Black Girls Matter: The Impact of Historical Representation on Contemporary Education

Carolyn Strong

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BLACK GIRLS MATTER?:
THE IMPACT OF HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION ON CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION

by
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Doctor of Education in Curriculum, Advocacy and Policy

Submitted to the Faculty of
National-Louis University
Foster G. McGraw Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

National College of Education
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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of
Doctor of Education
in the National College of Education

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ABSTRACT

A long history of misogynoir and negative stereotypes about Black girls and women can be found throughout the literature and popular culture of the United States. These stereotypes inform the lived experience of Black girls and women, and in particular interfere with African American girls’ ability to thrive in a school environment. An autoethnographic research approach shows that various strategies, in particular, Black girl-centric spaces, have proven to be helpful in supporting Black girls who have to negotiate varying degrees of hostility in general environments. These could be applied more broadly to improve Black girls’ mental, psychological, physical, and educational outcomes.
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To the Black women near and far who have motivated me, pushed me, and told me that work was needed. This is our project. We are in this together.
DEDICATION

To my little Black girls, Eden and Ever, my work has always been for you. May this serve to make your future brighter. I loved you before I even knew you.

To my Momma: Thank you for standing in the gap for me. You took the girl nobody wanted and gave me a home. I hope my life has made you proud.

To every little Black girl who has ever felt unheard, unseen, unloved, or unwanted: I hear you, I see you, I love you, and I got you.
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I've had enough
I'm sick of seeing and touching
Both sides of things
Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody

Nobody
Can talk to anybody
Without me Right?

I explain my mother to my father my father to my little sister
My little sister to my brother my brother to the white feminists
The white feminists to the Black church folks the Black church folks
To the Ex-hippies the ex-hippies to the Black separatists the
Black separatists to the artists the artists to my friends' parents...

Then
I've got the explain myself
To everybody

I do more translating
Than the Gawdamn U.N.

Forget it
I'm sick of it

I'm sick of filling in your gaps

Sick of being your insurance against
The isolation of your self-imposed limitations
Sick of being the crazy at your holiday dinners
Sick of being the odd one at your Sunday Brunches
Sick of being the sole Black friend to 34 individual white people

Find another connection to the rest of the world
Find something else to make you legitimate
Find some other way to be political and hip

I will not be the bridge to your womanhood
Your manhood
Your human-ness
I'm sick of reminding you not to
Close off too tight for too long

I'm sick of mediating with your worst self
On behalf you your better selves

I am sick
Of having to remind you
To breathe
Before you suffocate
Your own fool self

Forget it
Stretch or drown
Evolve or die

The bridge I must be
Is the bridge to my own power
I must translate
My own fears
Mediate
My own weaknesses

I must be the bridge to nowhere
But my true self
And then
I will be useful

The Bridge Poem, Donna Kate Rushin (1987)
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

We have all been subjected to questions about our race/ethnicity: American Indian…Alaska Native…Asian…Black/African American…Native Hawaiian…Other Pacific Islander…White/ Caucasian…Hispanic/Latino…Middle Eastern…Although unwritten, African American girls are also subjected to additional “colorist” descriptors: High Yellow…Chocolate…Red Bone…Coffee-Colored…Dark…over the years, these phrases, among others, have been used to separate Black women within each other. For females that identify as African American, in addition to the aforementioned colorist and ethnic descriptors, there also appears to be a question of whether they meet the threshold of “acceptable Blackness”.

This threshold of “acceptable Blackness” exists within social circles, employment, and sometimes within their own families. At times, one’s shade of Black, coupled with its level of respectability can make or break their place in something as important to African Americans as the Civil Rights Movement. On March 2, 1955, Claudette Colvin, a high school student in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery public bus. She was arrested and taken to jail; her bail was paid by local clergy and later she was visited by representation from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). There was strong consideration regarding
using Claudette as the face of what would later become known as the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, a seminal point in the road towards ending Jim Crow. It was later decided that Claudette would not be used due to her age and the fact that she was pregnant at the age of 15. It was thought that her teenage pregnancy would detract from the issue at hand (Biography, 2017). It was not until nine months later in December of 1955, that Rosa Parks was arrested for the same offense on a Montgomery public bus. Her arrest became the catalyst to starting a bus boycott that would last three hundred eighty-one days, and ended with the ruling that this type of segregation was a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment (Montgomery Bus Boycott 2016). Busses were desegregated and Rosa Parks became a Civil Rights icon. A walking, living, breathing personification of “nevertheless, she persisted;” while Claudette Colvin has been relegated to a mere footnote. Although still alive and able to tell her story, Claudette is rarely ever asked. This juxtaposition raises two issues, the first of acceptable amounts of Blackness, the other one of colorism. For those that know Claudette’s story, her deep chocolate brown skin tone vs. the light-yellow hues of Ms. Rosa Parks is not lost. There are those that wonder, “Was the pregnancy the issue, or were civil rights leaders afraid to build a movement on the back of a dark-skinned woman?” Would she not garner enough sympathy? Of course, there is no real way to have the answers to these questions almost 50 years later, but the fact that given the gravity of the issue at hand, the fact that colorism is still a conversation is more the issue that I wish to address. It is hard to ignore the fact that even amongst the “Black
think tank” of the time, a dark-skinned teenager refusing to cooperate with an unjust law still feels less palatable than a light-skinned adult engaging in the same behavior.

Have we evolved beyond the Brown Paper Bag Test; a social construct within the Black community that assigns social capiol to a Black person based on whether or not their skin tone is lighter than a paper bag. What does it really mean to be “Black” in America today? As long as there have been African Americans in the New World, this has been an issue up for debate. But for African American girls, these questions of racial identity, public acceptance, behavior, and physical appearance—light skin vs. dark skin, straight hair vs. kinky hair, etc.—often manifest themselves in ways that are detrimental to both them and others. This media-fueled war rages on in the inner circle of girls.

Because neighborhood schools tend to serve as biospheres for the community at large, schools serve as a perfect breeding ground for this mélange of emotions. Take for example, High School X, the site of my autoethnographic experiences; the secondary school in this study. High School X is located in a suburb of a major Midwestern city, with a population of 1,500 students. Utilizing data pulled directly from High School X’s student management system, girls accounted for over 85% of the fights there in 2015. Taking this into account, it is clear that girls are angry, and equally clear this problem is rooted deeply within the history of African Americans and perceptions of racial identity and color consciousness in this country.

Statement of the Problem
As I sit here trying to begin my story, I am taken aback by the fact that I just don’t know where to begin! I have witnessed so many instances of intra-racial unrest that I am having a hard time determining with which allegory I should commence. Do I start with an incident from my childhood in which I was barred from playing outside in the summer sun because I was, “dark enough already?” Or do I initiate this piece by describing the utter disgust I felt as I watched a family friend pinch the nose of her newborn granddaughter in an attempt to prevent her nose from becoming “big and Black?” Do I talk about all of the questions that I had to field regarding whether or not my daughters have a White father, due to the fact that they possess a skin tone that is significantly lighter than mine? Do I talk about my experiences as an elementary school child, that as an adult, I now fully recognize as colorism on the part of the school and classroom teachers? Or should I just jump right in and talk about my own mother’s misuse of the baby bonnet as a means to preserve my newborn’s “pretty yellow skin?”

Actually, in retrospect…because my research is ultimately about the impact on girls in schools, I will stop and take a moment to walk back and unpack this notion of school-sanctioned colorism a bit. Because, honestly, it wasn’t until this very moment that I realized it for what it was. I attended what one would call a fairly successful elementary school on the South Side of Chicago in the Eighties. I excelled academically, rarely if ever receiving a grade that was less than an A for all of elementary school. By the time I had reached 2nd grade, there was talk of double promoting me; but, at that time, schools were starting to move away from that, so the compromise was for me to attend the 3rd
grade class twice a day for Math and Reading. Every day of the week, I left my
classroom once at 9:45am for Reading class with the third graders, and again at 1:45 for
Math with the third graders. It was also the understanding that the even though I was
getting Math and Reading in the third-grade class, I was still supposed to be keep up with
the second-grade curriculum. For about two months, another student— let’s call her
Robin—and I left the classroom for our pull-out enrichment classes in the higher grade.
One day, I was informed by the teacher that Robin would no longer be participating in
the pull-out program with me and that I was to gather my things daily and make my
journey to the third-grade classroom without her. When I asked why, the teacher
explained to me (this was decades before anyone cared about student confidentiality) that
Robin was having a hard time keeping up with the workload in both classes, and as a
result she was permanently promoted to the third grade.

I really did not know how to process this. I felt both betrayed and deceived. The
reason this pull-out was occurring in the first place was because the school stated to my
mother and me that you as a district were longer permitted to double promote. The reason
that we were supposed to be keeping up with both workloads is because it would be an
added acceleration for us. I held up my end of the bargain. I did what I was supposed to
do, but the other student, who wasn’t able to fulfill that task, was rewarded with the very
thing that we were told that we could not have. I wondered what was wrong with me. I
wondered what made her so different and so special. As a child I did not see it. As a child
it was not for me to recognize. However, as I got older and I looked back on the situation
that held me back so many years ago; I cannot help but to wonder if Robin’s light skin, long wavy hair and green eyes came into play when the aforementioned decisions were made. Situations place me squarely in the middle of my research demographic and because of this, I am left to revisit the feelings that I had as a small child during this time. I honestly believe this is why I chose autoethnography, a qualitative research method that uses personal experience and self-reflection to connect their story to a broader cultural experience, as my research method. My business here is multifaceted; Black woman, Black girl emeritus, Black educator, and Mother of Black girls—but more on that later.

This project seeks to explore the notion of African American female representation as it relates to self-esteem. It examines how Black women have been portrayed throughout history, and how the internalization of the aforementioned still impacts girls in contemporary educational settings. In essence, I take this journey to unpack and understand how Black girls are being systematically pushed out and left behind in school systems across the United States.

Our stories are narratives that must be told. Wherever I choose to begin my story, I realize that it is a narrative that must be told. For years, the concept of intra-racial discontent has been tearing away at the fabric of the African American community; particularly its girls.

Intra-racial discontent affects the African American community, and especially its girls. Ever since there has been something called a “Negro Woman” in America, society has gone out of its way to catalog us based on skin color and hair texture. From the
“house Negro” and “field Negro” classifications of the antebellum South to the current depictions of African American women in popular culture, the “Black” woman has consistently and constantly been pigeon-holed based on skin color, hair texture, body size, and attitude.

Ok, I’m supposed to talk about my personal experiences with intra-racial discord; those experiences that necessitate these courageous conversations. But, as I look around, I cannot help but see how far beyond me is this problem. The simple reality is, this issue is not new; however, how we deal with it must change in order to successfully conquer it. Admittedly, I have had multitude of negative experiences due to my dark brown skin color, kinky hair texture, and large build. Nevertheless, I assert that because of the positive people in my village and my support network, I was able to power through the negativity and persevere. Because of this network of women that loved me and treated me as if I was worthy of…anything, I was able to navigate this labyrinth called life as an African American woman in America. I didn’t always get it right the first time, or even the second time, but because of them I was at least able to stay in the game. As I look around, I weep for our girls because, the village is burning and society is using the buckets to wash the feet of the dominant culture. When I was a child, yes, it was clear from the images on television that, with the exception of the occasional dark-skinned Huxtable child, only light skin and straight hair was considered beautiful to the masses. However, I was fortunate enough to have dark-skinned women with kinky hair in my life that carried themselves in such a way that no one would dare anything to the
contrary. The principal of my elementary school wore a small afro. In the 1980’s this was not done in professional settings…at all. These were my teachers, my church family and sometimes the women within my biological family. Thanks to the encouragement of the women in my life, I was able to sift through the cacophony of insults, ignorance both explicit and implied. I was able to hold on to something that, through hard work and self-reflection became what I now know is an unapologetic sense of self. These women were the mélange of my village; and for them I am grateful.

Is there Civil War among Black girls?

In her book, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (2014), Walker-Barnes writes,

We have never quite stopped to appreciate the truth of their experience, the verity of what it feels like to be Black and female, the reality that no matter how intelligent, competent and dazzling she may be, a Black woman in our country today still cannot count on being understood and embraced by mainstream White America (p. 2)

Not only does the aforementioned hold true with regard to how Black girls see themselves, but it inundates their sense of self and consequently impacts how they see one another. As a result, feelings of doubt and inferiority permeate their daily interactions. The preceding issue has manifested itself in a civil war among Black girls; a place where name-calling, ridicule, deceit and physical aggression often play themselves out in our schools. Recurrently, the behavioral response that we witness is a mimicking of
the negative portrayals of Black women that are seen repeatedly in popular culture. These images time and time again leave me with a sense of emptiness and fear for future generations of girls that look like me and leave me to wonder, how do we fix it? Start by acknowledging the issue and talking about what has been ignored for so long. While I don’t claim to have the magic cure-all to resolving the malaise of African American girls, I do believe that I have found a healthy place to start. We cannot begin to fix the problem until more people realize and acknowledge that there is one. My research is designed to do just that.

In September 2014, President Obama launched “My Brother’s Keeper (MBK).” Aside from providing mentoring to males of color, MBK’s goal was to “address persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color and ensure that all young people can reach their full potential (My Brother’s Keeper 2014)”. When asked about MBK, President Obama stated:

That’s what ‘My Brother’s Keeper’ is all about. Helping more of our young people stay on track. Providing the support they need to think more broadly about their future. Building on what works – when it works, in those critical life-changing moments (My Brother’s Keeper 2014).

Males that are able to take advantage of this program are privy to the following milestone markers:

- Getting a Healthy Start and Entering School Ready to Learn
- Reading at Grade Level by Third Grade
These milestones purport a synergistic relationship between home, community, and school that will provide young males of color with lifelong relationships and valuable lessons and experience that they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. Which begs the question, what about girls? One would think that having four African American females residing in the White House during this time would have garnered some attention for Black female programming. But it did not, and I digress.

While national attention has been given to the plight of African American boys, African American girls have been rendered invisible within the conversation of closing the achievement gap and compensatory services. As a result, the data on African American girls and school discipline points to a trend that suggests that maybe African American girls need some national attention as well.

In 2014, the African American Policy Institute released a report called, *Black Girls Matter: Pushed out Overpoliced and Underprotected*. In this report, researchers looked at suspension data from the Department of Education and truncated it by race and gender. According to this study, in Boston, where African American girls make up 28% of the enrollment, they accounted for 61% of the suspensions (Crenshaw, Ocen, &
Nanda, 2014). In New York, African American girls make up 34% of the enrollment and account for 56% of the suspensions. Within this same report, it is noted that African American girls are 53 times more likely to be expelled from New York City Public Schools than their White female counterparts (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2014). It is also imperative to note that these numbers are double and in some cases triple, the numbers of the African American males in these same school systems. These numbers imply that African American girls are disciplined, suspended and expelled at rates that greatly outnumber both their White female and African American male contemporaries.

This same level of dissonance exists with regard to African American women as well. In 2012, African American women earned 89% of what their male counterparts earned and 64% of what White men earned (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2014). In addition, 25% of African American women live in poverty and the unemployment rate for African American women age twenty and older at the end of 2014 was 8.2% compared to the 4.4% for White women and 5% for women overall (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2014). The aforementioned numbers illustrate the need for specific attention to be placed on African American girls and implore us to find ways to bridge the gap between African American girls and their Caucasian counterparts.

While the trend nationally is for the small population of Black girls to make up a sizeable portion of the discipline referrals; the homogenous racial and ethnic make-up of High School X augments this paradigm, while still managing to perpetuate the notion that African American girls are the squeaky wheel that doesn’t get the oil. Of the 1550
students enrolled at High School X for the 2018-2019 school year, 1,107 of them were African American. Of that number 510 of them, or 46% were girls. This 46% of the school population accounted for 55% of the physical fights and 67% of the arguments that would almost certainly have ended in fights if not for adult intervention, known for documentation purposes at High School X as hazardous disruptive behavior. This information was retrieved from the student management system known as Powerschool; the system that High School X uses to manage its data.

Yet, even with the data pointing to the fact that African American girls are in need of educational and social emotional support systems, the three new programs that were introduced into our school community between the years 2014-2018 were were targeted specifically for, or piloted by African American boys. In addition, I personally met with school leaders and offered my services to pilot a program for African American girls free of charge. I was told by administration that he did not feel comfortable sanctioning a program for African American girls without introducing a comparable program for boys; even though there were already three programs for boys in our school.

In the research previously presented, the disproportionate discipline numbers for African American girls when compared to their White counterparts are problematic. However, we expect this due to the systematic nature of racism and implicit bias. Yet, even when we look at a more homogenous school district Black girls are still being disciplined at disproportionate rates. In addition, when interventions are offered that will help address they data; they are cast aside for additional programming for African
American boys. This gives us yet another tangible example of how the historic nature of Black women’s invisibility has trickled down into the schools and impacting Black girls on a systemic level. Even when racial comparisions are taken away, Black girls still manage to be disportionately impacted. In order to fully examine this we must look at the ideas and attitudes that teachers hold toward Black girls, this is something that we will unpack in subsequent chapters.

**Background**

There are those in the media that have dubbed 2016 the year of “Black Girl Magic.” That year, African American women took home a record number of gold medals in the Olympic games, anchored by notable standouts such as Simone Biles, who won five medals in gymnastics, Simone Manuel, who won four gold medals in swimming to become the first African American woman to win an individual medal in swimming, and Michelle Carter, a Black woman, became the first American, of any race, to win gold in the Women’s shot-put. Arguably, African American women dominated the Olympic Games, and in doing so, introduced the possibility of a different narrative surrounding Black women; one that did not include more common colloquialisms that have become commonplace when speaking about Black women…the narrative that includes but is not limited to being loud, rude, or “ratchet”, a slang word that has replaced the word “ghetto” to describe girls—typically African American ones—that do not fit the dominant culture’s definition of respectability.
In addition to the Olympics, 2016 also introduced us to an African American Miss USA, one that was decidedly more “Black” than any other to ever wear the crown. DeShauna Barber’s win placed her squarely in the center of a myriad of firsts. She was the first active military woman to win the title, the first woman from Virginia State University in Petersburg, Virginia—a historically Black college or university (HBCU)—and one of two women to ever win the title as a member of a Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO), Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Incorporated. As she made her rounds as Miss USA, she was adamant about being a role model that people from all walks of life could look up to. In her pre-pageant interview with the Washington Post she stated, “I guess I like to think of myself as being able to break the mold for pageant girls all around the world and for military soldiers all around the world.” (2016 p. 2) These are the words that come to mind when I watch the video of Miss USA, a sitting beauty queen, ascend upon “the yard,” the part of campus designated for members of BGLOs, during Virginia State University’s homecoming, and participate in a step show; crown, sash and all. It was one of the most unapologetically Black moments that I have ever witnessed, and the fact that it was Miss USA that was the facilitator of this moment made it even more surreal.

2016 also saw the release of the movie *Hidden Figures*, based on the true story of three African American women that worked for NASA as computers during the “space race” of the mid-twentieth century. It explores the personal and professional triumphs of three important women who excelled during a time of racial and gender bias that was so
pervasive that most workplaces still did not know what to do with women that were not employed as secretaries or teachers.

In 1949, Dorothy Vaughan became NASA’s first African American manager when she was appointed to lead its West Area Computing Unit, an all-Black group of female mathematicians (From Hidden to Modern 2016). Mary Jackson became NASA’s first Black female engineer (From Hidden to Modern 2016). Katherine Johnson garnered a reputation for being a leader in the field of mathematics and computation. In fact, when NASA began using electronic computers, John Glen demanded that Katherine Johnson personally recheck the calculations of the electronic computer prior to the launch of Friendship 7; the mission on which John Glen became the first man to orbit around the earth (From Hidden to Modern 2016).

Katherine Johnson began working at NASA in 1953 after a stint as both a teacher and stay-at-home mother. Her contributions to the space race and the launch of Friendship 7 have proven invaluable, and now, 50 years after John Glenn first orbited the moon, Katherine Johnson is finally getting the recognition that her contributions deserve. In 2015, Katherine Johnson was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her contributions, the highest honor that the President of the United States can bestow upon a civilian (From Hidden to Modern 2016). In May of 2016, the Langley Space Center in Hampton Virginia named its new computer facility, The Katherine G. Johnson Computational Research Facility (From Hidden to Modern 2016). These brilliantly accomplished African American women were hidden in plain sight for over 50 years,
until the release of the book and subsequent movie, *Hidden Figures* brought their stories to light.

A graduate of Wilberforce University, Dorothy Vaughn was born in Kansas City, Missouri in 1910. After her 11-year tenure as a high school teacher, Vaughn went to work at NASA. Having taken advantage of President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802, which prohibited discriminatory hiring practices based on race; Vaughn was amidst the first group of African Americans hired to work as mathematicians and scientists in the space program (Biography 2016).

In 1949, Dorothy Vaughn became the first Black supervisor at NASA when she was put in charge of the West Area Computers, a group of African American females charged with the task of calculating mathematical computations for engineers conducting aeronautical experiments (Biography 2016). Desegregation led to the dismantling of the West Area Computers in 1958; consequently, Vaughn switched her primary focus from human computing to mechanical computing by joining the Analysis and Computation Division eventually becoming an expert FORTRAN programmer (Biography 2016).

Born in Hampton, Virginia in 1921, Mary Jackson earned dual degrees in mathematics and physical science from Hampton University (Biography 2016). Although the “separate but equal” laws of the state of Virginia often tested her fortitude and resolve, Mary Jackson stayed the course…for the most part. At a point in her life when she considered resigning her position at NASA due to the overtly discriminatory policies, a chance meeting changed her mind, and her destiny. An unexpected meeting with a
supervisor opened Mary up to the idea that she could in fact be an engineer. Navigating the segregated Southern school system, Mary managed to acquire the credentials necessary to become an engineer. As an aeronautical engineer, Mary analyzed data on aircraft flight experiments and developed wind tunnel expertise (Biography 2016).

While the book, *Hidden Figures* outlines Mary Jackson’s contributions to aviation on space exploration, Ms. Jackson also changed fields later in life. Undoubtedly having been influenced by her experience of being an African American woman in a male-dominated field in the South, Mary took her talents to the human resource department in 1978. She served as both the Federal Women’s program Manager and the Affirmative Action Program Manager in the Office of Equal Opportunity Employment (Biography 2016). During her tenure in those offices, she helped many women and people of color be competitive in the work force.

Given all that African American women have accomplished, given all that African American women have contributed to this country, one might believe that the dominant paradigm would be one of respect, admiration and love. However, the level of hostility that society shows toward Black women in everyday situations can give one pause, socially and professionally. The following narrative focuses on describing the brutal violent attacks on Black women.

