a result, Black women graduate students and faculty/staff can use this model to help us be more strategic in organizing our support system that includes academia but is not exclusive to it. I recommend that Black women who are graduate students draw on this model routinely as a check and balance system to reflect on the areas where we have support and be more strategic about the areas where they do not have support.

The IES builds on and complements other models focused on Black women's wellness. These include models that emphasize the importance of embodied practices, such as that proposed by authors Shani Collins and Truth Hunter (2022) in their essay, "*Advancing African Dance as a Practice of Freedom*." In this essay, they stated that the use of dance, which also involves breathwork, allows healing to take place when "individual and collective voices are discovered, explored, valued, and written through the body" (p. 81). Their framework, which explored African dance as a way to "heal the body, strengthen the body, and express the body" (p. 81), reflected both the internal system of support, something that we can do to enhance and grow our spirit. This practice is also an example of faith and cultural support as it draws on a practice that is ancestral and can ground us in African ways of knowing and being.

The IES also builds on the framework articulated by Stephanie Y. Evans, Kanika Bell, and Nsenga K. Burton (2017), called BREATHE, standing for balance, reflection, energy, association, transparency, healing and empowerment. The authors stated that "the BREATHE model is presented as a set of principles by which one can engage the process of restoration and lifestyle change as well as increase one's understanding of Black women's mental health" (p. 4). This model is also reflective of work that we must engage in to strengthen our internal system of support, but also emphasizes the value of social networks that "promote, affirm, and encourage

wellness" (p. 6), which can take the form of sister circles, filial kinships, which I term sista scholar friends, therapeutic groups, writing groups and more. Speaking of the need for writing groups, Negrete-Lopez, Palacios, and Ramirez (2021) shared how their women of color graduate writing group is a space to express frustration within academia, and practice resistance and resilience. This shows that the BREATHE model, in addition to being about one's internal system, is also deeply committed to strengthening one's family and community system.

These are just a few models and strategies that showcase the resources that Black women PhD students draw on to be well and thrive within academia settings. The IES, rather than replacing any of these models, is about placing the models and solutions in conversation with each other in order to emphasize that there is not a single panacea that can bring about our wellness in a society that has been so fixated in not only tearing us down, but obliterating us.

The IES is ultimately about fostering a politics of care for Black women. It is here where instead of being only called on to provide support to other people, Black women are intentionally cared and provided for without being seen as weak, less than, or disposable because we are not able to or chose not to live up to the Strong Black woman trope. And perhaps the idea of fostering a politics of care for Black women is the most radical thing about the IES because it focuses on caring and loving for Black women. At its core, it recognizes and affirms that Black women cannot thrive in education on our own without compromising our health and wellbeing. In a space where Black women are among the most disregarded, it is radical to declare that we ourselves need and deserve people pouring into our life just as much as we are pouring into others. Having a politics of care for Black women PhD students, as well as Black women faculty and staff, then, is not only a liberatory practice, but absolutely critical for our wellbeing within academia and beyond the walls of the institution. This not only benefits us; but it benefits Black

communities as a whole. This was a sentiment that early Black women educators understood like Anna Julia Cooper (1892) who stated that "only the BLACK WOMAN can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me" (p. 12). Similarly, political leaders like Claudia Jones (1949) articulated that "once Negro women undertake action, the militancy of the whole Negro people, and thus of the anti-imperialist coalition, is greatly enhanced (p. 3).

This model also takes the idea of self care to another level, advocating for not only caring families and communities for sure, but also caring institutions that can nurture us. It is a call for the academic institutions that we labor in to love our Blackness (Love, 2019), to love our necks unnoosed and straight (Morrison, 2004), to love us into wholeness as part of the beloved community:

"To be called beloved
Is to be called by God
To be called by the shining moments
Be called deep within deep

To be called beloved
Is more than one plus infinity
More than the million breaths of loving
Than the sounds of tomorrow's horizon

To be called beloved
is the marvelous yes to God's what if

The radical shifting of growth

Mundane agency of active faith" (townes, 1993 p. 47).