Dajerria Becton is an African American female from McKinney, Texas. At the age of fifteen, while attending a pool party, the police were called due to what was categorized as loitering and disruption. Once the police arrived, Becton was grabbed and
thrown to the ground by police Cpl. Eric Casebolt in his attempts to subdue her. Video footage that has since gone viral shows him grabbing her, shoving her to the ground, and at one point sitting on her, all for what is deemed as a lack of compliance (Eromosele, 2016).

When she was a 15 year-old student at Rolesville High School in Rolesville, North Carolina, Jasmine Darwin attempted to intervene and break up a fight because her sister was involved in the physical altercation. While doing so, the 98-pound girl was picked up by Officer Ruben de Los Santos, held over his head and slammed to the ground. Video footage shows the fact that the little girl’s body went limp when she hit the ground and she appeared to be briefly unconscious. The officer then proceeded to pick up her limp body and drag her across the room (Goulding, 2017). While the officer was placed on paid leave, this incident still begs the question of why a child is allowed to be treated in this manner in a school setting… or any setting.

Spring Valley High School located in Columbia, South Carolina, has been in the news over the last two years due to the treatment of a 16-year-old student by Officer Ben Fields. The student, whose name still has not been released, was in her classroom on a cellphone. When she was told to put the cellphone away and failed to comply she was told to the leave the room. She did not comply with this request, either. At that point, administration was called, but the child was still non-compliant and refused to leave the room. As a result, the school resource officer, referred to as “Officer Slam” by some of the students, was called in. When the student still refused to comply, she was literally
yanked from the desk and thrown across the room. Officer Fields was fired and the parents have filed a lawsuit on behalf of their daughter (Ford, Botelho, & Conlon, 2015).

In addition to the brutality shown toward African American girls by law enforcement, we also bear witness to African American girls being sexually brutalized and that brutality being placed on social media for mock and ridicule. A 16-year-old girl that has chosen to only be identified as Jada, attended a high school party in her hometown of Houston, Texas. At some point during that party, something was slipped into her drink and as a result, she passed out. While she lay unconscious in the middle of the floor, she was stripped naked and allegedly sexually assaulted. Pictures were taken of her naked, prone body and posted to social media. Not only did these pictures go viral, but other teenagers began to mock the girl, posing on the ground in the same manner in which her unconscious body had lain, with the hashtag #jadapose and #hitthat (Cohen, 2014). What message does this send to young girls of color? Who will protect you?

Stories of teenage African American girls being victimized by adults have been trending in the media as of late, but in order to fully comprehend the gravity of the situation, we must further explore the narrative that this treatment of Black female teenagers is not new. The conduit to this exploration is Latasha Harlins. Arguably one of the seeds that sowed the Los Angeles riots, Latasha’s story began on March 16, 1991 in a local grocery story run by shopkeeper Soon Ja Du (25 Years Later 2016). Latasha entered the store and put a bottle of juice in her backpack. Du, assuming that Latasha was attempting to steal the juice, grabbed her by the sweater. A scuffle ensued and Latasha
knocked the shopkeeper to the floor. Upset by her treatment in the establishment, Latasha put the juice back on the counter and walked toward the door. It was at this time that Du shot Latasha in the back of the head. She fell to the ground, still clutching the two dollars bills that she had pulled out to pay for the juice that ultimately cost Latasha her life. Du was arrested and convicted of voluntary manslaughter; and Latasha Harlins and Rodney King became the faces of the Los Angeles riots of 1992 (25 Years Later 2016).

The aforementioned five unrelated incidents of treatments toward African American female children stand in stark contrast to how White male adults are treated in the eyes of the media and law enforcement for far more heinous offenses. “I would like to make it crystal clear I do not regret what I did. I am not sorry. I have not shed a tear for the innocent people I killed” (Blinder & Sack, 2017). These were the statements that Dylann Roof made during his sentencing hearing. Dylann Roof…a fully realized adult; old enough to drink, smoke, drive, have a family, and make rational decisions, chose to, at 22 years old, kill nine people. Despite the odious nature of what he had done, the immediate response of law enforcement was to protect him. In addition to the fact that Roof’s initial encounter with law enforcement was not anywhere near as vehement as the encounters of Becton and Darwin; he was given a bullet-proof vest—wary of any retribution-real or imagined—a trip to Burger King, (as mass murder does indeed burn calories), and most importantly: his day in court (Blinder & Sack, 2017).

Though he was an admitted mass murderer, the system—that was designed for those that look like him, by those that look like him—allowed him his due process to
stand in front of a jury of his peers, and tell the world that he had no regrets for the murder of nine American citizens, one of which was a sitting United States Representative. Dajerria Becton attended her pool party. After a presumed infraction of talking back and non-compliance, she was antagonized and brutalized by those that were sworn to protect her. Jasmine Darwin attempted to break up a fight. The police response to her attempt at doing the right thing was to pick her up, hold her as far above his head as his arms would reach and slam her to the ground. As a result, she suffered a concussion and her body lay still on the floor. When the officer extended his hand to her, it was not to help; but instead to drag her lifeless body out of the school and arrest her. She got a concussion; Roof got Burger King. As previously stated, the young lady that was thrown across the room at Spring Valley High School by Officer Ben Fields committed one offense…saying no to authority figures. Latasha Harlins lost her life over a $1.49 bottle of orange juice. Lady Justice is not blind. White men of all ages are protected when their brutality is egregious, while one’s simple existence as a Black female is an immediate cause for brutalization and punishment. Where is the justice in that?

Taking into account the heinous nature of the acts committed against the aforementioned teenaged girls, it can become easy to lose focus on the entire picture. That picture encapsulates how Black women are treated in this country and underscores the paradigm that the treatment of Black girls does not ameliorate as they matriculate into womanhood. The modality may change, but the sentiment of wanton disrespect is
arguably more prevalent now than ever before, especially in what one would deem as professional work spaces. The most recent cogent illustration of the aforementioned is personified by the recent incidents involving April Ryan and Congresswoman Maxine Waters. With the zen-like resolve of Ieshia Evan’s flowing gray dress on the front lines of a Baton Rouge protest, these women have taken their cause to the press.

April Ryan is a graduate of Morgan State University and the White House correspondent for American Urban Radio Networks, a position that she has held since 1997 (Kreig 2017). For decades, hers alone has been the African American female voice covering urban issues in the White House press corp. Ryan has had the opportunity to conduct one-on-one interviews with such political figures as President GW Bush, President Obama, President Clinton and South African President Thabo Mbeki. In fact, she holds the distinction of having conducted the most radio interviews with President Clinton while in office (Kreig 2017).

April Ryan is a fixture within the worlds of radio and politics; however, as of late, her interactions with Donald Trump and members of his administration have increased her visibility and popularity outside of those circles. The first such instance occurred during an unexpected news conference convened by Donald Trump. During the conference, Trump was asked by Ryan about his plans to follow through with his campaign promise of improving the inner cities. The subsequent conversation has since gone viral as an illustration of both the disconnect between Trump and his understanding
of how government entities work, and as an example of the lack of respect for positions held by Black women.

Trump responded to Ryan’s question by telling her that her question was “very professional and very good,” intimating that she had somehow exceeded his expectations with her ability to ask a cogent question (CNN 2017). Further along in the exchange, Ryan asked Trump whether or not he planned to meet with members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) to discuss issues that impact African American communities. He responded by stating, “I’ll tell you what, do you want to set up the meeting? Are they friends of yours?” When Ryan responded “No,” Trump went on to say, “Set up the meeting. Let’s go. Set up a meeting.” (CNN 2017). In one brief exchange literally for the entire world to see, the President of one of the most powerful nations in the world reduced a well-respected journalist with over twenty-four years of experience as a member of the White House press corps to a mere house Negro at his beck and call to indulge his whims no matter how nongermane to her job they may be. It also embraces the stereotype that all Black people know each other.

About a month later, another incident involving Ryan occurred, this time with White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer. During a press conference, Ryan asked Spicer a question about Trump’s ties to Russia. Growing frustrated with the barrage of questions regarding the administration’s collusion with Russia, Spicer exclaimed to Ryan, “It seems like you’re hell-bent on trying to make sure that whatever image you want to tell about this White House stay (Lavender 2017).” When Ryan continued to press Spicer to
provide an actual answer to her question, he ordered her to stop shaking her head while he talked (Lavender 2017). Here we have again, a Black woman that is highly regarded in her field having her behavior dictated and body movements restricted by the White male power structure.

April Ryan’s interactions with the White House are just one example of how this particular brand of White maleness has sought to shut down Black women, particularly those who may have some credibility and influence. Another recent example of this would be the events that occurred between Congresswoman Maxine Waters and the host of Fox News’ The O’Reilly Factor, Bill O’Reilly. Serving over a dozen terms in the United States House of Representatives, Congresswoman Waters was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1938 (The History Makers, 2017). Waters has held many jobs in her long life, however, her job as an assistant teacher in a Headstart program is the position that showed her that she had the ability to galvanize people toward change. Over twenty years later, Congresswoman Waters is still in Congress doing just that. However, her recent interactions with the White male power structure have attempted to silence her voice while simultaneously objectifying her.

Waters has been very outspoken about her opposition to the Trump administration. In fact, she has been quoted numerous times voicing her disrespect and lack of acknowledgment of Donald Trump as the President of the United States. In February she tweeted, “My greatest desire was to lead @realDonaldTrump right into impeachment (Rep. Maxine Waters 2017).” This outspokenness regarding the Trump
administration made her a target for conservative pundits. One such incident in particular occurred on March 28, on the show, *Fox and Friends* (year?). A clip of Congresswoman Waters in which she stated that she was fighting for democracy was playing; the hosts of the show began to talk about the clip and O’Reilly chimed in “I didn’t hear a word she said. I was looking at the James Brown wig (Diaz 2017). Here we have a clear-cut example of an African American woman again being reduced to her appearance and body by the White males in charge.

**Research Questions**

Taking into account how Black women are treated from childhood through adulthood has played a major role in determining the research questions that I have chosen to answer. As an African American woman, an educator, a school administrator, and for all intents and purpose, a former Black girl educated in an urban public school system, working in an urban public school system, I have a unique vantage point—one that I argue can only truly be appreciated through the use of autoethnography as my methodology. The use of autoethnography, using the affords me an opportunity to unpack the topic of being Black and female working within a school from the vantage point of having been Black and female educated within the public education system. As a scholar, the probability of unpacking this notion of “multiple consciousness” gives me the motivation to investigate this topic further utilizing my range of lived experiences. Taking all of that into account brings me to my research questions.
How does the dichotomous nature of being an African American woman and an educator inform interactions with African American girls and school policies? To further examine this question, one needs to look at the work of W.E.B. DuBois and his notion of “double consciousness.” In his work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), DuBois uses this term to refer to the duality that African Americans feel when navigating situations that do not necessarily want you to be both African and American and the conflict that comes with that (Dickson 1992). In my case, it would be the duality that goes along with being a Black female and an administrator, when at times I am called upon to enforce policies that are counterintuitive to what being a Black female is. This is a dichotomy with which I often struggle. I understand the feelings of invisibility that Black girls describe. I watch as Black girls are vilified, ridiculed and maligned for what the dominant culture describes as “ghetto” or “urban” behavior. The behavior is then co-opted by the dominant culture and praised. A prime example of this would be Danielle Bregoli, or as she is known to the world the, “cash me ousside how bout dah” girl. Danielle, a White girl, has become famous for her appearance on the television show *Dr. Phil*. Bregoli was a guest on the show due to her disrespectful behavior toward her parents at the age of 14. She is loud, rude and has been in an actual fistfight with her mother. They came onto the show to try and get some resolution to her behavior. Instead, Bregoli left as an internet sensation that is rumored to have a reality show in the works. The girl that was dismissive, rude, and abrasive with no respect for authority is now positioned to become the next “it” girl for mimicking behaviors that are normally associated with everything that is wrong with
Black girls. When a White girl does them, these behaviors are celebrated and somehow made profitable, when in reality, Black girls live in a world that with school systems that commit what Monique Morris (2016) describes thus:

Some of the most egregious applications of punitive school discipline in this country have criminalized Black girls as young as six or seven years old, who have been arrested for throwing tantrums in their school classrooms, yelling and screaming at a teacher, and being disruptive to the learning environment. Six-year-old Salecia Johnson was arrested in Georgia in 2012 for having a tantrum in her classroom. (Kindle Location 94).

This is the duality that makes me, as a Black Girl, think, “Hey, it clearly isn’t the behaviors, so it has got to be me, there must be something wrong with me.” While, on the other hand, the administrator and intellectual understands the dynamic of being Black and female in America. These voices don’t always agree and can sometimes create more moments for reflection as an educator, and a Black woman, but more on that later.

**RQ1: How does the way that African American women have been depicted historically in mass media inform how they see themselves? How do African American female archetypes still inform African American women and teenaged girls?**

For the purposes of my research, the most recognizable archetypes of Black women will be explored. The mammy, who is normally depicted as an older, large African American woman who is dark-skinned, is arguably the most recognizable
and most enduring image of Black women in the United States. Depicted in such advertisements as Aunt Jemima Pancakes and Luziane Coffee, mammy’s image has been used to sell products in America for over a century (Pilgrim, 2010). The Sapphire, named for Sapphire Stephens, a character from the Amos and Andy radio show, is depicted as loud, rude and never quite satisfied. She tends to be mean spirited and never has anything nice to say (Pilgrim, 2010). The Jezebel is also a long enduring archetype of Black women. The lascivious, lustful, sexualized nature of Black women is often held in direct contrast to the purity of White womanhood when invoking this archetype. Black women are often depicted as scantily clad and highly sexualized as a justification for sexual assault in the Antebellum South and beyond. (Pilgrim 2010). Not quite as long-standing, but relevant nonetheless is the archetype of the Superwoman, depiction of a Black woman that is able to be all things to all people, one that is able to be there for her children, her mother, her significant other and anyone in the neighborhood that comes in between. But what is often overlooked with this archetype is what price is paid for such access to a person (Walker-Barnes, 2014)

**RQ2: What role does misogynoir play in the treatment of African American girls in schools as well as their depiction in mass media?**

**Is there a need for “Black girl-centric spaces to combat this? If so, what do those spaces look like?**
As coined by Moya Bailey, “misogynoir” is a term that has come to mean misogyny geared specifically toward African American women (Solis, 2016). We see examples of this throughout mass media and throughout the country. Things that have been deemed “ghetto” and “unprofessional” when Black women do them, are somehow not only socially acceptable but “trendy and urbane” when White women do them. The Kardashian Family has almost single-handedly brought the customs of African American women from the marginalized sidelines and into mainstream America. They have been credited with bringing to the forefront everything from “boxer braids” which are actually cornrows, a hairstyle that has literally been around for centuries and is normally considered unprofessional for Black women to wear in the workplace, to having a large behind, which was once seen as a novelty and undesirable. Taking all of this into account, this question seeks to answer whether or not these things are purely coincidence or a direct impact of this notion of misogynoir.

With any given culture, the media of the time, whatever modality that may be, tells one a lot about how that particular culture sees themselves, or in some cases, how the dominant culture sees them. Whether we are discussing cave painting or the stories of griots, these stories will tell us the mentality of a people in a particular time period. The depictions that will be scrutinized here will be ones that specifically look at how African American women are shown to the masses for public consumption. This question will also take into account how these depictions play a role in how young African American girls view themselves, and consequently how they view each other. The latter part of this
question attempts to rectify the problem that has been laid out thus far. Will spaces designed specifically for African American girls negate in some way the negative caricatures that are constantly consumed in mainstream media?

**RQ3: How does the dichotomous nature of being an African American woman and an educator inform interactions with African American girls and school policies?**

**Description of Terms**

*Colorism.* Colorism is a socially constructed hierarchy where lighter-skinned people are perceived as more socially acceptable than dark-skinned people (Morris, 2016).

*Cultural Competence.* Cultural competence is the ability to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than our own. It entails developing certain personal and interpersonal awarenesses and sensitivities, developing certain bodies of cultural knowledge, and mastering a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching (Moule & Diller, 2012).

*Double-Consciousness.* A term first used by W.E.B Dubois in 1903, double-consciousness is used to describe the individual feeling or sensation that your identity is divided into several parts, thus making it difficult to have one solid identity. (Dubois, 1903).

*Internalized racial oppression.* This is the process by which Black people internalize and accepted, not always consciously, the dominant White culture’s
oppressive actions and beliefs toward Black people (e.g. negative stereotypes discrimination, hatred) while at the same time rejecting the African worldview and cultural motifs (Morris, 2016).

**Intersectionality.** There is no hierarchy of oppressions. Each identity intersects with the others to generate a more complex world view than the one that would exist if any of us were truly able to walk through life with a singular identity (Morris, 2016).

**Intra-racial bullying.** This refers to conflict and relational aggression that occur between members within a racial or ethnic group strictly due to phenotypical differences. (Strong 2013).

**Misogynoir.** Misogyny directed towards Black women where race and gender both play roles in bias. It was coined by queer Black feminist, Moya Bailey, who created the term to address misogyny directed toward Black women in American visual and popular culture (Solis 2016).

**No Child Left Behind (NCLB).** NCLB is a law that was designed to hold schools accountable for student progress and outcomes. This law was an update to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Klein, 2016).

**Oppositional Gaze.** A phrase describing a way to examine the presentations of Black feminine identities and confront the paralyzing stereotypes that undermine the well-being of Black women and girls (hooks, 1992).

**Relational aggression.** Sometimes referred to as social bullying, the Stop Bullying government website states that this involves deliberately doing things to hurt
people’s reputations or personal relationships. It often includes things like, deliberate exclusion, spreading rumors and public embarrassment (2019).

**School-to-prison pipeline.** In this national trend, children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems (aclu.org).

**Senate Bill 100.** This bill, passed into law in the state of Illinois, eliminates automatic “zero tolerance” suspensions and expulsions, and requires that schools exhaust all other means of intervention before expelling students or suspending them for more than three days. The bill also prohibits fines and fees for misbehavior, and requires schools to communicate with parents about why certain disciplinary measures are being used (Willkle, 2015).

**Socioeconomically Disadvantaged.** This term describes a population, community, or individual who has less advantages to food, housing, education, and finances, than others (Poleshuck & Green, 2008).

**Structure of dominance.** An institution in which societal biases are reinforced (Morris, 2016, p. 26).

**Zero tolerance.** A zero-tolerance policy requires school officials to hand down specific, consistent, and harsh punishment—usually suspension or expulsion—when students break certain rules. Under zero-tolerance policies, harsh punishment applies regardless of the circumstances (Gjelten).

**Significance of the Study**
This study is significant to the student population as well as to the academic community because it will examine how antiquated notions of what it means to be Black and female in America have infiltrated our education systems and are currently serve as barriers to equitable education for African American girls. This study could be utilized by the administration in a manner that may be impactful in the lives of the students. This study will allow one to look at images of African American women from a historical perspective, and in doing so, synthesize this information with what we see today in schools. Looking backward before we go forward allows one to identify all of the elements that lend themselves to the problem, and not just the problem that we see before us today. This problem was several hundred years in the making, and in order to properly identify and resolve it, it must be attacked from that angle.

The school-to-prison pipeline is teeming with African American girls that report feeling pushed out of school. This project seeks to explore that notion of African American representation as it relates to Black female self-esteem. By integrating these two issues; the question of aggression, both physical and relational can be addressed. In addition, it will answer the following research questions,

**RQ1**: How does the way that African American women have been depicted historically in mass media inform how they see themselves? How do African American female archetypes still inform African American women and teenaged girls?
RQ2: What role does misogynoir play in the treatment of African American girls in schools? Is there a need for “Black girl-centric” spaces to combat this? What do those spaces look like?

RQ3: How does the dichotomous nature of being an African American woman and an educator inform interactions with African American girls and school policies?

Summary

Historically and currently, African American girls have experienced maltreatment and unfair stereotypes from within and outside of the African American community. The school setting, which should serve as a haven of learning and safety, has instead demonstrated itself to be not only a microcosm of the negative experiences of African American girls in larger society, but also has contributed to the under-valuing and under-serving of our girls. As a result, African American girls have been on the fringes of the conversation regarding inclusion, school achievement and culturally-competent teaching. As a result, they are being disciplined, expelled, and suspended at rates that far exceed both their White female contemporaries and African males. This study seeks to look at this data as a symptom of the issue of self-esteem and representation as it relates to African American women and provide solutions for the problems these issues present in school settings.
This chapter introduced the study, defined terms as they relate to this particular concern, and presented background information on this particular facet of school discipline. Chapter II of this study contains a review of pertinent literature addressing the historical stereotypes of African American women and how they relate to the representations that we see today.
CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Introduction

I draw inspiration from experiences within every aspect of my life. Seemingly mundane interactions with contemporaries are no different. I had to be about sixteen at the time, I am sure of this accuracy because I remember the fear of being a novice driver. I was sitting at my braider Rasheeda’s house, getting my hair done, an event that can literally take all day. My style usually ran somewhere between eight and ten hours, depending what else she had going on that day. I was watching television, (because what else did one do to pass the time for eight to ten hours before wi-fi when you’d already finished your book) and a commercial for the television series “Martin” came on. “Martin” was a show that aired from 1992-1997 on the Fox Network and was a part of a Thursday night series of Black shows on that were on up against NBC’s “Must See TV” and was dubbed “Gotta See TV.” The series focused on a radio personality named Martin Payne and his girlfriend Gina as they navigated, life, love, friendships and upward mobility in Detroit (Internet Movie Data Base 2018). Mid commercial Rasheeda exclaimed, “God! I hate that fucking show!” And I knew that she was serious because she took out her irritation on my edges. Once the initial head throbbing subsided, I asked why, and her response was quite succinct, “because ghetto girls didn’t sound like that until Martin said they did.” Needless to say, what she said resonated with me; here we are twenty-seven years later and I am still thinking about it. Honestly, I don’t even know that
I agree with her, because he had to get the idea from somewhere…didn’t he?

Nevertheless, right or wrong this dialog needed to occur. The “that” to which Rasheeda was referring was the speech patterns and mannerisms of one of Martin Lawrence’s most recognizable characters, Shanaenae. Shanaenae was loud, Shanaenae was rude, Shanaenae was belligerent, Shanaenae was what we have now come to classify as *ghetto*, a term that has evolved over time from geographic nomenclature to be more a behavioral description. A term that colloquially has come to mean something associated with the undesirable aspects of the inner city. Shanaenae’s catch phrase, “oh my goodness, no you di-in” was exclaimed by the likes of everyone from every background imaginable, whether they felt they could identify with the culture or not, it was cute, it was funny it was edgy. I guess this is why Rasheeda had such a problem with the depiction. Not only does it depict Black women, yet again, as caricatures to be put forth for public consumption and amusement. But Rasheeda asserts that girls in the “hood’ picked up these mannersims from television and began to act this way because popular culture told them that they should. Rasheeda’s assertion speaks to the power that popular culture wields. *In Popular Culture as Historical Text: Using Mass Media to Teach American history* (2017) Leff asserts:

> Like all historical texts, popular culture representations of American society are “written” from a particular perspective and created for a particular purpose. Thus, the historian needs to approach such a text with familiar considerations in mind. Who are the authors? From what social
location do these authors come? What historical realities are they responding to? What objectives do these authors have in creating this text? And even after carefully accounting for bias, perspective, context, and agenda, the historian will not be able to somehow reveal a pristine image of “how things really were.” Instead, the historian asks: What does it tell us that American society was being depicted in this way at this historical moment, by these particular authors? Or, what does it reveal about American society that such a text was popular among a particular group of Americans? (p.229)

In the case of “Martin,” it shows a different side of Black women, one that Rasheeda insists did not exist prior to this show airing in 1992. Whether this is true or not honestly isn’t the point. I tell this story as a way to underscore the reasons why popular culture and fictional text are considered primary sources for the purposes of my literature review. Within this chapter they are featured alongside scholarly peer reviewed academic text, and they are equally yoked. In Literature as Historical Archive (2004) Pasco writes, while literary works would not normally provide exact information about speeches, laws, wars, or coal production, they do serve particularly well for insight into common opinions and attitudes, everyday life in the streets, in houses, apartments, and hovels (p.373). I would argue that the aforementioned is definitely true with regard to African Americans for a myriad of factors, one of which being us as a people being denied access to the written word for so long that we came to rely on folklore and popular culture
narratives to tell our stories. In *African American Folklore: Its Role in Reconstructing African American History* (1997) Ogunleye states:

Folklore represents a line to the vast interconnected network of meanings, values and cognitions. Folklore contains seeds of wisdom, problem solving, and prophecy through tales of rebellion, triumph, reasoning, moralizing and satire. All that African American people value, including the agony enslaved and freed Africans were forced to endure, as well as strategies they used to resist servitude and flee their captors, is discernable in this folk literature. African American folklore is also a historical thread that ties the cultural heritage of African Americans in the diaspora and those living on the continent of Africa (p.435)

For the purposes of this literature review, popular culture and literary analysis prove vital in filling the gaps left by scholarly works as they relate to the state of being and evolution of Black women in America over time. Ogunleye asserts that the ultimate strength of folklore resides in its power to communicate the social and cultural identities of the eras (p. 435). With this in mind Pasco asks the question, how does one gain insight into states of mind, conscious and unconscious assumptions, attitudes, opinions, prejudices and emotions of the people that lived then (p.373)? I take the aforementioned question a step farther and I ask, how do you insure the story told is your truth when you are a member of a marginalized group that is so marginalized that the dominant culture still can’t agree on whether or not you are considered a person. Literature and popular
culture are the mediums through which African American nuance can be expressed more freely, theoretically without having to mitigate the oppositional gaze of White America; their use is germane to my journey to show the true reflection of a people within this work.

On August 22, 2018, the Chicago Sun-Times published a story about the principal of a high school on the South Side of Chicago addressing her students regarding the new dress code policy she had just implemented. In response to a female student who questioned why the changes were necessary, Principal Melanie Beatty-Sevier said, “The dress, the dress code, we already stated, there has been sexual abuse cases throughout the City of Chicago. These things are put in place to, why, why should we allow students to dress provocatively (Mitchell 2018)?” When I read this article, I was deeply impacted, and I honestly could not, and still cannot determine which part of me feels the most betrayed, the most discouraged, the most affronted. I am a Black woman. I am a mother of Black girls. I am an educator. More specifically, I am an educator of marginalized students in minority spaces. Overall, I am a protector and champion of Black girls, in all milieus. As a result, this article, and the statements made within it, have hurled me from the immense writer’s block that has plagued me for the last three weeks and realigned me with my life’s work and purpose: to examine how Black women have been portrayed throughout history and how those depictions still impact girls in schools today As a writer that thrives within that which is autoethnographic research, part of me cannot help but
think that the timing of these words was divine intervention, because this woman’s words have reignited my fervor to stand in the gap for Black girls and tell their stories.

Sevier is a Black woman, and according to *US News and World Report* (2017) King College Prep High School located in Chicago, IL; the school over which she presides is 92% Black and 62% female. This means that the literal majority of students in her care are people that “look like her.” Black girls like her. This is an opportunity that should not be taken lightly and should serve as a chance for Black women to model and teach girls what they can one day accomplish. Instead, Sevier chose to utilize her precious platform as an opportunity to engage in a vicious campaign that amounted to nothing more than victim-blaming and a lack of accountability for pedophiles.

The sexual assault cases to which Sevier refers first broke on July 27, 2018 in a Chicago Tribune article titled, *Betrayed Chicago Public Schools fail to protect students from sexual abuse and assault leaving long lasting damage*. In the article, the authors chronicle the hundreds of sexual abuse allegations that plagued the district at the hands of staff and contract workers from 2008-2017. The Tribune reports that during this 10 year-span, the Chicago Police Department investigated 523 reports that children were being abused within Chicago Public Schools. In an internal investigation done by Chicago Public Schools themselves, they have acknowledged that their law department has investigated 430 reports since the year 2011. The reports noted allegations that employees have harassed, assaulted, or sexually abused students. They further go on to state that 230 of these reports were found to be credible.
The article documented incidents that include, but are not limited to, a 16 year-old track student being raped 40 times by her coach, a 14 year-old elementary school student being kissed and sent obscene text messages by a substitute teacher, and a student reporting that a security guard and track coach raped her during practice.

While it sickens me to think that Sevier believes that this type of systematic abuse and depravity can be mitigated by simply “dressing less provocatively,” the underlying notions of respectability politics espoused by this Black woman (and disseminated to future Black women through policy and procedure) is problematic and indicative of a larger issue. However, before the aforementioned can be addressed, we must first examine how Black women have been portrayed in this country, unpack the most pervasive stereotypes of Black women that exist, and explore the origins of colorism and its impact on relationships among Black women and girls.

**Historical Context**

Long before Isabella Baumfree, known colloquially as Sojourner Truth, asked the question, “ain’t I a woman?” at the 1851 Women’s convention in Akron, Ohio, the notion of what it means to be a Black woman in America had been taken to task (Biography 2014). Truth’s words, “Ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! Ain’t I a woman (Truth, 1851)?” The veracity of this statement could not be more pertinent. These words have been thought, felt, uttered, and exclaimed by many Black women in various and sundry incarnations with regard to the helplessness and pain that
they feel when their children are taken from them. It is very much akin to Sabrina Fulton, the mother of slain teenager Trayvon Martin, saying, “It seems our kids are getting younger and younger, they’re killing them younger and younger. There is no regard anymore for human life. There has to be somewhere where we draw the line and say, ‘Listen, our kids want to grow up, too.’” (Sanchez, 2014)

Black women—Black mothers—have been fighting for their acknowledgment as human beings; as people with the right to basic human decency for quite some time now. On the surface, it appears that the essential question is, “where is the regard for Black women in this struggle for equality and recognition?” However, the substantive questions in all of this remain, “where do Black women fit into the fabric of the American tapestry? The only way to truly examine the tenuous relationship that Black women have with this country, is to first unpack the reality of what it has meant to be a Black woman in America. I do that by examining Black womaness, both historically and contemporarily.

**Historical Depictions of Black Women**

William Tucker’s birth in 1624 marked the first documented birth of a person of African descent on American soil (African American registry, 1994). It also marked the first notions of how African Americans would be treated, depicted and categorized in this country. In her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), Patricia Hill Collins writes:

> The dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of four interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood,
each reflecting the dominant group’s interest in maintaining Black women’s subordination…According to the cult of true womanhood, “true” women possessed four cardinal virtues, piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. African American women encountered a different set of controlling images (p. 266).

This next section of our story looks specifically at the aforementioned controlling images, and how African American women have been portrayed throughout America’s history. We examine this as these notions became invaluable when unpacking the interactions between African American women and girls in the present.

**Mammy.**

Often considered the most globally recognizable image of Black womanhood, the mammy caricature has endured. Created during the Post-antebellum South to personify their longing for the days of old when slavery was rampant and cotton was king, mammy as we know her today was born. Her dark brown skin and wide eyes have become symbols that we have grown to recognize on such products as Aunt Jemima pancake mix, a staple that made its debut in 1889 (Jim Crow Museum, 2005).

Happy, contented and treated like family, the mammy image was touted as proof that Black women were indeed both amenable to, and appreciative of the institution of slavery (Jim Crow Museum 2005). The smile was used as a constant reminder that slavery was just and humane. Mammy was always portrayed as being happy to be of service to her White “family,” treating their White children with nurturing, care and
kindness, while oftentimes her own children were either neglected or treated with disdain. This is a phenomenon that Patricia Hill Collins (1990) unpacks by saying, “By loving, nurturing and caring for her White family and children better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group’s perception of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power (p. 266).” This juxtaposition was on full display Toni Morrison’s 1970 novel, *The Bluest Eye*. In the book, we witness Pauline Breedlove, mother of Pecola and domestic to a White family, have interactions with both her own child Pecola and the White child for whom she worked:

It may have been nervousness, awkwardness, but the pan tilted under Pecola’s fingers and fell to the floor, splattering Blackish blueberries everywhere. Most of the juice splashed on Pecola’s legs, and the burn must have been painful, for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered with a tightly packed laundry bag. In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication. “Crazy fool…my floor, mess…look what you…work…get on out…now that…crazy…my floor, my floor…my floor.” Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries, and we backed away in dread. The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. “Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don’t cry no more. Polly will change it.” She went to the
sink and turned tap water on a fresh towel. Over her shoulder she spit out words to us like rotten pieces of apple. “Pick up that wash and get on out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up.” Pecola picked up the laundry bag, heavy with wet clothes, and we stepped hurriedly out the door. As Pecola put the laundry bag in the wagon, we could hear Mrs. Breedlove hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl. “Who were they, Polly?” “Don’t worry none, baby.” “You gonna make another pie?” “Course I will.” “Who were they, Polly?” “Hush. Don’t worry none,” she whispered, and the honey in her words complemented the sundown spilling on the lake. (p. 108)

This interaction is a prime example of the mammy trope at work. Pauline derides her own child for something that was clearly an accident. The fact that Pecola is burned during this incident holds no merit for her mother Pauline, as she hops around the kitchen in pain. Her mother doesn’t acknowledge Pecola’s pain but instead begins to inflict more pain by beating her. As she is beating her daughter, the White child of her employers walks in and Pauline’s demeanor changes post haste. Her face, language and mannerisms soften to soothe the little White child and assure her that everything is fine and that the current chaos is only temporary. She wipes the child’s tears and lets her know that everything will be fine. When the child asked her who Pecola was, she does not even acknowledge her own daughter to this little girl. This interaction also serves to illustrate Hill Collin’s (1990) assertion that,
The mammy image is central to interlocking systems of race, gender and class oppression. Since efforts to control African American family life require perpetuating the symbolic structures of racial oppression, the mammy image is important because it aims to shape Black women’s behavior as mothers (p. 267).

Given the level of interaction between Pecola and her mother Pauline, it is not outside the realm of possibility that Pecola has negative associations with motherhood due to her mother’s harsh treatment of her. It is also not far-fetched to assert that if Pecola were to ever become a mother, the cycle of this brand of oppression would continue, something that Pauline addresses when she talks about how horribly she was treated by her own mother in Morrison’s novel. Through perpetuating this behavior, the women in Pecola’s family have become unwitting, yet effective conduits for perpetuating racial oppression.

While the aforementioned is the predominant narrative as it relates to the mammy caricature, further research has determined that this caricature is not rooted in much fact. Mammies are portrayed as a staple figure in Southern households. When we, as mass media consumers are presented with images of mammies, we are sold the notion that this construct was commonplace, that there was somehow a chicken in every pot and a mammy setting every table. Patricia Turner (1994), refutes that presentation by asserting that most plantation owners during the antebellum era were in fact members of the planter class. Simply put, most plantation owners could not afford to have this “right hand” mammy characterization that we have been fed. Most plantations needed all hands
on deck in the field. As a result, only the “very wealthy Whites could afford the luxury of utilizing the (Black) women as house servants rather than field hands” (p. 44).

Another misnomer was that the mammies were dark skinned, over-weight, older grandmotherly figures. Again, this is a far cry from the reality. Most slaves were skinny, due to the fact that they did not receive much in the way of nourishment, and the life expectancy of most slaves did not go beyond 50 (Turner 1994). This image was created to distract from the rampant sexual assaults that Black women endured at this time at the hands of their owners. This fact of the slave South was downplayed in an attempt to desexualize the Black woman (Jim Crow Museum 2005). The rationale being that if you create an image that is synonymous with unattractiveness, then you will somehow be able to escape notions of sexual assault against African slave women. By painting them in popular culture as undesirable, one attempted to control and/or ameliorate the evidence of sexual assault that is as obvious as the light brown skin and wavy hair of slave children throughout the South. Taking all of the aforementioned into consideration, mammy’s purpose is multifaceted, as the upholder of ideologies of the past, the personification of things that never were, and the manufactured denial of sexual assault.

*Sapphire.*

Formerly known as “sassy Black mammies,” Carolyn West (2017) documents the origins of the use of the term, “Sapphire”:

The Amos and Andy Show created the character Sapphire Stevens, which was played by Ernestine Wade as domineering, aggressive and
emasculating shrew who drew laughs for berating King Fish, her lazy, get rich quick con-artist husband. It began as a radio show, and the television series with an all-Black cast, aired on CBS from 1951 to 1953 (p. 149).

Sapphires were known for running their homes with an iron fist. They were categorized as loud, tough, insensitive, hostile and domineering, when talking to a Sapphire, chances are you will never get a word in edgewise, and you will never, ever be right. In her 2015 book, *This Sisters Are Alright: Changing the Broken Narrative of Black Women in America*, Tamara Winfrey Harris describes the Sapphire:

> Black women are believed to be quick to anger and even quicker to let you know it—always shouting with their faces twisted in a rictus of pique. And the ire of Black women is irrational and base—never justified. The idea that Black women are angry, hostile, and aggressive is pervasive and burdensome and leaves them vulnerable, unable to defend themselves when they need to. (p. 77)

Much like her older, more docile counterpart, Mammy, the Sapphire or Angry Black Woman in more contemporary circles, has become a multi-faceted staple in the caricature of Black womaness that is set forth for public consumption. According to Pilgrim (2015), the Sapphire image serves an array of purposes. In fact, it is categorized as, “a social control mechanism that is employed to punish Black women who violate the societal norms that encourage them to be passive, servile, non-threatening and unseen” (p.121). In short, if you dare go against the status quo and not subscribe to the Mammy narrative,
then your resistance is seen as unjust anger. In other words, because passion, righteous indignation, or quite frankly, the right to simply exist without being placed into a box can more often than not be misinterpreted as irrational anger. (Ironically, when taking into account the circumstances, there are those that would argue that the anger of Black women is not only rational, but both justified and a natural human response to their experience). The image of the Sapphire can and has been used to shame and silence Black women that challenge societal inequities, who believe that they deserve more, who complain about their circumstances or demand fair treatment (Harris-Perry 2011).

While the line between Mammy and Sapphire is often resolute, there are times in which a Mammy can make the shift to a Sapphire. There are times where the shift is gradual. Numerous examples of this can be found in popular culture. The example I want to unpack here is the NBC television series “Gimme A Break.” The first episode of “Gimme A Break” aired on October 29, 1981 and starred Broadway actress Nell Carter as Nell Harper, a former performer that took up the mantle of taking care of the husband and children of her White best friend after her death. The very first frame of this television series is of Nell…dressed in a house dress…wearing a headscarf…humming a song…while she vacuums. The visual and mental image of a fun-loving mammy that can “sang” was put forth for the world to see.

As the show progresses and Nell becomes more comfortable in her surroundings, her mammy role begins to morph into that of a Sapphire. While Nell was always quick-witted and curt with the “chief,” this was always mitigated by the fact that she was still
taking care of his home and children. However, as the show progressed through its six-year run, we begin to see Nell change. She is no longer satisfied with being “the help” and begins to pursue interests outside of the home as the children get older. Once the caretaker role has been eliminated from Nell’s persona, we are left with curt retorts and wise-cracks without the tempering impact of her caretaker side. What “Gimme a Break” presents us with is a Black woman’s gradual six-year transition from Mammy to Sapphire.

There are other instances in popular culture when the shift from one stereotype to another is more abrupt, almost instantaneous. To examine such a situation, let’s take a look at Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. Written in 1983, this epistolary novel chronicles the life and times of Celie, as she attempts to navigate life in the Post-Antebellum South.

One of the characters we are introduced to through Celie’s letters is Miss Sofia. Miss Sofia is Miss Celie’s stepdaughter-in-law and a Sapphire through and through. The first time Sofia is introduced, she is coming to meet Harpo’s family and is already visibly pregnant. In Miss Celie’s letters, she describes Sofia as, “…bigger and strong and ruddy-looking, like her momma brought her up on pork (p. 30).” Sofia makes her strength and presence known. When Harpo’s father, Mr.____, gives Harpo a hard time about trying to marry a pregnant woman, Sofia doesn’t argue or go back and forth with him. She simply collects herself and leaves, and when Harpo tries to follow, her response is one that embodies that curt emasculation that is synonymous with the Sapphire. When he gets up
and walks toward her, Sofia responds, “Naw Harpo, you stay here. When you free, me and the baby be waiting” (p. 32). This action lets Harpo know that while Sofia wants to be with him, his presence is not necessary to her ability to take care of the family. This idea of not needing a man is commonly associated with the Angry Black Woman.

Sofia’s headstrongness appears to others as a direct attack on Harpo’s masculinity. Harpo’s father, Mr.______, often has conversations with Harpo about what he needs to do to make Sofia “mind him. This exchange between Harpo and his father illustrates his perceived emasculation at the hands of Sofia, as well as Mr.____’s proposed solution.

Harpo want to know what to do to make Sofia mind. He sit out on the porch with Mr._____ . He say, I tell her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always backtalk. To tell the truth, he sound a little proud of this to me. Mr._____ don’t say nothing. Blow smoke. I tell her she can’t be all the time going to visit her sister. Us married now, I tell her. Your place is here with the children. She say, I’ll take the children with me. I say, Your place is with me. She say, You want to come? She keep primping in front of the glass, getting the children ready at the same time. You ever hit her? Mr._____ ast. Harpo look down at his hands. Naw suh, he say low, embarrass. Well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let ‘em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating. He puff on his pipe. Sofia
think too much of herself anyway, he say. She need to be taken down a peg. I like Sofia, but she don’t act like me at all. If she talking when Harpo and Mr. _____ come in the room, she keep right on. If they ast her where something at, she say she don’t know. Keep talking. I think bout this when Harpo ast me what he ought to do to her to make her mind. I don’t mention how happy he is now. How three years pass and he still whistle and sing. I think bout how every time I jump when Mr. _____ call me, she look surprise. And like she pity me. Beat her. I say. Next time us see Harpo his face a mess of bruises. His lip cut. One of his eyes shut like a fist. He walk stiff and say his teef ache. I say, What happen to you, Harpo? He say, Oh, me and that mule. She fractious, you know. She went crazy in the field the other day. By time I got her to head for home I was all banged up. Then when I got home, I walked smack dab into the crib door. Hit my eye and scratch my chin. Then when that storm come up last night I shet the window down on my hand. Well, I say, After all that, I don’t spect you had a chance to see if you could make Sofia mind. Nome, he sa . But he keep trying. (p.36)

This section of the novel highlights the lengths to which Harpo is willing to go in order to “domesticate” his wife. Sofia is strong. Sofia doesn’t listen,. She thinks too much of herself. She needs to be “cut down to size”. This is typical language one uses when describing a Sapphire and justifying silencing her.
Sofia and Harpo’s relationship has its up and downs, just like any other relationship; however, it is changed forever on that fateful day in the town square when Sofia meets Miss Millie, the mayor’s wife. Sofia is with Buster (her boyfriend) and her children, when Miss Millie approaches the family and asks Sofia to work for her. What happens next changes her in ways she is never really able to articulate.

All these children, say the mayor’s wife, digging in her pocketbook. Cute as little buttons though, she say. She stop, put her hand on one of the children head. Say, and such strong White teef. Sofia and the prizefighter don’t say nothing. Wait for her to pass. Mayor wait too, stand back and tap his foot, watch her with a little smile. Now Millie, he say. Always going on over colored. Miss Millie finger the children some more, finally look at Sofia and the prizefighter. She look at the prizefighter car. She eye Sofia wristwatch. She say to Sofia, All your children so clean, she say, would you like to work for me, be my maid? Sofia say, Hell no. She say, What you say? Sofia say, Hell no. Mayor look at Sofia, push his wife out the way. Stick out his chest. Girl, what you say to Miss Millie? Sofia say, I say, Hell no. He slap her. I stop telling it right there. Squeak on the edge of her seat. She wait. Look down my throat some more. No need to say no more, Mr. _____ say. You know what happen if somebody slap Sofia. Squeak go White as a sheet. Naw, she say. Naw nothing, I say. Sofia knock the man down. The polices come, start slinging the children off the
mayor, bang they heads together. Sofia really start to fight. They drag her to the ground. This far as I can go with it, look like. My eyes git full of water and my throat close. Poor Squeak all scrunch down in her chair, trembling. (p. 85)

There are several things at play in this situation. It is socially acceptable for a White woman to just walk up to an African American family and decide that she wants the wife to come and work in her home taking care of her children. One of the other issues at work here is that, even though Sofia and Miss Millie are both women, when the sensibilities of a White woman are offended through words, a White man steps in to physically assault Sofia by slapping her. Such an act provides a physical reminder that the Sapphire that Sofia has been allowed to be “to her own kind” does not translate when communicating with White people, especially White women.

Sofia is a woman known for standing up for herself and does not believe in allowing anyone to abuse her. As a result, when she was struck by the mayor, she hit back, and it wasn’t until she did that law enforcement got involved. It was perfectly fine for a man to hit a Black woman, but that Black woman will now be jailed for defending herself. Sofia is tried and incarcerated and once she is released, she is sent to work for Miss Millie as her maid anyway.

With this one incident, Sofia, this strong woman—this angry woman—this woman with a reputation for being able to hold her own in a fight with any man, and not taking any mess from people, has been silenced. The next time we encounter Miss Sofia
she is a different person. She is not as imposing anymore. She has aged and doesn’t speak much. She has become docile, and has spent the last 20 years in service to Miss Millie and the mayor that physically beat her. In one day, with one incident, Miss Sofia went from Sapphire to Mammy.

“In Antebellum America, true women (read: White women) were thought too delicate for hard manual labor. Black women, by contrast, were expected to work alongside and as hard as men.” (Winfrey-Harris p.5) In the case of Miss Sofia, her belief of her being as tough as any man hurt her both mentally and physically in the long run. After her ordeal, Miss Sofia was a shell of her former self, and became everything she was trying to avoid.