Loving our Blackness in the way that Morrison and townes demanded is not about sentimental feelings expressed towards Black women PhD students. Love is an action word and thus requires tangible and specific policy and programming changes that can support our wellness. Again, this looks like providing Black women PhD students with sustainable funding packages that pay a living wage; having supportive advisors who can champion our success and connect us to resources; having policies that support a healthy school/work/life balance, which could include providing sick leave and paid maternity leave. The IES then, inasmuch as it is about Black women PhD students understanding and shoring up our systems of support, is also about the community in which Black women live and thrive that holds us up, and that includes academia.

Are we sure we want to be well?

In order for Black women PhD students to be well, and move beyond the mere notion of survival, we need an Integrated Ecosystem of Support where we are able to tap into an internal system of support, as well as familial and community support, faith and cultural support, academic support, and material support. We need a community that loves and supports us, in concert with the capacity to imagine and practice freedom and liberation. When the IES is practiced and realized, we move from a place of surviving to a place of thriving.

Of course, such a notion is easier said than done. As already previously mentioned, the permanence of racial capitalism and its hold not only on society as general, but academia, will undoubtedly keep systems and structures upholding the same practices unless they are forced to change as a result of the bottom line. The framework of equity as a superior growth model is an

example of change that happens as a result of the bottom line, and represents a practice of interest convergence, this is what prevalent models around diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice or access (DEIJ/DEIA) have offered us. This is because a business argument can be made for the inclusion of Black women PhD students; our existence within academia makes good business sense. But good business sense does not address the pervasive spirit murder that we ultimately suffer from because of our experiences with double consciousness, gendered racism, and academic mammying.

Our wellness must not be brokered or predicated on whether or not it makes good business or economic sense; it must be predicated on our existence as human beings and belongingness to the human family. This allows us as Black women PhD students to move from survival and being alright, to actually being well. As Love (2019) stated, the ultimate goal is to be whole. “It does not mean the work of wholeness is complete, because we are all works in progress; being well is to join others in the fight for humanity and antiracism in love and solidarity” (p. 159). Inasmuch as this research has been focused on the wellbeing of Black women PhD students, this is work that we must each take up for our collective wellbeing.

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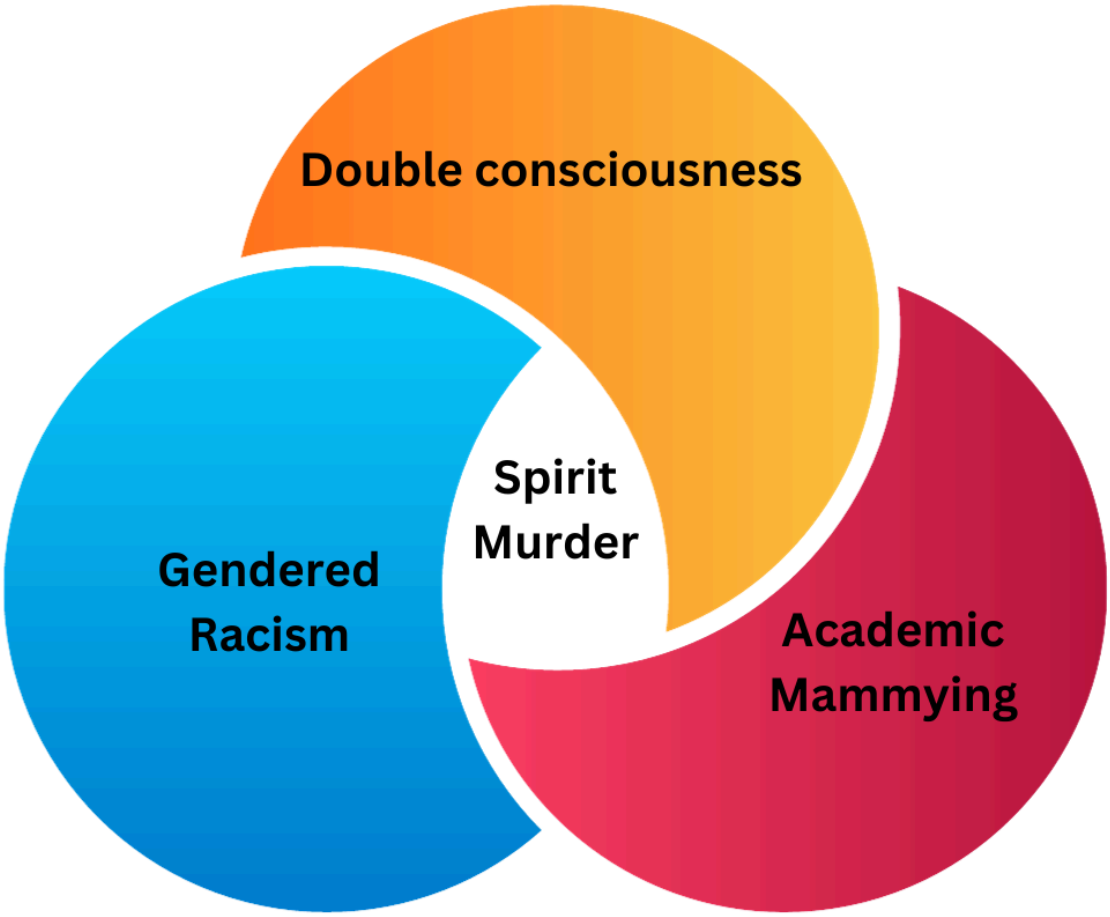
Appendix A:

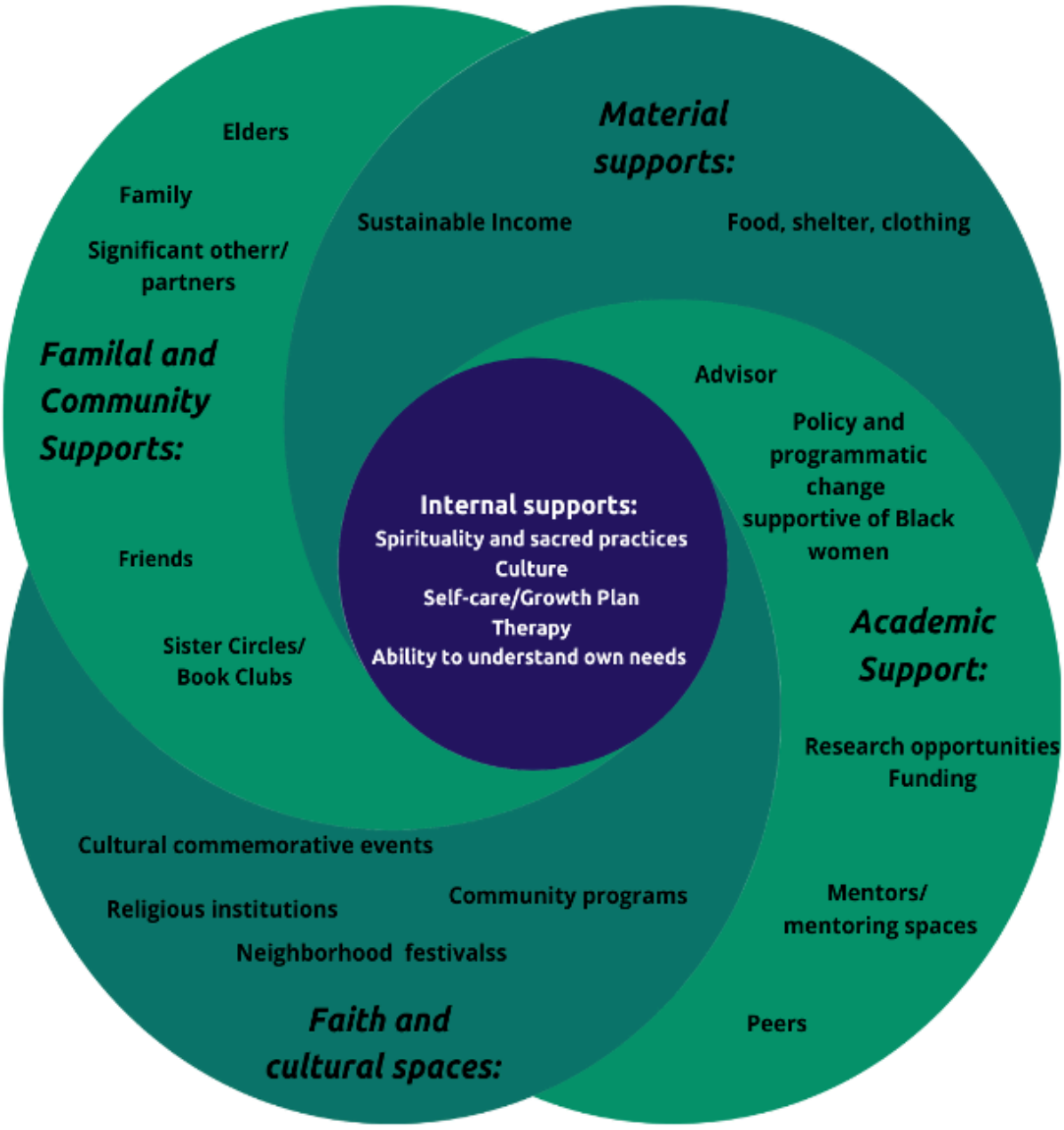

Mapping the Collective Autoethnographic Self Study Process
Step 4: Collective feedback and furthering study with community elder
*At every level, I as the lead researcher am involved in self study with co-researchers and apart from co-researchers.
Step 3: Lead researcher analyzing experiences
Step 2: Participants reflect back on and analyze their experiences
Step 1: Autoethnographic Writing Sessions with participants

Appendix B: Conceptual Framework



Appendix C:

Integrated Ecosystem of Support (Model and worksheet)



About the Integrated Ecosystem of Support:

The Integrated Ecosystem of Support is a model that enhances the capacity of Black women college students (undergraduate, graduate, PhD) to be well in their program studies. While it does not directly tackle the underlying and pervasive roots of racism in academia, it does provide students with the tools that they need to navigate higher education without losing themselves or compromising their integrity. It is inspired by Love's (2019) We Want to Do More than Survive and informed by two independent studies conducted in 2020 and 2021 on the experiences of Black women in higher education. Additionally, it combines principles of Yosso's (2005) concept of Community Cultural Wealth, Dillard's (2006, 2012, 2022) theory of Endarkened Feminist Epistemology, and principles of African Centered Pedagogy (Asante, 1991; Tolliver, 2018) in order to have a framework that directly supports the needs of Black/African ascended women.

This worksheet invites student participants to identify where they have support in their life right now, as well as areas where they may need to shore up support. The goal is for students to not only map their supports, but return to this worksheet periodically to check in with how their support system is working for them and where their still might be gaps or needs.

Date of initial assessment:

Internal Support: Spiritual consciousness and sacred practice; culture; self care/growth plan; therapy; ability to understand one's own needs.