*Jezebel.*

While the Mammy and Sapphire stereotypes have been dominant across all forms of mass media, the Jezebel stereotype has been more or less relegated to visual media. Although there is some argument as to when the Jezebel stereotype itself began, there is agreement on the fact that the stereotype was used to brand Black women as sexually promiscuous and amoral. In addition, this was used as a basis to ignore the rampant sexual assault of Black women that has occurred in this country since enslaved Africans were removed from boats in 1619, with the consequential dominant narrative being that Black women could not be sexually assaulted due to their insatiable sexual appetites and unnatural sexual proclivities (West 2006). In fact, a prevailing slave-era narrative for the Jezebel was that she did not just desire sex with Black men, but also the ultimate goal as
to have sex with as many White men as possible, continuing the Elizabethan image of the “lusty Moor.” This same rationale was used to paint Black women as sub-humans that were intellectually inferior, culturally stunted and morally underdeveloped, with savage animal-like sexuality (Pilgrim 2012).

Tamera Winfrey Harris (2015) writes, “Maligning Black women, regardless of our personal or collective truth is a part of America’s DNA. The seeds for negative perceptions of African Americans were planted centuries ago when Black women were chattel, part of the engine that drove the American economy.” (p. 5)

In the article Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel and the Bad Girls of Reality Television (2017), Carolyn West succinctly explains the origins of the Jezebel in America, and further elucidates Winfrey-Harris’ point about Black women being the driving force of the chattel slavery-based economy, as well as being expected to serve the carnal pleasures of White men from slavery and beyond:

In 1619 the first ship loaded with enslaved Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia. Upon arrival, enslaved women were placed on the auction block, stripped naked, and examined to determine their reproductive capacity. Once sold, they were coerced, bribed, induced, seduced, ordered, and of course, violently forced to have sexual relations with slaveholders, their sons, other male relatives, and overseers. Sexual terrorism did not end with slavery. During nighttime raids, vigilante groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, whipped African Americans, destroyed their property and savagely
raped Black women. The Jezebel image has been embraced by the larger culture and supports the belief that Black women’s innate hypersexuality made them “unrapeable” and undeserving of protection and sympathy. (p. 151)

The moral standpoint of the insatiable nature of Black women, coupled with the fact that they were classified as property—not people—effectively left Black women with no protection against rape. The aforementioned rendered a great number silent about their assault, which in turn was taken for not only being complicit but some form of enjoyment. This serves as a continuation of the cycle of abuse of Black women with no accountability on the part of their abusers.

The sexual assault of these women led to a great number of mixed-race children that came to be known mulattoes. Many female mulattoes were sold into prostitution during the slavery era. In addition, free born light-skinned Black women sometimes willingly became the concubines of wealthy White Southern men. This system, known as Plaçage, is when a formal arrangement is made for a White suitor’s financial support in exchange for sexual services (Jim Crow Museum). The Plaçagesystem served as yet another layer of victim-blaming and holding Black women accountable for their own abuse. While the definition of Plaçage insinuates that these Black women were entering these relationships of their own volition, the imbalance of power between a wealthy White Southern landowner and a free Black woman in slave-era America should be enough for the dominant narrative to stipulate that willingness in this case is a term that
should be used loosely. In addition, it supports and furthers the stereotypes of hypersexed Black women, with the Plaçage system serving as the mitigation for the White blood that flows through the mulatto veins. Their proximity to Whiteness in this case affords them a kinder, gentler violation of their bodies and right to choose. Theoretically not as violent, but a violation nonetheless.

Even as it was abundantly clear that the laws of consent did not exist for Black women, even when it was clear that the White man held all of the power in these “relationships,” their White female spouses still managed to blame Black women for what was happening to them. More often than not, such a belief would result in the addition of physical assault to the already endured sexual assault that Black women had already experienced. Zora Neale Hurston touches upon this in her 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

They was all cheerin’ and cryin’ and shoutin’ for de men dat was ridin’ off. Ah couldn’t see nothin’ cause yo’ mama wasn’t but a week old, and Ah was flat uh mah back. But pretty soon he let on he forgot somethin’ and run into mah cabin and made me let down mah hair for de last time. He sorta wrapped his hand in it, pulled mah big toe, lak he always done, and was gone after de rest lak lightnin’. Ah heard ’em give one last whoop for him. Then de big house and de quarters got sober and silent. “It was de cool of de
evenin’ when Mistis come walkin’ in mah door. She throwed de door wide open and stood dere lookin’ at me outa her eyes and her face. Look lak she been livin’ through uh hundred years in January without one day of spring. She come stood over me in de bed.

“‘Nanny, Ah come to see that baby uh yourn.’ Ah tried not to feel de breeze off her face, but it got so cold in dere dat Ah was freezin’ to death under the kivvers. So Ah couldn’t move right away lak Ah aimed to. But Ah knowed Ah had to make haste and do it. “‘You better git dat kivver offa dat youngun and dat quick!’ she clashed at me. ‘Look lak you don’t know who is Mistis on dis plantation, Madam. But Ah aims to show you.’ By dat time I had done managed tuh unkivver mah baby enough for her to see de head and face. ‘Nigger, whut’s yo’ baby doin’ wid gray eyes and yaller hair?’ She begin tuh slap mah jaws ever which a’way. Ah never felt the fust ones ‘cause Ah wuz too busy gittin’ de kivver back over mah chile. But dem last lick burnt me lak fire. Ah had too many feelin’s tuh tell which one tuh follow so Ah didn’t cry and Ah didn’t do nothin’ else. But then she kept on astin me how come mah baby look White. She asted me dat maybe twenty-five or thirty times, lak she got tuh sayin’ dat and couldn’t help herself. So Ah told her, ‘Ah don’t know nothin’ but what Ah’m told tuh do,
'cause Ah ain’t nothin’ but uh nigger and uh slave.’ Instead of pacifyin’ her lak Ah thought, look lak she got madder. But Ah reckon she was tired and wore out ’cause she didn’t hit me no more. She went to de foot of de bed and wiped her hands on her handksher. ‘Ah wouldn’t dirty mah hands on yuh. But first thing in de mornin’ de overseer will take you to de whippin’ post and tie you down on yo’ knees and cut de hide offa yo’ yaller back. One hundred lashes wid a raw-hide on yo’ bare back. Ah’ll have you whipped till de blood run down to yo’ heels! Ah mean to count de licks mahself. And if it kills you Ah’ll stand de loss. Anyhow, as soon as dat brat is a month old Ah’m going to sell it offa dis place.

(p. 26)

This passage illustrates the pseudo-protection that Nanny felt due to her “relationship” with the slave master. It also personifies how quickly those protections can be stripped away when a White woman perceives that her place and position within the cult of true womanhood are threatened.

Even amidst the rampant sexual assault that the Jezebel stereotype has come to personify, there are those Black women in more recent times that have come to embrace the Jezebel trope. This belief is supported by the fact that there are few representations of the Jezebel in the “traditional” sense within classic African American literature written by Black women. But, even within the minimal representations that we are left with, they
choose to embrace the narrative of Black woman embracing their role as the object of sexual desire. An example of this would be Shug Avery from Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*.

In the novel Shug is classified as an arrogant, flashy Blues singer and the one true love of Mr. _____. In addition, the public views her as a woman of disrepute and has the “nasty woman’s disease” to prove it. Shug uses this to her advantage, using it to get what she wants and manipulate men with her seduction. She fully leans into eroticism as power as detailed by Audre Lorde in her essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.”

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives…The erotic is a measure between our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. (p. 89)
In this passage, Lorde explains that eroticism is a source of energy. Shug understands this. She uses this energy to get what she wants and needs to get along in this world. She uses this energy to keep Mr. ___ occupied and keep Miss Celie safe from him. She uses this energy to make a living as a Blues singer. People are drawn to Shug’s eroticism and she rarely gives them a reason to look away. Shug embodies this notion of eroticism as agency.

In even more recent times, with the proliferation of mass media, in general, and social media specifically, the image of the Black woman that is being put forth for public consumption leans into the Jezebel-as-agency trope even more so, to a point that was once perceived as agency and autonomy is now being seen as a mass media free-for-all.

Unable to completely escape the Jezebel image, an increasing number of Black women are embracing the hypersexual Jezebel, particularly if they are frequent media consumers who believe that these are accurate representations…However, there’s a problem, I believe with the internalization of the Jezebel image: It may lead some Black women to believe that their sexuality is a major source of self-esteem and the only valuable resource they have to barter for material goods such as cars and money. (West p. 296)

The aforementioned has saturated popular culture through television, social media and music. Kanye West examines the phenomenon in his 2005 hit *Gold Digger.*
She take my money when I'm in need
Yeah, she's a triflin' friend indeed
Oh, she's a gold digger
Way over town, that digs on me
Cutie the bomb, met her at a beauty salon
With a baby Louis Vuitton under her underarm
She said: "I can tell you rock, I can tell by your charm
Far as girls, you got a flock
I can tell by your charm and your arm."
But I'm lookin' for the one, have you seen her?
My psychic told me she'll have a ass like Serena
Trina, Jennifer Lopez, four kids
And I gotta take all they bad asses to ShowBiz?
Okay, get your kids, but then they got their friends
I pulled up in the Benz, they all got up in
We all went to din' and then I had to pay
If you fuckin' with this girl, then you better be paid
You know why? It take too much to touch her
From what I heard she got a baby by Busta
My best friend said she used to fuck with Usher
I don't care what none of y'all say, I still love her
In his lyrics, Kanye talks about women, (taking into the account the visuals in the music video, Black women specifically), that appear to be entering into relationships with men in exchange for money, fame, power and/or security. In his story, these women are getting pregnant by these men and using the money associated with doing this to better themselves either physically, in the form of plastic surgery, or financially, in the form of large houses and cars. This is an example of what Ms. West talks about when she mentions that Black women are starting to embrace the Jezebel image and utilize it as a bartering tool for other goods and services that they may not be able to obtain otherwise. This appears to be not only the evolution of the Plaçage system that now includes non-mulatto women, but also a way that Black girls and women still find themselves trapped in the Jezebel stereotype, juxtaposed with the untouchable virtue of White women.

*Black Superwoman.*

I have two daughters. They are 13 years apart in age. I like to think that I have a good relationship with them. I think about my life with my oldest: I was twenty-four years old, in graduate school and simultaneously coming to terms with the idea that the infertility that the doctors had told me was in my future was clearly a misnomer, while unpacking the fact that my partner did not want to be father. My refusal to get an abortion ended our relationship. I suppose = he thought the words, “you can choose to have this baby or you can choose to have me,” were going to make me feel as if there was a real decision to be made. I’ve been told my entire life that due to my endometriosis and my polycystic ovarian syndrome, I would never bear children. Here I was pregnant, and you
I remember telling myself, “this baby will want for nothing. This child will know that she is loved and wanted.” I actually sought out a village for her that would be so strong that her father’s absence would not even register to her, nothing more than a footnote in the story of her life. On Valentine’s Day, on the sixth anniversary of the day that I met her father, my Eden was born.

We found out very early on that Eden was highly intelligent. By the age of four she was already a member of Mensa, and by the age of five she’d already matriculated to the second grade. But this, while a noteworthy source of pride, did not come without its share of problems. It was also during this time that I began to notice my child’s emotionality. I began to see that while some of this was developmental, a lot of her emotionality was just a part of who she was. Who she was, carried a level of emotion that I just did not understand. It was then that I realized how hard it would be for me to see the world the way she sees it. It was not until much later that I began to understand just how much of this disconnect would be due to how I see my place as a Black woman in this world.

One of the ways that we completely differ is how we view the obligation of Black women to be strong and make things happen. In retrospect, after a lot of soul-searching, hard work, and finally just shutting up and listening to my child, I understood that for me, the “strong Black woman” goes far beyond a cultural trope. It was a way of life that I’d
watched and modeled without questioning. Therefore, I couldn’t understand my daughter, who was questioning. I, like “many Black women in America [felt] pressured to act like [a superwoman]. …strong, self-sacrificing, and free of emotion to cope with the stress of race and gender based discrimination in [my] daily [life]” (Science Daily 2019).

It wasn’t until my daughter pointed it out to me, that I realized that I spent a great deal of my time angry at everything, and the main place it manifested was in our interactions. I am a yeller. I always have been. I guess it is because yelling is the only action, and anger is the only emotion that is acceptable for Black women to express. Eden does not operate this way. As a result, a lot of our interactions proved scary to her growing up. During those times, I found myself having… to find myself, if I did not want to lose my child forever.

In order to figure out how to fix this issue, I had identify it. Was I really angry? What was done to me to make me so angry? Why does yelling seem to help, if only but for a moment? I didn’t know the name then, but I do now, and I will never forget the day that I realized that being a strong Black woman was eroding my relationship with my daughter. But who or what is the strong Black woman? In her book, Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength, Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes breaks down the who and the what of the strong Black woman:

The Strong Black Woman is a legendary figure, typified by extraordinary capacities for caregiving and for suffering without complaint. She is a cultural myth that defines—and confines—ways of being in the world for
women of African descent. While both Black men’s and Black women’s identities have been bound by cultural mandates to be strong, the manifestation of strength that has become normative for Black women is uniquely racialized and gendered. Strong is a racial-gender codeword. It is verbal and mental shorthand for the three core features of the StrongBlackWoman—caregiving, independence, and emotional strength/regulation. (p. 3)

This defined, and to an extent defines, me to the letter. I pride myself on being strong, hell it is literally my name. I felt like I had no choice, and it was impacting my relationship with my daughter, who was raised to believe that she could choose when and if she wanted to be strong. I gave her the breathing room that I was never allowed, and the result was a disconnect in need of repair. During her childhood, Eden would say things like, “why don’t you just stop? Why does it always have to be you?” At an early age, she understood the importance of personal boundaries and when to say when. She understood that the world wasn’t likely to fall apart if she took a minute, and if it did…oh well.

I like to think that her ability to see the world this way comes from her sense of self-worth being a priority in our household. Although we got off to a tenuous start, her father and I reconciled and together, we make sure that our daughters feel worth and value at home. We do our best to celebrate Black girlhood at every turn, letting them know that they have a fundamental right to take up space, and that what they do with that
space is up to them. When I reflect upon my own childhood, I don’t think the message centered my right to exist as much as it impressed upon me the dire need for excellence. I believe the best synthesis of the aforementioned comes from Kumea Shorter-Gooden and N. Chanell Washington’s article entitled *Young, Black and female: The challenge of weaving an identity*:

Being an African-American female adolescent and growing up in the United States poses particular challenges. Young Black females must contend with the typical adolescent developmental tasks, but they must do this in the context of a society that devalues Black and women. If adolescence is the time when one consolidates a sense of identity, which according to Erikson (1968) is based in part on one’s ethnicity and gender, then to develop an identity that integrates one’s Blackness and femaleness must be demanding (p 465).

I believe that in my case, leaving my daughters space to be who they are as Black girls, unapologetically, has allowed them to develop a truer sense of self that does not necessarily subscribe to society’s belief about the strength of Black women…more likely than not because they do not seek society’s approval.

In their article, Goodwin and Washington (1996) posit what this notion of strength looks like for Black women:

We suggest the following: (1) African-American women develop a sense of strength in the reaction to struggling with two ascribed identities, race
and gender, that are devalued, or alternatively the more racism and sexism an African-American woman perceives, the more likely she is to have an identity that includes a sense of strength. (2) For late adolescent African American women a sense of strength serves as a buffer, or mediating variable against challenges (or stress) of racism and sexism. (3) Late adolescent African American women who have an identity that includes a sense of strength are psychologically healthier than those whose identity doesn’t include a sense of strength. (4) Gender identity is a more central concern for adult than adolescent African American women. (5) African American women who engage in active exploration around gender issues do this after they have engaged in active exploration around racial identity issues. (p. 473)

The aforementioned sheds a lot of light on the fundamental differences between my daughter and me. Her sense of strength, or even her need for it, has been mitigated by the differences in her struggle. She has never had to figure out where her place in this world as an African American girl is because we have always fought to make sure that she has one. She has been given the freedom and autonomy to figure things out without being “otherized.” She has been purposefully put in inclusive spaces so that every move that she made was not “for the culture.” I look back at my relationship with my mother and the ways in which I was allowed to navigate spaces, and I begin to understand the
differences even more. But in order to analyze the situation to the extent that would be
required to fully unpack it, I had to take a look at my relationship with my own mother.

By the time I was thirteen years of age, I was an orphan. My birth mother was
killed when I was six before my very eyes. My father was murdered seven years later.
Even with that, due to circumstances, life, doing what they felt was best for me, or
however you choose to label it, they had abandoned me long before. I was raised from
birth by my great-great grandmother’s sister. As far as I am concerned, she is the only
mother I have ever known. She was very close to seventy when I was born. I did the math
once, but those numbers have long since removed themselves from my mental rolodex.

My mother took me in, she loved me as best she was capable, she raised me, she
fought for me when the court system told her that she was too old to adopt me. She made
me strong, to the best of her ability. She was a Black woman that lived through the Great
Depression (in fact, she had a newborn during the stock market crash of 1929), Jim Crow,
and everything else that came along with living in that time. She fully embodied what we
have come to describe now as the resilience of African American women. She was ahead
of her time in a myriad of ways. She was one of the first Black women to earn a barber
license in the state of Illinois. She was one of, if not the first Black female line captain
and union steward during her forty-year career at the factory where she worked. When
“stand by your man” was essentially the only narrative for women of the time, my mother
divorced her husband. Once divorced, she moved back in with her parents and raised her
son as a single mother, before the term single mother even existed. This was considered
an act of defiance that was unheard of at that time. She walked away, not because he abused her, not because he did not provide for her, but because he was a cheating asshole that did not value her as a person. So she always said that, she was left with no choice but to value herself.

She taught me to be strong, that above all else. She taught me to advocate for myself, and for her, advocacy took on many forms. She taught me to fight for what I believe in. No one ever wondered what was on her mind, and I have been accused of sharing that affliction. She taught me to be the dominant force in the room. She taught me to be accountable. Because of this, to this day, if I did it, I own it. I may not like it, but I own it. She lived and died on her own terms. When she decided that it was time for her to transition at one hundred two (she was not ill, just tired and according to her “bored with this life”), she started verbalizing being ready to die in November. The sense of loss was overwhelming, but I knew that I could not be selfish, and begging her to stay in a life that she no longer wanted would have been selfish, so I did what I know how to do. I did what she taught me. I negotiated. I sat down with my mother and said, “I will never ask you to stay, because I feel like the latter part of your time on this earth has been for me. But, what I will ask you to do is give me time to prepare Eden. She needs one more set of holidays with you. Get us through the holidays. She needs for February to remain our birthday month and not become the month that nanny died. I won’t ask you to stay, but I will ask you to stay until March. You don’t owe anyone anything, but you taught me to always ask and see where it goes, so I am asking.” My mother died March 2.
According to the doctor she stayed here by sheer force of will because at that point, her body had already started breaking down. A personification of her fortitude and steadfastness that still leaves me lost for words. All of these experiences with this larger-than-life figure that was barely five feet tall, made me the woman that I am today. Made me the mother that I am today. This made me someone that I can be proud of, but also made me someone that is in need of some serious self-assessment.

This assessment led me to further examine my relationship with my own mother. It taught me that I had heard her messages loud and clear. Although I had copied her example to a tee, I wasn’t raising someone that was taught to follow mother without question as she did. I learned to do what she did. I also learned not do what she didn’t. She did not teach me to listen to that voice inside of me that knows when I have had enough. My mother did not do “overwhelmed.” She did “push through” and “fake it till you make it.” I mean, this is a woman that controlled every aspect of her life, and her death. The day she died, she told the nurse that she was going to die close to her shift because she didn’t like her and wanted to stick her with the paperwork…she did just that.

Conversely, my daughter understands overwhelmed. My daughter understands that it is okay to say no. She never developed this notion of strength that Shorter (1996) posits is a reaction to dealing with racism and sexism (p. 473). My mother did not teach me to apologize. She taught me to own it, learn from it, and to adjust, but not to apologize. I had to learn this on my own, for the sake of my own child. She needed to hear those words; she was taught that she was worth those words. I had to learn that it is ok to tell
children that you are sorry. It is okay to admit mistakes in a way that shows you are vulnerable. Children need much more than “ok I did it, let’s move on.” My child needed more than that. She needed to see the human in me, and in order to relate to her I had to stop pretending that I was superhuman. In *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black women in America* (2003), Jones and Shorter-Gooden discuss how this idea of being superhuman and taking on more than you should in the name of “getting shit done.” They have named this the Sisterella complex and according to them, it can be very damaging to the mental health of Black women.

They suffer from what we call the Sisterella complex, a manifestation of depression that is all too common in Black American women today. Much like the classic Cinderella character, Sisterella is the Black woman who honors others but denies herself. She achieves in her own right—indeed, she may overachieve—yet she works tirelessly, sometimes masochistically, to promote, protect, and appease others. She is trying so hard to be what others want and need that she has lost control of the shifting process. It’s overtaken her. Sisterella has had to give too much to others. Or she’s given up too much of herself. She has so internalized society’s messages that say she is less capable, less valuable, that she has stopped trying to prove otherwise. She has lost sight of her own gifts as well as her own needs. Her identity is confused, her personal goals are deeply buried, and she shrinks inwardly. She becomes depressed,
sometimes severely so. Although the Sisterella complex is not a clinical term, it describes a phenomenon among African American women that has been too often disregarded. The very selflessness that characterizes Sisterella may lead clinicians and researchers to overlook the prevalence of depression in Black women. (p. 124)

I must admit, that in all of the lessons I have learned regarding unwavering strength from my mother, I really felt this. I started this section with my daughter asking me where my anger comes from, and why it was necessary. I have never really been able to give her an answer, but the more that I unpacked this research, the more I realized...while it is manifesting to her as anger, for me, it was frustration. It was being tired. It was for once in my life not having to do all things, and not feeling guilty about not stepping up to stand in the gap whether it be at home or at work because honestly the milieu matters not for a “strong Black woman” that suffers from a serious case of “fuck it, I’ll do it.”

The “fuck it, I’ll do it” mentality of Black women is so pervasive that the phrase has been put on a t-shirt for public consumption (I sadly admit, that I own the shirt in both blue and Black). While some of us wear this as a badge of honor, medical professionals are starting to see that this need to put on a cape and save the day could be the very thing that is shortening our lifespans. We have already explored the mental health impact of doing this. Other research argues that there is a physical toll as well. Dr. Cheryl Giscombe at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has begun
researching her belief that health disparities in Black women can be explained by stress coping. She believes that the Superwoman Syndrome plays heavily into.

It is reasonable to examine how the role of superwoman might be a double-edged sword for the health of this group—an asset and a vulnerability. African Americans have been acclaimed for their strength (vis-a-vis resilience, fortitude, and perseverance) in the face of the society and personal challenges. This has been viewed as a positive character trait or asset that has contributed to the survival among the African American population. It stands to reason that without this survival mechanism, African Americans might not have endured historical hardships…Perhaps there is a price to the Superwoman role. The legacy of strength in the face of stress among African American women might have something to do with the current health disparities that African American women face.

(p.2)

It appears that Dr. Giscombe’s theory is in part, maybe what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, but what makes you stronger can potentially play a major role in killing you. However, to truly unpack how this superwoman role is becoming detrimental to our community, one must look at the characterization of the Superwoman role which Giscombe breaks down into five parts.

1. Obligation to manifest strength.
2. Obligation to suppress emotion
3. Resistance to being vulnerable or dependent.

4. Determination to succeed despite limited resources

5. Obligation to help others (p. 8)

These five characteristics do not directly contribute to health disparities, they can even play a part in whether or not medical treatment is sought, and how far medical issues have advanced once treatment is finally received. I look at my own health as an example of this. I was diagnosed with polycystic ovarian syndrome at eighteen years old, even then, I pushed through pain to get things accomplished. Even as a child, I understood that you put your head down, you don’t complain. I did not start my menstrual cycle until long after the norm, and when I did, it did not last long. I told my mother that I needed to see a doctor, a gynecologist, but her swift judgement and terse, “you are a child, what do you need to see a lady doctor for? What are you out here doing in these streets that you need to see a lady doctor for?” taught me that the constant pain, swelling and lack of menstrual cycle were something to be quietly endured and never spoken about again. It wasn’t until I was able to go away to college and see a doctor on my own that I realized that I had a grapefruit-sized cyst on my ovary. It was the first of many (double digit) gynecological surgeries that would culminate twenty-four years later in a full hysterectomy. When I finally was treated for my cyst at eighteen, the doctor wanted to know, had there been pain? Why didn’t you say anything? I just bowed my head and withstood his judgement because, at the end of the
day…Black girls don’t tell. Black girls don’t tell. Black girls don’t complain. Black girls get shit done. An idea that Giscombe’ breaks down even further:

It is reasonable to assume that an isolated characteristic of the Superwoman role might not be, in and of itself, a risk factor for undesirable health outcomes. However, specific combinations of superwoman characteristics and varying degrees of available resources might influence a woman’s risk for impaired health. For example, a tendency to suppress negative emotions in the context of inadequate resources and responsibilities in multiple life domains might place a woman at greater risk for adverse health compared to a woman who has a great deal of determination to succeed but also has the ability to express distress as a result of abundant tangible and emotional support from family and friends.

(p.18)

In short, the superwoman effect is cyclic. We embody superwoman because that is what we are taught, that is what is modeled for us. What we are taught colors how we see the world. How we see the world impacts how we interact with it, and around in a circle we go. However, according to the research, we can mitigate the superwoman narrative and some of the corresponding health issues by creating spaces in which Black girls and women can be vulnerable, period.

*Colorism.*
I spent the majority of my young life having a very specific experience that I could not name. In fact, I didn’t realize that what I was feeling even had a name. A large part of me just assumed that I had created a narrative inside of my head to torture and victimize myself, I had to be doing this to myself because there is no way that the people around me could possibly be making me feel this way, on purpose. Very rarely did anyone ever come right out and say what they really meant: “you are too dark, your hair is too short and …nappy. You will never be beautiful.” I wish they had just said those things, because if they had, then it would have saved me years of trying to figure out what was wrong with me. More importantly, this would have eliminated the years that I spent try to decipher meaning from vague slights. Things like my mother suggesting that I shy away from certain colors because of how they look against my skin. Her comments regarding me not playing outside because I had “already sustained enough damage.” Hair stylists looking at my chocolate brown skin and putting the strongest relaxer in my hair that money could buy (because we all know that skin color and hair texture always correlate) causing me to lose the majority of my hair and damage my scalp in the process. I spent my childhood trying to figure out what was wrong with me. Why I was being treated this way, and more importantly, why no one seemed to have a problem with it. As a result, I internalized, I self-loathed, I tried to fix it, and when those didn’t work, I studied it. Consequently, when I got to undergraduate school, I learned that this visceral sense of self-loathing had a name…colorism.
In her 1983 book, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, Alice Walker defines colorism as, “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color.” (p. 290) While there are those that argue that colorism involves reciprocity and negativity toward both light- and dark-skinned individuals, the dominant narrative surrounding this notion has been very singular in concept. That concept is simple… the closer you are to Whiteness, the more socially acceptable you are. Or, as my momma used to say, “if you light you alright, if you brown stick around, but if you Black stay back.” Although this concept was formally named in 1983, colorism has been around since the days of slavery.

In addition, to Walker’s original definition, other more detailed definitions have since been added to the colorism cannon. There are many other definitions of colorism that exist and provide the basis for the existence of colorism and expand its reach. Bonnie Berry more precisely defines colorism in the Encyclopedia of Gender and Society:

> The term colorism refers to the biased treatment of individuals based on their skin color and can occur interracially (similar to race bias) or intraracially (with members of the same race expressing bias against fellow members based on skin color). Colorism also refers to other identifiable race features, such as hair texture, lip shape, nose shape, eye shape, and eye color. Like gender, skin color, and related phenotypical features are readily visible traits that designate minority or majority status. Other minority statuses are not necessarily visible and thus not
Immediately identifiable: ableism, lesbianism, religious affiliation, social class, criminal status, and so on. The visibility of a minority trait, racial identity in this case, is key since it almost automatically invites a public response that can be experienced as bias (147).

A definition that once only included skin color, has grown to include things like hair texture and African versus European features. Prior to the conclusion of this chapter, we will exam how the aforementioned has impacted Black girls contemporarily but prior to doing so, we must first garner an understanding of how colorism began and where it comes from.

Skin color separation and delineation began in the South as a part of the slave trade. While most people think of the slave trade as an issue between Black and White, a more nuanced look into the institution of chattel slavery will posit that its intra-racial legacy has been just as damaging as its inter-racial one. In short, we view slavery as a very racially polarizing time in America; however, slavery was more than an institution of interracial boundaries, creating and exacerbating racial inequality between Blacks and Whites, it also shaped intra-racial boundaries among Black people. It not only determined who and who was not Black, but also contributed to skill differences that molded occupational success post-Emancipation (Ruef & Fletcher, 2003).

In order to keep track of intra-racial classifications, a system had to be developed. To manage said system, a baseline for “acceptable Blackness” had to be established. For the purposes of colorism in America, that baseline became the brown paper bag, in what
Kerr called, the “Brown Paper Bag Principle.” As stated by Kerr, “the brown paper bag is believed to signify degrees of acceptance and inclusion (that is, if one is fairer than the brown paper bag” (p. 272). Kerr continued, “Even given its derogatory meaning, the phrase ‘paper bag test’ traditionally has been used liberally and with great frequency by African Americans throughout the twentieth and into the twenty first century” (272). The paper bag principle stemmed from a test that was conducted by Whites to first determine whether a person had any drop of Blackness in them. Because of the growing capacity of “passing” into Washington schools in the early 1900s there were methods adopted by Whites to determine whether any White person was purely White or if they had any Blackness in them using the “One Drop Rule.” The One Drop Rule concluded that any person found to have even one drop of Blackness in their blood, no matter how long ago, was Black and not White. In an attempt to find those that were indeed endowed with Black blood, ridiculous methods, such as the ones stated by Kerr, included examining the shape of the fingernail, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and the examination of hair roots (p. 277). Anyone found to contain any characteristic that could connect them to Blackness no matter how faint the amount, would be automatically declared as Black. In the 1918 study, White sociologist Edward Byron Reuter accounted for all those that could be mixed by placing them into the following categories:

- Mulatto: Negro and White
- Quadroon: Mulatto and White
- Octoroon: Quadroon and White
Cascos: Mulatto and Mulatto
Sambo: Mulatto and Negro
Mango: Sambo and Negro
Mustifee: Octoroon and White
Mustifino: Mustifee and White

While this classification did exist and was clearly accompanied by a number of ways to “test” someone for Blackness, the general population relied on what they could see and what they knew about a person’s background to determine their Blackness. Because of this, some Black people opted to “pass” or assimilate themselves into White society based upon how they looked. In the book, *A Chosen Exile: Black People Passing In White America* (2014), Allyson Hobbs documents her family’s history, and the story of her aunt, who decided to send her daughter that was “good enough” to pass far away for a better life. Hobbs laments,

The young girl could not have known that this would be her last time hearing the marching bands and the cheering crowds and following the parade to the picnic in Washington Park. Unlike many Black parents, she would not share this experience with her children. She looked White, as did both of her parents. At the insistence of her mother, she would move far away from Chicago’s South Side to Los Angeles to live the rest of her life as a White woman apart from her family. It was not her choice. She pleaded with her mother; she did not want to leave her family her friends
and the only life she had ever known. But her mother was determined and
the matter was decided.

Years later, after she married a White man and raised White children who
knew nothing of her past, she received an inconvenient telephone call. It
was her mother, and she called to tell her that her father was dying and she
must come home immediately. Despite these dire circumstances, she
would never return to Chicago’s South Side. The young girl who had once
sat on a curb in Chicago’s most historic Black neighborhood to watch
America’s largest Black parade was a White woman now. There was
simply no turning back. (p. 82)

Hobbs’ book tells a story of a woman who is caught between two worlds. She was born
Black, yet looks White. She struggles to navigate those two worlds, in her case, by not
straddling them both, but making a conscious choice to give up anything that had the
slightest possibility of revealing her secrets. She did not even come to the bedside of her
dying father, simply dismissing her mother’s pleas for her attendance with a simple, “I
can’t. I’m a White woman now.” To her, the hurt and pain of loss were worth the quality
of life that she had gained as a White woman. They were worth everything she had left
behind. This tale differs greatly from the story of Clare Kendry, a light-skinned Black
woman that did choose to pass, marry a White man, but not completely separate herself
from her life of old. Her Negro life. Her story is documented in Nella Larson’s 1929
novel, *Passing*. For Clare, life takes a deadly turn once her secret is inadvertently revealed.

But Bellew didn’t heed him. He pushed past them all into the room and strode towards Clare. They all looked at her as she got up from her chair, backing a little from his approach. “So you’re a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!” His voice was a snarl and a moan, an expression of rage and of pain. Everything was in confusion. The men had sprung forward. Felise had leapt between them and Bellew. She said quickly: “Careful. You’re the only White man here.” And the silver chill of her voice, as well as her words, was a warning. Clare stood at the window, as composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity and wonder, as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her. She seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring. There was even a faint smile on her full red lips and in her shining eyes. It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare’s bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn’t have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn’t have her free. Before them stood John Bellew, speechless now in his hurt and anger. Beyond them the little huddle of other people, and Brian stepping out from among them. What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly. One moment Clare had been there, a vital
glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone. There
was a gasp of horror, and above it a sound not quite human, like a beast in
agony. “Nig! My God! Nig!” (p. 90)

Clare spends most of the novel, relishing the good life that being White has
afforded her, while simultaneously missing her life of old. She lives on the White side of
town and is regarded as a White woman with every luxury that such a designation
affords; however, she cannot resist the compulsion to have friends from her old life, her
Negro life. In an effort to ensure some safety precautions, Clare only associated with
friends from her old life who, like her could pass for White. She invited them over for
lunch and they talked about the old days, with her husband none the wiser about the fact
that his home has literally been infiltrated by Negroes. Each lady represented a different
version of what it means to pass. Clare is completely passing. She has cut off her entire
family (except the White ones) and no one knows that she is in fact Black. Gertrude is
passing, but her White husband and family are aware that she is Black and don’t seem to
care. And then there is Irene, the protagonist of the story. She does what I will call
situational passing. Her husband is a dark-skinned man, she lives in a Black
neighborhood, and her children are brown, so she is unapologetically Black in that
regard. However, if she happens to be on a bus alone, and she wants to sit in the Whites-
only section, she does. If she wants to eat lunch at Nordstrom, where Black people are
not allowed, she does, and no one is the wiser. As the ladies sat and had lunch, Irene and
Gertrude begin to talk about the fear and stress of carrying babies while passing. Their
greatest fear is that the baby will come out dark and change everything that they have worked for.

After taking up her own glass she informed them: “No, I have no boys and I don’t think I’ll ever have any. I’m afraid. I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I’ll never risk it again. Never! The strain is simply too—too hellish.” Gertrude Martin nodded in complete comprehension. This time it was Irene who said nothing. “You don’t have to tell me!” Gertrude said fervently. “I know what it is all right. Maybe you don’t think I wasn’t scared to death too. Fred said I was silly, and so did his mother. But, of course, they thought it was just a notion I’d gotten into my head and they blamed it on my condition. They don’t know like we do, how it might go way back, and turn out dark no matter what color the father and mother are.” (p. 25)

While *Passing* tells the story of those trying to navigate society as White women, Margo Jefferson’s *Negroland: A Memoir*, chronicles the life of light-skinned Blacks on the South Side of Chicago that while not light enough to pass, were fortunate enough to leverage their light skin into a form of privilege that they feverishly uphold and fight fervently to protect. In this passage Jefferson explains the origins of this light-skinned privileged class. Once reserved for only free Negroes, emancipation opened this opportunity up to others:
But there are new players here. Those who once lived in slavery or on the lower rungs of the free Negro class are now in a position to seize opportunities and provide good schools, stores, and restaurants to an eager people along with churches, life insurance, good hair products, and cultural advantages. They too become teachers, lawyers, undertakers, doctors, journalists, some dare to become artists. They study chemistry and zoology, Greek, Latin, the Romance languages. They send their children to the growing number of Negro colleges, occasionally they send them to White colleges, periodically they send them abroad for cultural enrichment. The old families have to cope: The end of slavery has not just freed a people, it has freed achievers, strivers, arrivistes from the lower ranks. (p.27)

Dorothy West also chronicles this as she talks about the light-skinned elite Black people, particularly the Coles family of “The Oval”, or the Black section of Martha’s Vineyard, setting for her 1995 novel, *The Wedding*. Set in the 1950’s when Black people were preoccupied with the notion of equality and dispelling Jim Crow, the Black people of The Oval operated on a different wavelength due to class and privilege. To the Coles, and the Oval, appearance is of top priority. To those that live in the world of the Coles and the Oval, one must always remember their societal reputation and live up to expectations placed on them (p. 20). This illustrates that light skin, privilege, and money imbued Negroes of a certain ilk with a level of freedom that was not afforded Negroes that did
not look like them. One could argue that the Black people of the Oval have problems more akin to the ones of White America than they do with Black Americans that are darker and less wealthy. Very similar to what Jefferson describes as being a part of a third race:

in Negroland we thought of ourselves as the Third Race, poised between the masses of Negroes and all classes of Caucasians. Like the Third Eye, the Third Race possessed a wisdom, intuition, and enlightened knowledge the other two races lacked. Its members had education, ambition, sophistication, and standardized verbal dexterity. (p. 51)

But that myth is completely dispelled when fair-skinned, blonde-haired, blue-eyed—yet Negro—Shelby Coles goes missing on the island. The Coles, a known Black family on the Island, calls and reports their daughter missing. A note is made, and the police keep a lookout for a Negro girl on the island. In the meantime, Shelby is found wandering and assumed to be a White child and all attention turns to locating her parents while the Black families of The Oval galvanize to find Shelby. Eventually, they realize that the lost White child that they are circling the wagons for, and the missing Black child are indeed one in the same. Once Shelby is found and home safe, a neighbor unpacks what happened and proclaims in frustration that:

they couldn’t find a lost colored child so they had to settle for any child that was lost. They had the whole town keeping an eye out—everybody
put on dark glasses. Those of us with light-skinned children should put a tag on them, “please return to the colored race. (p. 75)

The frustration of this statement seems to echo the sentiment of Black people not born into wealth and class with regard to Jim Crow, seemingly one of the few times that a family such as the Coles has had to feel such a stigma.

This stigma is one that impacts darker-skinned Black people on a regular basis and has been documented throughout African American literature. One such documentation is present within Toni Morrison’s book *The Bluest Eye*, written in 1970. The main character is an eleven-year-old girl by the name of Pecola Breedlove. Pecola struggles with her self-identity as she believes that she is ugly. She despises her dark skin, her short kinky hair, and has decided that the only thing that can make her beautiful is a pair of blue eyes. As much as it pains me to say it, Pecola was one of the characters in literature that I identified with on a myriad of levels, having grown up a dark-skinned, kinky-haired girl in a family with a mother whose caramel-colored skin was often mitigated and sometimes even negated by a head full of soft, long curls and a pair of dark blue-green eyes. Everyone loved my mother, people fawned over her, as an adult I realize that part of that may have been her commanding personality. However to a child, it was her pretty skin, her beautiful hair and those blue-green eyes that were clearly present in my bloodline but had somehow managed to skip me. Why would a god that was supposed to be benevolent and kind make me with literally everything that the world hates: big frame, dark skin, African features, crooked teeth, and nappy hair? Why would
he do this to me when clearly there was a version of my DNA that could be put forth for public consumption that the world would love? I understood Pecola, and honestly, if I thought that there was something that I could have done to change the way that I look, like Pecola I probably would have done it, too.

Marita Golden shares a similar sentiment in her memoir *Don’t Play in the Sun* written in 2004. In this passage she talks about the “don’t play in the sun” speech, one that I know all too well:

My mother’s words were filled that day with as much emotion as trembles in the voices of mothers today, warning their children not to play in the sun because of the fear of skin cancer. And yet for my mother, darkness, Blackness, in its own way was a kind of disease whose progress, in its assault on me, she felt she had to try to halt. (p.9).

This belief that, somehow, we can mitigate what is considered beautiful, or if we can’t mitigate the standard, then let’s mitigate ourselves, is at the heart of Morrison’s novel. As she explains in the forward, it is one of her major reasons for writing it:

Beauty was not simply something to behold, it was something one could do. *The Bluest Eye* was my effort to say something about that, to say something about why she had not, or possibly ever would have, the experience of what she possessed and also why she prayed for so radical an alteration. Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. And twenty years later, I was still wondering about how one learns that. Who told her?
Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale? The novel pecks away at the gaze that condemned her (xi).

Pecola’s quest for blue eyes, beauty, and social acceptance literally drives her mad. Her desire for blue eyes consumes her and ultimately destroys her. Pecola’s victimization is present on a number of different fronts. In A Study of Black Feminism and Womanism in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* from the Viewpoint of Alice Walker, Walker states that Pecola:

As the protagonist of the novel because of her Blackness and her darker skin is doubly pressed and victimized. One the one hand, she [is] pressed by a White racist society due to her Black race, but on the other hand, she is victimized within her own Black community due to her darker skin. Thus, the Blackness of her skin gradually disgusts her and leads her to embrace White beauty standards (p. 1307).

Colorism still impacts many individuals today. In “Skin Tone and Racism in the United States,” Landor states that:

there is a dearth of research that examines the relationship between skin tone and racial discrimination… Some research shows that darker skinned African Americans report more discrimination, whereas others indicate no significant relationship between these two variables” (818).
While some have a tendency to want to think of colorism as an antiquated practice; and it is true that people are rarely walking around quantifying their skin color down to the percentage, we have to look no further than schools to see that colorism still runs deep in our communities. The language has change but the sentiment is still the same. As a dean, when I am mediating issues between girls, there are times where I can tell a girl’s skin color based solely on the description of the incident. The dark skinned descriptors have been replaced with coded language such as, “she just ghetto” or “she loud and she do too much.” When the dark skinned girls describe their altercations with their light skinned contemporaries they use such language as, “she is stuck up” or “she thinks she better than everyone” These old notions of colorism are so deeply ingrained within our community that our kids espouse them without even realizing it. These old habits die hard; but I guess if they didn’t, I wouldn’t have needed to embark upon this journey.

**Summary**

This chapter has explored, through the use of both literature and non-fiction text, what it has meant to be a Black woman in America for the last four hundred years. These images have inundated our psyche and forever impacted what people imagine a Black woman to be. I would dare to argue that is has even tainted what some Black women think that a Black woman should be. This juxtaposition has led to a disconnect in how Black women are viewed and experienced by larger society; and in some instance how Black women see themselves. This has permeated Black women’s sense of self and
consequently impacted Black girls and how they see and navigate their place in this world. This is a dichotomy that will be explored in subsequent chapters.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

October 11, 2018 started off like any other day. I wish that I could tell you that, in hindsight, there was some ominous warning that would have let me know how my day would end, but there was not. No “initially the car wouldn’t start;” no “I should have just gone home when I spilled my tea in my lap.” Nothing. Just a regular day; a day like any other. I got up, I dropped the kid off, I went to work…I never in a million years would have guessed how that day was going to end.

I was sitting in my office doing paperwork when I got a call from a colleague stating that several of our shared students were arguing again. This time, they were calling each other and making threats over the telephone, as well as posting videos on social media. Our plan was to call them down to the office, have yet another conversation about their abhorrent behavior toward one another, call their parents and again impress upon them the importance of talking to their respective daughters regarding this incident and finally putting an end to their ongoing feud—a disagreement that had literally been going on in some form or fashion for years now. It started in middle school, and here they were, high school juniors, still arguing about it.

Sitting at my desk, I began to type. Looking at PowerSchool, our student management software, I pulled up the demographics of each of the students. One-by-one I called and asked security to go to the classroom and bring them to the conference room.
Because of their volatile history, I requested that our school resource officer to be present for the mediation and conversation. Per our protocol, security was to be present as well, just in case things got heated. Putting this chain of events in motion, I did not realize that, within the hour, my whole world would change forever.

I received a call from the Assistant Principal’s secretary stating that all of the students were in the conference room and they were ready for me to come over so that we could begin. I stopped by the Assistant Principal’s office prior to talking with the students because I wanted to get some clarity on why we were attempting to mediate this situation again. Needing to know why we were having another conversation about an issue that by this time, spanned multiple years, I explained to him that my goal was not to sound unfeeling or uncaring, because at the end of the day I am in fact an advocate for students,. However, as Dean of students, my job is to keep the building safe. As a result, I must ask the question, “How many times are we going to talk to the same group of girls about the same egregious behaviors that neither side is willing to back off of?” The school year had begun on August 15th, and since that time, these girls had fought each other twice, had relatives come to the school to fight each other, had been mediated by two different deans regarding this behavior, and we had had parent conferences. Taking all of this into account, I guess the question that I wanted the assistant principal to answer was “at what point do we determine that the issues of the student may be beyond the scope of services that we have to offer?” When does one say that more intensive interventions are needed?
My assistant principal listened, but then explained that we worked in a place that did not exactly subscribe to the paradigm of swift action when it comes to discipline. He cited what we colloquially refer to as “Senate Bill 100” within the state of Illinois, but its actual name is Public Law 92-313. A very loose and cursory reading of the aforementioned would have one believe that its inception was in fact an effort to move toward the polar opposite of “zero tolerance,” a policy requiring school officials to hand down specific, consistent, and harsh punishment—usually suspension or expulsion—when students break certain rules. Under zero-tolerance policies, harsh punishment applies regardless of the circumstances (Gjelten). People believe that Senate Bill 100 is the polar opposite of zero tolerance, and as a result, infer that it means that there will be no suspensions or discipline for anyone for any reason; despite the fact that the verbiage of Senate Bill 100 is very clear that suspension can still occur and lays out the parameters under which it can happened. Senate Bill 100 asserts that the goal is to provide students with alternatives to suspension, and to make sure that schools are providing necessary assistance to students, so that the school itself does not become a barrier to academic achievement. However, it also states that if a student’s continued presence within the educational setting causes a disruption to the learning environment or a threat to school safety then a suspension can still be applied as long as it is accompanied by interventions that help to reduce recidivism and the student has access to the work that they missed while they were out of school (Illinois General Assembly 2013). Honestly, I can’t say whether or not people choose to ignore this particular passage on purpose or if they are
jumping on the bandwagon with the anti-suspension rhetoric, but either way it is not applied correctly.