What are examples of internal supports in your life?
Where do you feel like you may need to shore up support in this area?
How will you do that?

Academic Support: Advisor; policy and programmatic changes supporting Black women students; research funding opportunities; mentors/mentoring spaces; peers
What are examples of academic supports in your life?
Where do you feel like you may need to shore up support in this area?
How will you do that?

Faith and cultural spaces: Cultural commemorative events, religious institutions, neighborhood festivities, community programs
What are examples of faith and cultural spaces in your life?
Where do you feel like you may need to shore up support in this area?

How will you do that?

Familial and community supports: Elders, family, significant other/partners, friends, sister circles/book clubs
What are examples of familial and community supports in your life?
Where do you feel like you may need to shore up support in this area?
How will you do that?

Material supports: Sustainable income; food, shelter, and clothing
What are examples of material supports in your life?
Where do you feel like you may need to shore up support in this area?

How will you do that?

Date of 3 month check in after initial assessment:

What is working well concerning your identified integrated ecosystem of support?
What does your system of support teach you about your needs and who you are?
Where are their gaps in your current system of support?
How will you go about filling those gaps? Where might you need to enlist the help of others to do so?

Date of six month check in after initial assessment:

What is working well concerning your identified integrated ecosystem of support?
What does your system of support teach you about your needs and who you are?
Where are their gaps in your current system of support?
How will you go about filling those gaps? Where might you need to enlist the help of others to do so?
Who might you share the Integrated Ecosystem of Support framework with to support their overall health and development?