After another conversation about how Senate Bill 100 is tying our hands, I walked rather reluctantly into this mediation. I felt in my heart that it was not the right thing to do, because I knew that it wasn’t going to change anything. I sat down at the long conference table, a fellow dean to my right and two students to my left. The other students were seated across the table next to the school resource officer. A security guard was positioned at the door. The other dean began the mediation by reiterating that we had been down this road before, and because of that, this mediation would be brief. I then laid out the ground rules for the mediation: one person speaks at a time, respect, confidentiality, and things along those lines. I also wanted to let them know that they were not to talk directly to each other, but to speak to the deans, as we were working diligently to minimize conflict. The girl sitting next to me, let’s call her “Candice,” elected to speak first. Candice began to tell her story. She told us that even though they have already fought, even though they had been mediated several times, and even though both they and their families had been instructed to leave this issue alone, it had not gone anywhere. In fact, Candice informed us that the girls she had the issue with have now started calling on the telephone from an anonymous number and leaving threatening messages. They were still trying to coax her into fighting again. The most vocal of the young ladies from the other side, we will call her “Erica,” jumped up and yelled, “You lying, ain’t nobody called your bitch ass!” Erica was immediately told to sit down and be
quiet by both myself and security. Candice then replied, “Oh I’m lying huh! Y’all left a message!” She then proceeded to pull out her phone and play the messages. The voice in the message taunted, “yeah bitch we beat your ass once, keep running your mouth!” I instructed her to turn the recording off and told them that we needed to shut this down because we were not getting anywhere. Erica jumped out of her seat and yelled, “Bitch, that not even my motherfucking voice you a lying ass bitch!” I will not lie, it sounded like her to me, but I am no expert.

When Erica jumped up, the other dean stood up and stepped in front of her and firmly told her to sit down. At that very moment, Erica grabbed the other dean and pushed her out of the way. She was coming for Candice, quickly and angrily, and now there was nothing standing in her way. I could give you a laundry list of things that were going through my mind, I could wax poetic through eloquent prose with some metaphor that would describe this girl barreling toward me. I mean, I could…but I think, “oh shit!” sums it up quite nicely. Erica was coming swiftly, angrily, and full of conflagration. I moved without thought, without action, and the educator in me, the mother bear in me, wanted to protect this child. I reached out, still sitting in the conference room chair and with my left hand I grabbed Candice, and pushed her underneath the conference room table, hoping that would be enough to stop what was coming. It was enough…for Candice, but for me…not so much. Erica was determined to cause this girl bodily harm and neither I, nor anyone else was going to stand in her way. I grabbed her and attempted to cover her with my body. As I turned, Erica grabbed the chair that I was in and pushed
it into the file cabinet, I was still holding on to Candice. By this time, security had
jumped in to break up the fracas. They grabbed Candice from me, it was at that moment
that I was able to look down at my left arm, it was swollen. I couldn’t feel my fingers,
they were starting to turn purple and my head was throbbing like nothing I had ever
experienced before. Candice was now secure, and a two-way radio transmission alerted
me to the fact that Erica had run out of the building and down the street. I was quickly
ushered to the nurse’s office. The longer I sat there, the colder my left arm grew. As the
nurse and I sat waiting on hold with the work-related injury hotline, I grew increasingly
concerned what this might mean for my health going forward.

When we had been on hold for about ten minutes, my hand was so swollen that I
could no longer close it. The Assistant Principal came into the nurse’s office and wanted
to know what was taking so long and why I had not been transported to the hospital for
medical attention. She was told by the nurse that we were waiting to speak to someone
from the work-related injury department; they had to clear us to go to the hospital. The
nurse then tried to alleviate some of the swelling in my neck and shoulders with an ice
pack while we waited to talk to someone. The rush of severe pain and nausea is
something that I will never forget; the vomiting was essentially instantaneous. As a
result, the ambulance was called. I never spoke to the work-related injury nurse.

The ambulance ride was short—less than ten minutes—but it was enough time for
me to replay the situation and to start thinking about what this incident would mean for
me going forward. After several hours in the emergency room, I was released with a final
diagnosis: a sprained cervical spine and herniated disc between my C4 and C5 vertebrae. After being out of work several weeks, I was back on limited duty, essentially chained to a desk and not allowed to engage in anything with the potential to turn into an altercation. Which for a dean of discipline means…pretty much everything.

I won’t lie, this situation has put me at odds with everything that I believe, not forever, I’m sure. Yet, I am questioning my own decision-making at the moment. I am a Black woman. I am an educator. I am a researcher, an ethnographer and an anthropologist. I just happen to be one that studies that which I also am… a Black girl. This experience has caused a great deal of reflection. I love Black girls. I have dedicated my career to the equitable treatment of Black girls in education. My life’s work has been to bring awareness to the lack of agency and protection afforded Black girls. I am hurting physically, mentally, and spiritually. I am willing myself to push through these feelings. Given my full immersion in that which I study, the best methodology for my purposes is autoethnography. But before we continue, we must first answer the question, what is autoethnography?

The aforementioned is an example of the autoethnographic narratives I plan to utilize in subsequent chapters. These narratives will be central to the autoethnographic research method I will implore. This study seeks to build a theory to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How does the way that African American women have been depicted historically in mass media inform how they see
themselves? How do African American female archetypes still inform African American women and teenaged girls?

**RQ2:** What role does misogynoir play in the treatment of African American girls in schools as well as their depiction in mass media? Is there a need for “Black girl-centric” spaces to combat this?

**RQ3:** How does the dichotomous nature of being an African American woman and an educator inform interactions with African American girls and school policies?

But, before we unpack autoethnography, let’s talk about what it is.

Autoethnography has been defined as:

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that utilizes data about self and its context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context. This research method is distinctive from others in three ways: it is qualitative, self-focused, and context-conscious. First, autoethnography is a qualitative research method (Chang, 2007; Denzin, 2006; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). As a research method, autoethnography takes a systematic approach to data collection, analysis, and interpretation about self and social phenomena involving self. This systematic and intentional approach to the socio-cultural understanding of self, sets autoethnography apart from other self-narrative writings such as *memoir* and *autobiography*. Second,
autoethnography is self-focused. The researcher is at the center of the investigation as a “subject” (the researcher who performs the investigation) and an “object” (a/the participant who is investigated).

Autoethnographers sometimes use a pseudonym to maintain a level of distance between what they are writing and the subjects of their writing. Laura Bohannan is an example of this, despite the fact that the subject was her lived high school experience (Bowen 1954). Bohannan’s goal was to create a line of demarcation that noted where this experience ended, and her life began. In my work, and in this study, there is no such line for me. I am a Black woman every single day that I live, and all of those experiences intermingle to weave the tapestry that is how I am perceived, coupled with how I interact with others in this world. This level of immersion, and my continued capacity in this role within this institution is why I have chosen to identify said institution as High School X. As the primary subject of this study, my identity cannot be obscured; however, to be as authentic in my retelling as possible, the identity of the institution will be. Because this experience is so deeply personal, the method of data collection is lived experience as a native member of a research group, observation and data collection. This data will be disseminated through self-reflection and writing. My position within the research paradigm is that of native member. Having worked at High School X for over fourteen years now, my presence is neither an intrusion nor a distraction. This line of thought is expressed in the writing of Ngunijir, Hernandez, and Chang (2010). When describing autoethnography, they posit that research is an extension of the researchers’ lives.
Although most social scientists have been trained to guard against subjectivity (self-driven perspectives) and to separate self from research activities, it is an impossible task. Scholarship is inextricably connected to self-personal interest, experience and familiarity (p. 2). In addition, it also eliminates the ethical issues that, for example, surrounded Cathy Small’s book when she obscured her identity to gain insider status for the purposes of autoethnographic research (Nathan 2005). To reiterate, my fieldwork is neither scripted nor scheduled. I am living my life daily, documenting daily, and unpacking my lived experience as it proves germane to my narrative.

Sherry B. Ortner (1996) wrote that a key point of emerging anthropological thought was the shift from static and structural approaches that deal with time and process. Instead one should view the authoethnographic process as one that views human actions as both shaping and being shaped by wider structural and historical forces. In the first two chapters we have explored the historical milieu in which the Black woman resides. In subsequent chapters we will unpack the implications of the aforementioned in school and beyond. This version of autoethnography is the most identifiable for me as it recognizes that the field or the area in which we observe students is not a static place. It is an evolving, every-changing space that lends itself to immersive study. For my purposes, the field is my life and how I experience it daily within three contexts, Black woman, Black woman educator, mother of a Black daughter and former Black girl student Each of these parts of my intersectionality come to form the context in which I experience my current milieu. While Fox (2017) states in his book that a “good autobiographer is writing
Detachment does not allow one to be fully immersed within the milieu because one is preoccupied with the appearance of objectivity in a subjective situation. My writing couldn’t be more attached; how does one detach from their identity and lived experience and engage in academic voyeurism for the purposes of objectively writing about their identity and lived experience?

While there are varying opinions on how much a researcher should assert themselves into a particular milieu for the purposes of autoethnography, one thing that seems to be consistent across the literature is the fact that the field of education organically lends itself to the use of this method. Reed-Danahay (2009) succinctly sums up my sentiment on why this has been my chosen method. She writes,

> education is a sphere that deals with both the cultural transmission and with the institutional arrangements in which this takes place. Education is also a site of power and conflict in stratified human societies, in which competing claims for dominance are enacted.” (p. 42)

**Theoretical Framework**

There are times when the only way that I am able to express what I am feeling is to write. There are times when my brain can only process situations by putting pen to paper, there are times where the only “I love yous” that I can muster come in the form a well written note. There are the days where my “you have harmed me” comes attached to
a loquacious email…much to the chagrin of my family. The following is something that I wrote after my experience with a White female probation officer in a meeting for a Black male student. I worked with:

I have a BA from Northwestern University, multiple Masters Degrees in various facets of education, and God willing and the creek don't rise, a doctorate before semester’s end. I am an expert in the field of culturally-competent discipline and literally wrote the book on dealing with Black girls and relational aggression. My expertise is both sought and respected across the country. I travel and speak nationally regarding education and discipline as it relates to students of color…and with all of that, those that know me know that this is not a calling that I take in jest. You also know that these are credentials that I do not readily or easily call upon because Mabel did an excellent job of instilling humility almost to a point of embarrassment. The position in which I sit in my professional life is the perfect storm of need, passion and expertise, a melange that I have worked tirelessly to master. And again—a position that I do not take lightly.

Yet, you sit across the table from me and several other Black women that are just as professional, just as credentialed, just as passionate and just as storied and somehow your privilege makes you the expert in the room. Within your privilege, you feel comfortable in claiming expertise about a person that you barely know and systems that you infrequently encounter. When the situation deviates from your original plan, you become demanding and combative while your privilege attempts to decimate the
expertise of every Black woman that sits before you. I am irritated because once again my chocolate skin and African features have empowered you to write my narrative for me and insert your single story as my own. I am undeterred because this is neither the first nor last time that my resting Black face will be perceived as a beacon of ignorance.

I am a Black woman full of passion and grace. I am blessed with the eloquence of ancestors that never got the chance to have their say and most importantly, I see through your thinly veiled microaggressions, as school and life and my momma have trained me to do. In your attempts of esoteric condemnation, I pause, not because I am afraid, not because I am broken, but because I want to give you the opportunity to retract...because that’s only fair. But you don’t digress, you stay the course and as a result I am left with no choice but to do that which I try to reject...be the voice of Black women that you pretend to have never seen. Be the erudite voice of reason and calm that you didn’t know came in brown. Use the finger of loud accusation and derision as the pointer to the facts and points of law.

Oh, thank you, yes I am well-spoken, oh you are impressed with me now...imagine that.

While this incident may feel isolated in nature, the reality of this situation…the reality of my students…my reality is that this is a common occurrence. The this, to which I refer is simple; although High School X is a school in which over ninety-five percent of the students are Black and Brown and about half the staff is either Black or Brown; the lone White woman in the room with the least amount of experience in education, or this
child believes that her opinion and voice matter above all else. This “well meaning” White woman probation officer with no experience is the education field, is fighting to place a Black child in special education services despite the dissent of four Black female educators with over sixty years of combined experience in the field. It is enough to anger anyone. It should anger everyone, except for me; as a Black woman I am not afforded the luxury of righteous, or dare I say rightful, indignation, lest I be labeled angry. In her 2018 book, *Eloquent Rage*, Brittney Cooper’s 2018 addresses the Black woman’s struggle anger, and when we are allowed to express it. She asserts that we always have to know our milieu and understand when and where anger are is safe because, we have jobs to keep, families to feed, and bills to pay. We understand that as Black women we hold our communities together, but in times like these we are reminded that not everyone takes us seriously in that endeavor (p. 2).

The irony of this interaction, is that upon speaking with this woman prior to this meeting, she considers herself a feminist. She wasted no time telling me her story, and how much she had to endure as both an Eastern European immigrant and a woman in this particular branch of law enforcement. She said, “The men can’t stand having a strong woman as an equal, they don’t know what to do with themselves. I don’t have to fetch them coffee or file their papers…and they hate it.” In that moment, we were two women commiserating over how men treat us in our perspective workplaces. Lamenting together over how much these men just don’t get with regard to our equality. In that moment we were together, united in our belief that women’s stories need to be told, and we together
would help to usher in the next generation of women that weren’t “fetching coffee.” This is the part where I am supposed to say, I never would have guessed that twenty minutes later this same White woman that so readily shared with me her story of intersectional feminism would now be attacking me in a very visceral way simply because she does not agree with me…I can’t say that, because I knew. Life experience and history have taught me that feminism, in the aforementioned incarnation is not and has not been very kind to Black women. This dynamic has made different kinds of feminism necessary, for my theoretical framework, I will be focusing on more intersectional brands of feminism that attempt to encapsulate all those things that make me…well me. In her 2017 book, Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women, Brittany Cooper asserts:

An explicitly Black woman–centered formulation of race womanhood became necessary because existing ideas about public and private did not accurately demarcate the social terms of Black womanhood. Unsurprisingly, the public was historically considered a male domain, in stark contrast to the private, domestic “woman’s sphere.” And even these ideas about a woman’s or domestic sphere were deeply racialized, so that “private and domestic” was a stand-in for “White womanhood (p. 14).

This passage succinctly elucidates how I felt in that moment, we were sisters standing together against the patriarchy, until you realized that I was fighting more than the patriarchy. It also personifies what Brittney Cooper denotes as one of feminism’s biggest
failures, it’s insistence that feminism is honestly truly and deeply about loving women (p. 34) this statement holds true as long as we are only discussion womanhood. When the feminism starts to intersect with race and class, it doesn’t work, and has a tendency to turn out like the situation that I previously highlighted. It is this dichotomy that Alice Walker so creatively names and articulates in her 1983 book, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*. She gives us the term, womanist, and defines it as a Black feminist who engages in behavior that is outrageous, courageous and willful, and who wants to know more and in greater depth than is considered good for one. (p.ix). She further goes on to create an image that has helped me to understand feminism vs womansim, and been one of my guiding principles as a move forward on my womanist journey, womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender (p.xii).

To better understand this metaphor Patricia Hill Collins (2000) writes,

Implicitly womanist and Black Feminist epistemologies uphold the importance of self-love, culturally derived knowledge construction, and audacious and courageous behavior oriented toward the goals of healing and wholeness for all people. Walker’s pairing of womanism with the color purple and feminism with the color lavender are significant. The similarity between the colors purple and lavender illustrate the commonality of gender oppression shared by the womanist and feminist; however, Walker’s designation of the color purple for womanism also suggests important differences between womanists and their female
counterparts. Womanism’s deeper hue, in comparison to the color lavender, reflects additional contexts of race and class that are also common sources of oppression for women of color. (p.358)

As a Black woman educating students in a school that is predominantly Black and Brown school district, this theoretical framework speaks to me on a number of levels. In addition to being able to live and work in my truth as a womanist, it has been documented that womanism, or Black feminism milieu as it is sometimes called, often manifests itself through the introduction of new ways of understanding curriculum and new ways of interacting with students. Something that is most certainly needed if we are to address the issues that this study highlight in Chapters one and two. One of the reasons for the aforementioned is that womanist and Black feminist epistemologies operate with the understanding that Black women’s experiences and activism are integral to how they operate within the paradigm of curriculum and scholarship (Ross 2015). It is further noted that Black women’s unique experience and unique ways in which they see, understand and move in this space impact how they develop curriculum and scholarship and demonstrate the complexity of Black women’s lives and the value of understanding Black women and their scholarship and activism as topics of curriculum study (Ross 2015).

This is why womanist theory is integral to my work in discipline as it relates to African American girls. The unique ways in which we are forced to move throughout this world help us to understand the pitfalls that Black girls are likely to experience within the
school setting. I conclude with an experience that I had the other day. One that I could not fabricate if I tried. The story involves Black girl that I come into contact with in my capacity as Dean of Discipline at High School X. What comes next personifies the need for womanism better than any academic unpacking that I could contrive. A Black girl was written up by a White female teacher. Her email said, “I am not letting her come into my classroom with that scarf on her head. She does this every day, she can either take it off or go to detention.” The security guard escorted her to my office, I read the email and asked the Black female security office to shut the door. I said, “What’s going on, Ms. ______ wrote you up?” the girl stated calmly, “yeah she wrote me up for not taking my scarf off, I’m not taking it off so suspend me or do whatever you have to do, I ain’t taking it off.” I looked, at her and I said, “Babe, let me see your hair.” She started to cry and said that she got into a fight with her stepfather before she could do her hair this morning but she wanted to come to school because she had a test to take. I looked at her hair and told her it wasn’t that bad (it really wasn’t) and asked her if I could find her a brush and a ponytail holder and gave her the opportunity to do her hair would she go to class. She was hesitant at first but she eventually said yes. The Black female guard chimed in and said, “I think I got a brush and some gel in my car!” I went next door and filled the Black woman counselor in on what was going on, all she had was a comb, but she offered it freely. Between the Black woman counselor, the Black woman security guard, the Black woman secretary and my Black woman self, we were able to get this girl what she needed and work together to remove such a frivolous barrier to this child’s education. What the
White female teacher did not understand, she discarded; luckily Black women heard her and understood her. We were able to stand in the gap for her, we were able to educate this. This is why I could not imagine engaging in a study such as this and not utilizing Black feminist/womanist milieu as my theoretical framework. Womanist theory is rooted in healing and wholeness for all people…despite what the world tries to tell us, these Black girls are indeed people and therefore deserving of all the love, time and attention that their White counterparts get…but that unpacking comes in the subsequent chapters.

**Research Design**

The school at which my research will be taking place is referred to within this document as High School X. High School X is located on what is known as the urban fringe of a major Midwestern city. According to the Illinois State Board of Education (2016), the student population breakdown regarding ethnicity was 82% (1,230) African American, 16% (240) Hispanic, 1% (15) Caucasian, and the remaining 1% (15) was listed as other. As indicated on the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) website, 8% (120) of students were English language learners and 18% (270) of the students had disabilities and qualified for special education services. With regard to teaching staff, roughly 80% of the teachers are Caucasian, with the remaining 20% being comprised of African American, Latinx, Asian and Multi-racial teachers.

The community in which High School X is located will be referred to for the purposes of this research as Community X. According to the 2010 United States Census Community X had 25,282 people. Among non-Hispanics this includes 913 White (3.6%),
19,046 Black (75.3%), 199 Asian (0.8%), 33 Native American, and 267 from two or more races. The Hispanic or Latino population included 4,799 people (19.0%). With regard to socio-economic status The median income for a household in the city was $31,958, and the median income for a family was $35,378. Males had a median income of $30,610 versus $25,248 for females. The per capita income for the city was $12,336. About 20.3% of families and 21.7% of the population were below the poverty line, including 27.8% of those under age 18 and 17.6% of those age 65 or over. These numbers presumably contribute to the 64% of students that qualify for free and reduced lunch at High School X.

Community X is a town with a long and rich history, Community X has contributed to leaders in entertainment, sports and politics. However, over the years that history has become inundated with corruption and money mismanagement. In 2019 several indictments were handed over charges that included bribery and extortion. These indictments were handed down to the brother of the mayor as well as the former mayor of the neighboring town, two of the people indicted have children that attend High School X (Masterson 2019). Even with that one of the things that people always seem to admire about Community X is their dedication to their city and their undying support of High School X. One of the things that I noticed when I first came to work at High School X fifteen years ago, was the high number of alumni that work in the building. From the principal to the lunch room staff, if I had to guess about the number of staff who are also
High School X alumni, I am sure it exceeds 50%. Which to me, is higher than average; especially when you take into account that most of them no longer live in the community.

While the majority of my auto ethnographic experiences will be chronicled through my position as Dean of students at High School X, my intersectional existence does not begin and end at those doors. As a Black woman, a Black educator, a advocate for Black girls, and a mother of Black girls; my identity rests somewhere in between those identity, and as a result I chronicle experiences wherever I go. Whether it is lecturing on the conference circuit about the discipline needs of African American girls in schools, or doing visits to school districts and talking to Black girls themselves all around the country, these interactions are a part of my experience and have been documented as such.

I’ve already stated that my methodology will be autoethnography, but within that, we must still unpack what this fairly nuanced method of data collection will look like. There is data that I have collected through the student management system of High School X, they utilize a system called PowerSchool. Data such as student population, demographics and discipline data has been collected from this system. As far as they data that will be collected for the results utilized in Chapter Four, my central method of data collection will be lived experience observation; that will be chronicled in handwritten journals and voice recorded notes that will be transcribed at a later date. These notes will serve to fuel the anecdotals that are chronicled narratively within this dissertation. As I am an employee of High School X, and I am not deviating outside of the role of my
current job to conduct this research, I assert that this autoethnographic research will be conducted from the perspective of a total insider, a position that, in contrast to the past, is considered to be integral to conducting ethical and effective research (Heron&Reason 1997). More specifically, I would be classified as a total insider, someone who shares multiple identities or profound experiences with the community under study (Chavez 2008). For the purpose of my research, those multiple identities are being Black and being female within a school system construct. Those identities lend themselves to exploring the intersectionality that has been mentioned in previous sections. The intersectionality that may in fact be key to unpacking the issues that Black girls are facing within school systems throughout the country. In addition, I see myself in a very unique position to conduct this research, and as a result my results going forward will be filtered through the intersectional lens of Black woman, Black girl advocate Black Educator and mother of Black girls. The following illustrations serves as a visual representation of where I sit as an individual amidst my research.
While being an insider does in fact give you unprecedented access to that which you have chosen to study, it does bring about other challenges. Challenges that Ross (2017) categorizes as the emotion related challenges of insider research. She asserts that having an emotion connection to the work can cause one to be “differently calibrated” and consequently allow one’s emotion to drive the focus of the research rather than the research itself. While I understand that the writer views this as a challenge; I assert that when filtered through the lens of reflexivity, this can be yet another strength to my research. According to Ross, reflexivity draws on the work of feminist and other critical scholars who foreground attention to power in research relationships (p. 328). I argue that my research is grounded in and fueled by relationships. I have spent the last one hundred
pages showing you that this country’s relationship with Black women and girls is how we got here. It would stand to reason that a healthy and ethical examination of relationships will aid us in fixing the problem.

Summary

This chapter explains the theoretical framework and research methodology that will be utilized for this study. It also explores the demographics of both High School X and the community in which it resides, Community X, in relative detail. Lastly, it unpacks how autoethnography will be used ethically and responsibly.
CHAPTER FOUR

Analysis

I have spent a great deal of time in Chapter Three outlining my process for autoethnography. The more I learn about it, the ways information is gathered; the great pains taken to convey an authentic truth, I realize that I learned how to do this long ago. My exposure to this documentation method was provided to me as a tool by a grief counselor who sought to teach me strategies to save myself and my sanity. Perhaps she knew what it was called, maybe she did not. Her knowledge of its name did not matter as much as the skill that was given to me at age six. It is a skill I was able to consistently utilize over the next thirty-five years that would not only save my six-year-old life; but hold my existence in abeyance authentically intact until I was mentally and emotionally prepared to reconcile my experience it in its purest most unadulterated form. For decades, I have continued to document things with a pen and a pad in as close to real time as one can get. With the advent of handheld technology and social media, I have been able to chronicle things in as close to real time as humanly possible; and I have done just that. I mention all of that to say, for me, it finally has a name; however, the practice of ethically gathering and chronicling information is not new to me. It is something that is very comfortable and familiar to me; and utilizing it for this dissertation has brought the nature of my experience full circle. But, as I have done in previous chapters, in order to fully chronicle this experience, I need to unpack how and why this journaling became a necessary tool. First, an excerpt from one of my thirty-five-year-old journals:
This scar hurts and they tell me I can’t pick them, but I want to because they hurt and they itch and they get on my nerves just like these kids that keep making fun of me and all they want to do is ask me about this stupid scar and all my mother wants to do is ask me about this stupid scar and all I want to do is get rid of this stupid life and this stupid scar and these stupid kids and this house my mom is cool until she starts asking about the scar the Monday lady (social worker) talks too much school is boring and my dad called

Carolyn Strong Age 7

It took me a while to get this chapter exactly the way that I wanted it. I sat with it. I thought on it, I slept on it. I watched Netflix while I pondered it; and for whatever reason I could not seem to put my finger on why I was having such trouble with it. When I realized that I was making it more difficult than it needed to be, my breakthrough happened. The things that I was reading about the process of autoethnography and field data collection were these processes introduced to a traumatized child at 6. After taking the time to reflect on the chronicling of my lived experience through journaling, the need to share the lived experience of Black Girls and their challenges in educational and societal spaces deserved the same reflection and true connection instead of sterile traditional research methods. The passage you see above comes from a journal that was written over thirty years ago, for reasons you will come to know sooner rather than later. The following pages unpack the origins of my journey to becoming an autoethnographer.
The following pages synthesize the major points of my journey into the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How does the way that African American women have been depicted historically in mass media inform how they see themselves? How do African American female archetypes still inform African American women and teenaged girls?

**RQ2:** What role does misogynoir play in the treatment of African American girls in schools as well as their depiction in mass media? Is there a need for “Black girl-centric” spaces to combat this?

**RQ3:** How does the dichotomous nature of being an African American woman and an educator inform interactions with African American girls and school policies?

Before we answer these questions, I need to take a moment to reflect on how this data will be analyzed. In subsequent pages, you will come to understand more about the origins of my documentation processes but it is only fair that I spend some time explaining my analysis choices as well. Due to the autoethnographic nature of this work, there were many experiences that could have been disclosed for analysis; however I tried to include incidents that spoke to the research questions. Whether they confirmed or dispelled my assertions was of no consequence my major concern was whether or not the experience was germane to the issue at hand. Does this experience speak to the relationship between Black girls and institutionalized setting? Once I narrowed those
experiences down, I then filtered them through the lens of the research questions; making a point to keep in mind my own intersection of Black educator, Mother of Black girls, Black girl advocate and Black woman. I wanted to keep in mind the archetypes of Black women that are being revisited in the experiences of these Black girls.

Dr. Maya Angelou once said, “I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” I had what most would consider an unconventional childhood. The woman who birthed me, Adrienne, was not fit to be a mother. She suffered from what we now know to be paranoid schizophrenia; and if you listen to the neighborhood, she got it from being dosed with LSD at a party. The truth is, there is no way to ever know where something like that comes from, and honestly; its etiology does nothing to change its impact on my life. When I was six weeks old, my great-great grandmother's sister, already age 69, took me home to raise as her own. She is the only person I ever called “Mama.” I had varying contact with Adrienne over the years. I can't remember what we did. I recall very little of what was said. Yet, I can recall very well how those interactions made me feel. Even as I type this, decades later, after years of therapy and “working through my shit,” I experience mounting nausea and dread. Dr. Angelou was right.

Spending time with Adrienne, because, "she's still your mother," didn't usually end well for anyone involved. We established in previous chapters that shit rolls downhill. So, I--a child--felt the weight of my birth mother’s misdeeds. Once, when the
voices in Adrienne’s head told her that I was evil and deserved to die, I was thrust out over the Green Line elevated train tracks on the South Side of Chicago. She held me there, despite the screams and pleas from commuters to spare my life and my own attempts to remind her that I was her child. I wish that I could tell you what happened next. I wish that I could offer you anything other than an auxiliary description of my unmitigated terror coupled with the absolute certainty that four-year-old me, was going to die that day. I can't tell you what happened next because there is a Black hole where that information should be. The next thing that I can recall is the police taking me back to my mother and telling her what Adrienne had done and cautioning her that the safest place for me to be, was away from Adrienne. My mother took me into the house, held me close and thanked this officer for being my guardian angel. She also assured him that she would do everything she could to keep Adrienne away. She also added that she didn't know how much she could do because there was nothing legally keeping me with her. I was with her because Adrienne allowed it; consequently, she had to tread lightly so that she did not upset Adrienne, an offense that could very realistically result in my permanent disappearance from her life.

My mom was elderly, and because the State felt that Adrienne could be rehabilitated, they weren't exactly keen on handing a toddler over to a senior citizen. That was my first of many glimpses into a system that doesn't put people first; but instead, does what it can to cover its ass and maintain the status quo. Why one goes out of their way to protect a broken system is a question that I would continue to ask, but I
suppose if I could answer that, I would be Dr. Strong already. My mom was right, 6 months later she got a call that she needed to come and pick me up from a drug-fueled party, I don’t know from who, she never told me. She just said, she got a call. This was the infamous party. This was the party that would leave me explaining scars away well into adulthood. This was the party at which Adrienne’s friends thought it a right fine idea to use me as an ashtray, and one by one they took turns putting out their lit cigarettes all over my body. This was the party that would lead me to tell people that the perfect round cigarette shaped scars that inundate my arms legs and neck, are in fact an allergic reaction to mosquito bites. To those of you that know me, and have heard that one before; please know, the mosquito bite allergy part is true. The fact that they made the marks you keep asking me about, is a lie. Again, I can't tell you what prompted this, I can't even tell you how it ended, but I can tell you that at five years old I found myself terrified...again. I remember feeling disappointed, but not surprised, because at that point, I don’t believe I was capable of being surprised by Adrienne anymore. In hindsight, my disappointment wasn’t even at Adrienne because disappointment requires an expectation that you know and can do better. No, I saved my disappointment for the police officer that saved me, and the people who called him. Because had it not been for them, my life would probably already have been over. Had it not been for them I would have already been dead, and I wouldn't be here right at this moment trying to shield my neck and appendages from the myriad of cigarettes and cigars barreling towards me. I found myself trying to no avail to protect myself, all while having a conversation with
God about what I could have possibly done in my five years on this Earth to piss him off this badly. I would spend the next 30 years trying to reconcile why God hates me.

Sometimes, I still wonder. But, the reality of the situation is…it just simply doesn’t matter anymore. I am here, and I have purpose, and since you decided that I should live, I will walk in it…unapologetically, authentically and all the time. At some point, I was rescued from that situation. I have no details, no nuanced articulation, no carefully crafted narrative to explicate. I simply don’t remember what happened next, I just woke up in a hospital.

I want to tell you that that was the last time Adrienne put me in a compromising situation...I want to, but I can't. I mean I could, but that would be a lie, and walking in your truth requires that you don’t do that. However, I can tell you over the next six months Adrienne got substance abuse and mental health treatment that she so desperately needed. In the 1980’s. While Black. I promise you; this is no small feat. I can also tell you, from my perspective, it helped. She started to behave less aggressively, less abusively; not quite like a mother, but more so like someone that I didn't feel the need to cross the street from upon approach (people had done that on numerous occasions). The subtle note of homicidal maniac that had resided behind her gaze for my entire life softened; her gaze didn’t indicate that she wouldn’t hurt you, but it did look like you might actually survive the interaction. My mom let her into our home, she had nowhere else to go and my mother did not believe in disenfranchising family. Adrienne, for the first time in a long time, managed to get a job as an Avon
salesperson. A job that would change everything. Somewhere down the road, Adrienne decided that moving forward, she was going to be an all-in, hands-on mom. Although it was awesome for her that she was willing to make that change, it was not so much for me, because I was still convinced that every interaction was going to culminate in filicide. Of course there is no way to ever know for sure. Yet, in retrospect, I think this was her way of trying to make up for the things that she had done to me in the past. We started spending more time together, and occasionally my mom let her take me somewhere unsupervised. It was rare, but it happened. And it happened for the last time on June 18, 1983.

Despite numerous warnings to the contrary, Adrienne decided that the most effective method of selling her Avon would be to do so door-to-door. In addition, she decided that taking me with her on these sales trips would underscore her need to sell these products. She had a little mouth to feed and she felt that people being able to see that would boost her sales. Her tenacity and fortitude as a single mother would endear her to her clients and she would be fiduciarily rewarded. This technique, I am told, was working fine, until we got to that damn house. That house, behind the Taurus Flavors. That house; the one that I would have to pass to get to school daily. That house, the one whose essence permeates my core as I drop my children off to their grandmother. That house, the one that would swallow Adrienne and what was left of my childhood whole.
In the interest of full disclosure, I must admit, some parts of what happened next, I remember clear as day; other parts, have slowly begun emerging from the haze within the last 3 years. But even in that, while some of the details may be struggling to gain their place within my psyche, the feelings that these events evoke are unmistakable...but I digress. We walked down the street talking, like two human beings having a real conversation probably for the first time ever. She asked about me and how I was. She saw me; and I saw someone who, for once wasn't trying to murder me. We went to a couple of houses, we made some sales, and we kept walking. Until we got to that house. She rang the doorbell and a young man answered. She gave her sales pitch and he seemed interested. He told us that he wanted to make a purchase for his mother, and invited us in. He stated that he was doing so because he needed to retrieve the bottles of products that she liked from her nightstand. We sat and we waited for him to return. We had our final conversation while we waited. The man returned, not with a night cream bottle, but with a knife! He demanded the money that Adrienne had. He went on and on about how she must have some money because she had been selling product all day. She grabbed my arm and ran out the door; leaving what was left of the product on the floor of the home. He followed. I don't know when he picked up the iron pipe that he hit Adrienne in the back of the head with; but at some point he procured it and used it to bludgeon her. She fell. He pounced and began to rummage through her pockets. She moved. He stabbed. He stabbed again and again and again until I jumped on his back. Needless to say, that exercise in futility ended badly. He threw me down and the last
thing I remember is a knife plunging into my chest. I have no idea what happened after
that. My last coherent thought was, welp... this time I'm dead for sure; and Adrienne isn’t
even the one who killed me. I stand corrected, I guess you can still surprise me. A
recurring thought that would resurface at numerous points, but that’s a story for another
time.

At the risk of stating the obvious, I didn’t die, but Adrienne did. At least that is
one of the first things that I remember being told two weeks after the fact. I don’t have
all the details of her murder. I have never asked for specifics. I know what is on the
death certificate, but I won’t bore you with those details, after all this is a story about
memory and feeling, nothing more. I have huge gaps in my memory around certain
things. The doctors have given it name, ironically a name I do not recall; but I do
remember them telling my mother that it is a defense mechanism. At this point my
mother was at a loss. She was so far out of her league and she had no clue how to help a
six-year-old who had just witnessed a murder and had been brutally attacked in the
process. She had no idea what to do with my memory loss. She had clue how to handle a
child who had been through all of the this; who was retraumatized by a grieving
grandfather; who decided that my insistence on not viewing Adrienne’s body at her
funeral was somehow a personal slight to him. Consequently, he picked me up out of my
seat on the first pew, took me to the front of the funeral home and held me over
Adrienne’s lifeless body sobbing while he yelled at me to “say goodbye to his child.”
My mother had no idea how to help with me deal with this. At that moment, all I remember feeling was, damn memory loss you sure can pick ‘em.

As previously stated, my memory of some parts of my trauma is sketchy at best. The counselor who worked with us after the murder told my mother to have me write things down, in real time, as they were happening. She was instructed to save them, so that I could go back and look at them and relive these moments, when and if I chose. My mother wasn't much of a nurturing person physically. However, she prided herself on tangibly having what you needed when you would ask her. I believe that is why these notebooks still exist. My mother held on to them for over 25 years, pages yellowing, spines growing more fragile by the day. She held on to them, just in case one day I needed them. After all, the social worker told her it was a possibility. She couldn't stop the man from killing Adrienne. She couldn't stop the district attorney from parading me around the courtroom, dressed purposefully to expose my wounds. Dressed intentionally for the jury to see that this man had in fact stabbed a 1st grader in the chest. My mother couldn't stop his mother from yelling at us; from having a full-blown meltdown in the courtroom after her son was found guilty. She blamed us—well me specifically—for being the reason her son was going to jail. She blamed my mother, for pushing the issue and making sure that he was brought to justice. Her son was being taking away and it was our fault, not the fact that he had killed one human and tried to kill another. My Mother could not control those things, but what she could do was hold on to those notebooks.
And if one day I needed them, if one day I wanted to know, they would be there, because of her.

My words, my thoughts, my feelings in real time. Maybe they will be a part of some larger seminal work one day, maybe my child will send them to the dump when I die. My Mom had no way of knowing which one would happen; but what she did know is that what happened to those notebooks would be my choice. Today I choose the “part of a seminal work” option. I choose that because looking at those three Sterilite bins full of notebooks, I realized not only that I have been an autoethnographer my entire life, but that it can be a powerful method of exploring the lived experiences of not just myself, but those of other Black girls.

This process permits the unadulterated review of my life and within this paper, the intersection of it in my various roles, with the historical and present experiences of Black girls. I have learned that it is important to document these experiences before they are shaped and disseminated through the lens of those who have not experienced it. Within this research project, I knew this needed to occur for myself as a former Black girl, and for those who exist in this time and are the subjects of this research. Now, will this story be influenced by my perspective? I hope so. Countless lives have been influenced by the dominant culture for far too long. Will my gaze make my data unreliable? Hardly, as a total insider, the data will be filtered through someone that understands it, lives it, is it. Why, you ask? Because, as I've taken great pains to make clear through sharing part of my own story, I too am a Black girl who happens to be raising Black girls. I am former
Black girl who is educating Black girls, and who primarily focuses on research and action that validates the feelings, emotions, and basic needs of Black girls. Through being taught how to channel my trauma experiences in writing as a survival mechanism, I also have a heightened sense of self-awareness, which allows me to unpack and analyze situations while being as objective as possible. I have become a chronicler of life and I plan to use that skill. Through my own need to survive, I have gained the ability and desire to tell the stories of other girls that have not gotten their say.

This chapter chronicles my field experience as Dean of Students in High School X and seeks to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How does the way that African American women have been depicted historically in mass media inform how they see themselves? How do African American female archetypes still inform African American women and teenaged girls?

**RQ2:** What role does misogynoir play in the treatment of African American girls in schools? Is there a need for “Black girl-centric” spaces to combat this? What do those spaces look like?

**RQ3:** How does the dichotomous nature of being an African American woman and an educator inform interactions with African American girls and school policies?

My lived experience as Dean of Students in High School X, my experience on the conference circuit and as a consultant in various school districts regarding the topic of
Black girls and their social-emotional needs are the basis for answering these research questions. In addition, I want to take a moment to reiterate the lens through which my experience is filtered. My lived experience intersects at a space that exists somewhere between my identities as a Black woman, a mother of Black girls, a Black educator, and a former Black girl. All these identities inform both who I once was and who I have become. I have wrestled in the past with being less intersectional, but for me it is simply impossible. It informs my work and how I live my life; and as I will chronicle throughout Chapter four, it informs my advocacy for the Black girls at High School X that have been systematically marginalized and ignored.

**RQ1:** How does the way that African American women have been depicted historically in mass media inform how they see themselves? How do African American female archetypes still inform African American women and teenaged girls?

In March of 2020, a four-year-old girl named Ariyonna went viral in Atlanta, Georgia during an exchange with her hairdresser. Not because she was rocking the latest styles. Not because the stylist had finally found the cure to shrinkage, a hair malady that has been stymieing the creativity of natural-haired Black girls since the dawn of time; but for three simple words that were uttered in a moment of pure realism that opened a lot of wounds for a lot of Black girls and shined a light onto something that most of us already know… the dominant culture does not find Black girls beautiful. When the video begins, it looks as if the camera is set up to showcase the hairstyle the woman is about to do for
little Ariyonna; but, the mood quickly changes when Ariyonna catches a glimpse of herself in the camera and says, “I’m so ugly.” The stylist immediately stops her and says, “Don’t say that! You are so pretty! When you look at yourself you suppose to say, ‘I am so pretty’— you got the prettiest little dimples, you are so cute.” Ariyonna then starts to cry. A deep soulful cry that many a Black woman has had alone in a room when the world has gotten to be too much. Those tears that remind you that this world does not value what you are. Ariyonna’s dark skin, African features, and kinky hair have spent the last four hundred years being the least desirable things that a woman could possess. This world has spent centuries showing Ariyonna how little her look is valued. Her response only came as a shock to those who aren’t in the know.

Ariyonna went viral, and many people came to her aid to show her how beautiful she is. The outpouring of love showered on that little girl was beautiful to watch and I, as a dark-skinned girl, was proud to see it. Black women from all over heard Ariyonna’s cries, understood what they meant and circled the wagons for a little Black girl in distress. Former First Lady Michelle Obama wrote, “Ariyonna, you are gorgeous. In a world that sometimes tries to say otherwise, I want to tell you—and every other beautiful, intelligent, brave Black girl—just how precious you are.”

In my work I am met with a lot of questions. One of the questions I get most often is “why are you always talking about representation?” Well, my answer is usually this. Every society has its way of documenting things, not one society that we know of documents their culture without providing visual representations of themselves. Cave
carvings are not of waters and landscapes; they are of people and we see how they lived and worked and that is woven into their story. Lack of Black girl representation is a continuation of the erasure of Blackness that began when we set foot in this country in 1619. My mother used to tell me that, “you can’t be what you can’t see;” but without proper representation, that is what we expect little Black girls to do. Ariyonna’s story shows us how difficult that is to do, especially in a society that has the ability to look and lurk twenty-four hours a day. I end this section with Viola Davis’ message to Ariyonna, as she sums it up so succinctly that there is no need to add anything else. She writes, “THIS is the motivating factor for Black women to leave a legacy...of WORTH of BEAUTY! We are fighting hundreds of years of brutal conditioning of being considered less than. It is sprinkled in our language, behavior, laws, music...etc.. and trickles down to our youth. I'm speaking LIFE into Ariyonna. From a sista who looks a lot like you....you were born worthy therefore you were born beautiful.” (Davis 2020)

Recently, I was watching a Facebook Live discussion with Angela Davis and Nikki Giovanni, two Black women who have made significant contributions to the Black feminist/womanist landscape. As it always is with Black women, the question of beauty standards was raised. One of the interviewers began to tear up, stating that neither she nor any woman in her family was “traditionally beautiful” and as a result, she always felt unattractive; much like Ariyonna. Nikki Giovanni stopped her and said, “Why do you ask people who hate you if you’re pretty?” In one sentence, one question, eleven words, thirty-eight letters, Ms. Giovanni summed up the plight of the Black woman—one that
has spanned centuries. Why are we asking people who hate us if we are pretty? If this does not encapsulate the need for Black girl-centric spaces, then my work has been for naught.

As I ponder Ms. Giovanni’s question, its implications extend beyond that of being pretty. It extends into the realm of self-worth for Black girls. One of the places that I have chronicled how this manifests is at the Educating Children of Color Conference in Colorado Springs, CO. During my three years of attending this daylong event, I have delivered three presentations: Mitigating Microaggressions in the Classroom; Black Girl Blues: An Examination of Intra-Racial Bullying; and Alternatives to Suspension and Black Girl Blues Student Seminar. It is the student seminar that always most illuminates an issue that Black girls face in schools, especially in schools where they barely make up 2% of the total population, as is the case for the girls that I met with for this student seminar. At the time of my most recent presentation, there were four high schools represented, and between them they sent a total of 14 girls. Girls that were happy to see other Black girls. We started our session late because they were just so excited to spend time with each other in a safe space. Normally, I begin my girl sessions with an activity that I call “Black Girls Are… White Girls Are….”. The activity consists of handing the students sheets that say Black Girls are, and White Girls are respectively, and asking them to write down the first things that come to mind for each. After I collect the nameless papers, I write the results on the board and we have a conversation about why they feel this way. This activity allows me to meet the students where they are in terms of
their self-esteem and how they see their place in the world. I’ve never walked away from this activity without learning something from the group of girls that sit before me. This time was no different. When asked what Black girls are, the group responded “ghetto,” “ignorant,” “crazy,” “bi-polar,” “loud,” “bougie” (when asked what that meant they responded “stuck-up,” “know-it-all” and “higher than everyone”). They concluded their list with “flashy” and “mistreated by Black men.” At that moment, I interjected and asked “ladies are you serious right now? You don’t have anything good to say about Black girls? About yourselves?” It was at that time that they added “comfortable in their own skin,” “confidence,” “high self-esteem,” and “pride.”
When we unpacked “White girls are,” their responses were “comfortable in skin,” “nerdy,” “perfect,” “annoying,” “rich,” “educated,” “sensitive,” “privileged,” “better than everyone,” and “family-oriented.” As before, I interjected and asked “Is this all you see in them? There’s nothing else that you want to add?” at that point the girls added “soft,” “weak-minded,” “no flavor palette” and “wife material.” (see figure 3) When asked exactly what they meant by “wife material”, they stated “controlled by men, know how to please husband (kiss butt), and everything that Black girls aren’t… educated, perfect, real hair, real nails.” At that point I asked, did they ever feel they would get married, if White girls are marriage material and the response was, not in Colorado Springs. This prompted my next question, what does that mean? We then began to have a conversation about what it means to be a Black girl in Colorado Springs. The boys don’t talk to them, they don’t want to date them, and if they do engage them romantically at all, they make it clear that they only want one thing from them… sex. These girls are living their lives trying to enjoy their high school experience. Yet, somehow their Blackness still manages to reduce them to a Jezebel in the eyes of their would-be White male suitors. Why White male suitors? Because the girls made it abundantly clear that the one or two Black boys that attend their school are in no way shape or form “checking for them”. They only have eyes for the “marriage material” girls with real hair, real nails, and perfection.
Figure 3

In addition to the Jezebel trope, these girls also expressed that they are often pulled into the Mammy roles by their White female peers. One girl—let’s call her Deja—proceeded to tell us about situations that she encounters in her Colorado Springs high school. When talking about how they feel they are perceived by their peers, or more simply put “What is everyday life like for you here?” Deja stated that she has friends but she often feels like their friendships aren’t genuine. “They are friendly, but when they start asking me to do things it makes me feel awkward.” When one of her peers asked what she meant, she stated that some of the White girls attempt to use her to literally fight their battles. Deja stated that the girls will come up to her and ask her to confront people
on their behalf because she is “better at it and used to it.” Deja also says when she asks why they think that she would be good at or even enjoy engaging in such behavior, the girls will state that they didn’t mean anything by asking her. They just thought that it was something Deja wouldn’t have a problem doing. Deja saw it as an offense to her as a person. Based on the feedback her peers gave during our session, they agreed, interjecting with phrases such as, “she tried it!” and “you should have whooped her ass on GP (general principle).”

I saw it as, yet another attempt by White America, specifically White women, to co-opt Black women’s bodies for their own personal gain. It also falls in line with the Mammy trope in the sense that White women still have an expectation of being protected and cared for by Black women, sometimes at the expense of their own bodies. Once again, Black women are expected to provide the emotional labor of making situations for White people ok. Taking into account that this is happening at the high school level shows us that this behavior is learned very early in life, on both sides. This is a prime example of how African American female archetypes still inform African American women and teenage girls.

**RQ2: What role does misogynoir play in the treatment of African American girls in schools? Is there a need for “Black girl-centric” spaces to combat this? What do those spaces look like?**

The call from my colleague, “Ms. Jackson” was nothing alarming. We are friends so honestly, I didn’t know if her summoning me to her classroom was business or
personal. When I got down to her classroom, she was visibly upset. When I asked her what was wrong, she relayed to me a story that a student shared with her regarding an interaction with a White male teacher. Ms. Jackson was so upset that she could hardly speak, but eventually she composed herself and was able to tell me what happened. She stated that she had been visited by one of her students—let’s call her Loren—who was visibly shaken by her encounter with “Mr. Tillman,” a White male teacher and horticulture club sponsor. Loren and two male friends visited Mr. Tillman’s classroom to inquire about joining the horticulture club. When they entered the room, they were greeted with a smile and all seemed well. While Mr. Tillman was looking for the paperwork, he decided to make small talk with the kids by saying, “so… which one of these dudes is gonna be your baby daddy? You better choose wisely because one in three Black men end up in prison.” Ms. Jackson relayed that Loren was devastated and neither she nor her friends responded, they just left to go and find Ms. Jackson. I talked with her for a while and told her that if she wanted me to speak to the principal, I would. However, before I approached him, I had to speak to Loren. Ms. Jackson agreed to send Loren to me during her 2nd period class the next day.

Loren walked into my office 2nd period, as promised. The first thing I had her do was fill out a student statement, a paper that allows the student to chronicle their experience in writing in their own words. Loren filled out her statement quickly, so I was able to read it within a couple of minutes. It was short and succinct, saying essentially everything that Ms. Jackson had already told me. This is why I was there. This is what he
said. I walked away. The end. Now that Loren’s statement was complete, as the dean, I had to ask clarifying questions, questions that might fill in gaps of information. Such a process includes gathering information about things the student may have thought were unimportant. Because this issue was so cut-and-dried, I only had a few clarifying questions: was this your first interaction with Mr. Tillman? When he said this to you did you respond? How many other people were there to witness this encounter? She told me the names of the witnesses and I allowed her back to class. However, because I had taken a statement from her, I needed to call her mother and inform her of the situation. Mother thanked me for the call and informed me that she would be keeping up with how the school was going to handle the situation. She also told me that she is a teacher in our district at our sister school… the plot thickened.

I called down the witnesses and had them write down their statements about what had happened on that day. One-by-one they confirmed Loren’s account of Mr. Tillman’s actions. One-by-one they asked me what I was going to do about it. One-by-one I told them that I would get their statements into the hands of the right people. I arrived at work early the next day so that I could sit in my car. Catching the principal during the day is virtually impossible, so over the years I’ve found the easiest way to get an audience with him is to catch him upon arrival and walk and talk; so that’s exactly what I did.

When he saw me emerge from my car an hour before my usual arrival time, he knew I had a complaint. Once I was close enough to be in earshot he said, “What happened Carolyn, I only see you during these hours if someone has pissed you off.” My
response was, “I’m here about Mr. Tillman, but the day is young.” I relayed to him what had happened and he stopped in his tracks. His eyes widened and he said, “not Mr. Tillman.” He then said I needed to get student and witness statements. I told him that they were already on my desk waiting for him. He instructed me to give the statements to his secretary and he would take care of it. My last words to him were, “Why does the culture of this school allow for the constant shitting on Black kids?” He told me that he understood that I was upset, but I needed to give him a chance to do something about it.

Three weeks passed and I received a phone call from Loren’s mother. She stated that no one had reached out to her regarding this issue even though she had been calling and emailing. She expressed frustration and noted that if she were not a district employee, she would be pushing a little harder and making a bigger stink; but she couldn’t risk her job for this. I told her that I would check on it.

When I was finally able to talk to the principal, the first thing he did was assure me that he had spoken to Mr. Tillman. The next words out of his mouth made my blood boil and my stomach churn. The principal proceeded to tell me that Mr. Tillman said the students took what he said out of context. He then proceeded to tell me that the statistics he told the kids were actually from Ava Duvernay’s documentary 13th, a Netflix movie that documents African American incarceration within the US. He went on to claim that, while his delivery may have been terse, what he said to the students wasn’t incorrect. My response was tempered, but please understand if I didn’t need to keep my job it may not have been. I told my principal “at the end of the day, your name is on the door, so there is
only so much that I can say. But please know, my role here hasn’t changed. I will still call out the racialized bullshit and microaggressions. It’s just the way I’m wired. There is no way “baby daddy” would ever have been used toward a White girl, period.”

The principal responded, “I know.”

This type of racialized, defamatory language toward Black girls in a school setting is a prime example of how misogynoir—hatred of Black women where race and gender both play a role in the bias—is alive and well and exhibited every day in school at the expense of the social-emotional well-being of Black girls. As of this writing, I still don’t know what, if anything ever happened regarding Mr. Tillman’s treatment of Loren. But, I do know that her mother was not satisfied with whatever it was that they did decide to do, in fact she deemed it too little, too late. The Black male principal made a point to engage in egregious mental gymnastics to uphold a White man’s version of events over those of numerous Black children. Misogynoir at its best—if such a thing exists.

While the foregoing story is an example of misogynoir aimed directly at the student; sometimes the misogynoir is so ingrained in the culture of High School X that manifests in White faculty using tone-deaf language to describe students without any regard to its appropriateness, or student impact. The following is a redacted email thread between myself and a White female teacher, Ms. Lott, who was reporting a student to me for inappropriate dress:
The email thread begins with Ms. Lott’s original email. She writes that she is sending a student down for inappropriate dress; or her “hooker outfit” as she deemed it. When I first got the email, I didn’t respond right away. I had to take a moment to unpack the gravity of what had, so carelessly been sent to me. I contemplated not responding at all, and for an hour or so I went on about my day. However, I just couldn’t shake the anger I felt. I spent all afternoon thinking “how dare you!” and knowing that such treatment of her own daughter would never be tolerated.

I gathered my thoughts and decided that I had to respond. I also decided that because this interaction occurred over district email, I should copy the principal on the email. I wanted to let Ms. Lott know that I would be dealing with her dress code
violation. However, I needed Ms. Lott to understand that her disregard for Black female bodies and her sexualization of a Black child would not be tolerated—not by me anyway. I included the study done by the Georgetown Law Center (2017) because I wanted her to know that I wasn’t just being pedantic, that my concerns are real and that real entities like Georgetown University believe that Black girls have the right to a childhood free of ridicule and sexualization. For reference, this study notes that Black girls are sexualized as early as the age of five; and as result have greater behavioral expectations than their White contemporaries and are often ignored when they report incidents of sexual assault. I ended with reminding her that as change agents, we have a responsibility to be mindful of our use of microaggressions. I didn’t expect a response from Ms. Lott, but I braced myself for the blowback from administration for “overstepping.”

The email from the administration never came. However, a response from Ms. Lott did. It was a complete microinvalidation of everything that my previous email
attempted to explain. The first line of her email, “I was actually trying to be funny.” She took what could have been a teachable moment, a time to unpack some of her implicit bias to be more culturally competent teacher and completely missed the point. By that time, all I could think was, “wow, we think nothing of joking at a Black girl’s expense.”

When I got the expletives out of my system and resisted my urge to go to her classroom and finish this conversation in person, my email response simply talked about the power dynamics that exist between teachers and students, and reminded her that she may not be getting pushback on her comments from her students because the power dynamic is too great. I also reminded her that her dismissal of my concerns regarding her treatment of Black girls was very disturbing—typical, but disturbing nonetheless.
She didn’t respond to my email after that. However, the White community of High School X, made their displeasure at my actions known. While no one had the courage to come and talk to me directly, the passive-aggressive way in which I was treated for the remainder of the semester, was laughable.

Let’s see…it started with my removal from the lottery pool, no warning, no conversation, I just stopped getting the emails saying that it was time to pay. Next, the whispering from the White teachers whenever I would walk into the cafeteria or any common space made it obvious that they had a lot to say about me, but nothing to say to me. I have a very low tolerance for petulant games so I decided to go to the president of the union directly and have a conversation with her about the whispers that I was hearing about being a “union traitor” because I alerted administration to the racialized and sexualized language that was being used toward a student over official school email communication. They seemed to be under the impression that rather than defend the child and provide a teachable moment, I should have sounded the whistle so that the union could circle the wagons and protect the White teacher at the expense of a Black girl child.
They followed this up with the complete and total ostracization of a Black girl dean, thinking they were punishing me for stepping out of a good nigger’s place and not going along to get along. They could have saved a lot of time and energy if they had only known that this Former Black girl who was now a Black Woman Educator responsible for educating Black Girls, didn’t give a damn. They learned that day.

I wish that I could say that this the only time that High School X became a school stratified along the lines of race and privilege. I wish I could, but I cannot. Shortly after this, a White teacher was placed on suspension because she posted a Black female student’s work to Facebook with a caption that read, “this is the shit I have to deal with. ACT is only two months away. I teach high school (eye roll emoji).” The school was in an uproar and the student whose work she posted was rightfully upset. But once again, the White woman who made the post and the White school community took the entirely wrong message from the corrective action. Instead of being reflective or trying to correct the behavior, they chose to focus on how the administration found out about it. Almost immediately, the White teachers began to unfriend the Black teachers on social media. The ones that did not unfriend wrote passive-aggressive posts on Facebook like, “there are spies on my timeline so I have to be careful what I post.”

The Black teachers became upset and decided that they needed to do something to show that their allegiance was to the students. That next week, a great number of Black teachers, along with the White teachers that understood the gravity of what was done, wore Black Wildcats Matter t-shirts to school. It did not go over well. In fact, the union—
the same union that had said nothing about the posting of student work online—the same union that shunned me for standing up for students—sent out an email about political statements during school hours. These examples just go to show that even when put in a space in which children are supposed to be cared for and protected, Black girls and the Former Black Girls who educate them, will always be expected to sacrifice their emotional health and well-being to placate the needs of White America. This is what misogynoir looks like in schools with African American girls. This is also why Black girls need safe Black girl-centric spaces, to mitigate experiences like these.

Traveling extensively to train for working with Black Women and girls, one of the things that I have never seen is Black girls not taking the chance to talk about their experience when given the opportunity. Even if it starts off slowly, and there is an initial reluctance, eventually, the girls open up and are grateful for the opportunity to have a conversation about themselves in which they don’t have to explain what they mean or do the emotional labor for White people who do not have the emotional intelligence to do this work on their own. I have always held these spaces for Black women and girls. I have always made myself available when needed. Yet, I don’t think it truly hit me how needed these spaces were until one serendipitous day in November of 2018. I was invited to Indianapolis, Indiana to participate in an intergenerational Black women’s healing circle with some dear friends who share a passion for Black girl advocacy. We worked tirelessly, establishing a curriculum for the day that was supposed to bridge the gap between African America women and African American girls. We scheduled the women
to come early so that we could establish some ground rules for engagement because we
did not want to create a situation where the girls felt anything other than love and support
from the women who were to be the recipients of their sage advice for the day. We did
not want politics of respectability to undermine the goals of this intergenerational
exchange.

We introduced ourselves. We did our icebreakers. We laid our foundation and
shared our agenda for the day and then we waited. We waited for the girls to show up so
that we could begin this exchange that we had been eagerly anticipating. Yet, the girls
never showed. We heard word of conflicting events that may have prevented them from
coming but, regardless of the reason, they were not there and we had ten women who had
shown up to stand in the gap for Black girls. We wondered what to do. Should we just
send them home? Should we try and explain and hope they understand? No, we decided
to stay there in that moment, in that space, and give Black women a platform to unpack
some things that they never get to talk about. We stayed in that space and allowed Black
women to talk about their hopes, their dreams, their triumphs and their greatest failures.
They did it with people with whom they could feel safe. They did it with people who
looked like them. They did it with people who would not judge them; people who got the
inside jokes and had an understanding of cultural nuance. For three hours of one day, for
these ten women, doing the emotional labor for an entire people was not theirs to do. That
burden was not theirs to carry for that brief moment, and let me tell you…it was amazing.
On that day I got to hear the story of “Dora” a woman that I’d never met prior to that day, but whose story could be my own. She told of how she had to learn to sit with the fact that she had allowed her fear of the world to impact her relationship with her daughter. How her need to be strong had made her daughter grow up thinking that her mother didn’t give a damn. I felt that in my spirit, on levels that I can never truly explain.

I have the same experience when I do my sessions with Black girls in schools. They are so used to being invisible that sometimes the simplest of questions throw them. How are you? What do you need? These are not questions that a lot of Black girls are used to being asked because as we have already established, Black women are the mules of the world and with that comes pulling freight: yours and other people’s. But what I can tell you, as someone who does this work first-hand, when these girls get in these spaces, when they are allowed to just be themselves, whatever that looks like, the room is filled with such a joy that it breaks my heart when it is time to return to the real world. This is what these spaces should look like.

**RQ3: How does the dichotomous nature of being an African American woman and an educator inform interactions with African American girls and school policies?**

There was a year during my tenure at High School X that I had to leave mid-year due to a medical emergency. It ended with me having to undergo surgery. I had to have my right ovary and fallopian tube removed, and I was out of work for several weeks. When I returned, there were some major changes that had occurred regarding the way that the deans of High School X do business. Upon my return, I kept hearing the students
in the office asking about the Time Out program. I am not ashamed to admit, I had no idea what they were talking about. The office was pretty full and somewhat chaotic, so I had not had the opportunity to ask. Later that day, somehow amidst the chaos, I was able to grab a moment with my suitemate, a fellow dean, to get some insight on exactly what the Time Out program was. She told me that when I left at the end of the semester, the office was inundated with students. They were not equipped to take final exams because they were failing all of their classes, so they had made the decision to be class disruptions and/or walk the hallways. She then went on to say that she had to do something because these “little Black boys” were wandering the building aimlessly with no direction. They were causing trouble in classes, so she went to the principal with an idea. This idea would ultimately become known as the Time Out program. She said that she didn’t have much to start except a sincere desire to “help these boys.” The principal greenlit her program and a pilot was in the works. I congratulated her on getting the go ahead to run her pilot with the boys and went back to my office.

I sat down at my desk and began to reflect on all of the times that I had taken that exact same walk to the principal’s office and made that exact same impassioned plea with only two differences: the first being that I was advocating for special dispensation for Black girls and the second being that I had federal, state and local data supporting the need for said dispensation. Each time I was met with the same answer, “you have some really good ideas, put them in writing and I will get back with you.” He never got back with me and years passed. Years in which I went on to publish Black Girl Blues: Small
Group Sessions, Activities, and Discussions to Combat Intra-racial Bullying (2014), a book that has been used across the country by schools looking to mitigate the discipline disparities that impact African American girls in just about every school system in America. Even after schools started to have me come and deliver lectures to their staff about how to implement policies and procedures to help African American girls my principal remained silent until one school district reached out to him directly. When that happened, he called me into his office and said, “you know it’s a goddamn shame that I have out-of-state principals calling me up asking about your work and you don’t do anything here. We have to fix that.” We never did. I have written several proposals addressing alternatives to suspension and self-esteem training for Black girls to reduce discipline disparities. At our last meeting (I say last because I am done begging this principal to allow me to help him), he told me that I had really great ideas but he could not in good conscious give me the go-ahead for a girl program without a comparable boy program. Never mind the fact that we had a school-sanctioned boy program for a full two years before girls were allowed to join. Never mind the fact that we should be behaving equitably. Never mind the fact that…well just never mind. This is just a prime example of how my intersectionality of being a Black female educator in this space dictate the tenacious nature in which I approach Black girl advocacy.

Despite minimal assistance from the administration, one of the things that I am proudest of in my work at High School X is the fact that there are some staff members who have embraced our preventative, restorative approach to discipline and have begun
to aid us in this endeavor. The following account is one of my proudest moments as an educator, as a Former Black girl, and as an advocate for Black girls.

I received an email from a teacher regarding a subtle exchange that she had witnessed between two students in her class. She asked that they have a mediation because she didn’t want the problem to escalate. I called my student down to get her take on what was going on. While she was writing down her version of events. I called the other student’s dean so that he could do the same. After comparing notes and going through our pre-mediation checklist; a system that I devised to determine if mediation is the best course of action during a conflict situation, we determined that this issue did in fact warrant a mediation and the other dean and his student met in my office…

We began this mediation as we began any other, letting the girls know that they were in a safe space and laying out the expectation for productive communication and active listening. The girls were cooperative, and we were able to begin. You could immediately tell that neither girl was backing down from her position. The problem was, we didn’t know what the position was as both proclaimed that the other “knew what she did.” You could tell that neither girl was coming from a place of anger. They were hurt, and a harm clearly needed to be repaired. We finally got the girls to open up and start talking but things didn’t go as we expected. Somehow we went from “you know what you did” to “I’m fine as long as she keeps my name out her mouth,” the proverbial gauntlet that has been the progenitor of many a melee in the school and beyond.
Once the words were uttered, the energy shifted. Now, we had a situation that required de-escalation. We talked. We redirected and pleaded. Nothing seemed to work to bring these girls back into the fold. Once we were pretty much resigned to the fact that the girls were not ready to resolve their conflict, I stopped the mediation and said, “look-y’all know y’all can count on me to keep it ‘100’ with you. So, what we not finna do is deny someone else their education because y’all can’t hold it together today. I get it, shit happens. We have bad days. Let’s call your parents, take the day, regroup and revisit this tomorrow. No hard feelings. I promise.” At that point the other dean got up and told his student, “let’s go call your parent.” She responded, “my grandmother has chemo today so no one can pick me up.” At that moment, the other student said, “my grandmother is in chemo too.” Suddenly they just looked at each other, full of hurt, full of pain and neither realizing that the other was having the same experience. At that moment I looked at them both and I said “you ladies have something in common. And right now, that something is that y’all got bigger stuff to worry about than he say-she say. You shouldn’t and it sucks, but you do, and let me tell you something, little girls that look like me, I see you. Not what you’ve done, not your discipline record, not what your teachers say about you in this moment. I see you, so from one Black girl to another, can we fix this so y’all can go back to class?” The girls looked at each other and decided that they wanted to try and talk it out. It appears that one was feeling slighted by the other. It turns out that she is the oldest in her family and has had to pick up the slack because grandma is ill. That doesn’t
really leave a lot of time to socialize. But, one can also see how this can be interpreted as ghosting by your friend who you haven’t spoken to about this.

After the girls left, Dean “Smith,” who is a Black male, came back into my office and said, “so were you really going to send them home?” I told him, probably not, but had I not done something to change the narrative quickly they would have been stuck at an impasse. He said, “well I am at a point where we need to just send them home then, because you gotta be able to do school in school.” I told him that I agreed with him, being able to “do school” is a primary prerequisite for being in school. However, I then asked Dean Smith, if this had been a dispute between two of your (sports) players, would you have sent them home? He paused, seemingly in reflection, and said, “now that you mention it, probably not.”

Not at the moment, but definitely upon reflection, I realize that this is one of those times where I acted upon my intersectionality. The educator in me says, “yes you gotta be able to do school in school, if you can’t, see you when you can.” The mother in me says, “why are you out here wilding out like this embarrassing your momma?” the Black woman in me says, “this is how they expect us to behave, good job!” The Black girl advocate in me says, “how can I push for you, when you won’t even push for yourself.” But the intersection, the sweet spot that takes all of those roles and turns them into a mélange of emotion and action says, “I will not throw you away, today or any other day. I see you and I will fight for you.”
I asked Mr Smith why he would treat male athletes differently, was it because they were worth something to him, or because they look like him? He said, “I guess both.” I responded with, “exactly, they mean something to you, and as much as we like to pretend that they don’t, little Black boys usually mean something to our community as a whole—maybe not to larger society—but we always rally to protect our boys.” He asked me what I meant, and I told him to think about the large-scale movements that have been launched in the Black community in response to police brutality against Black boys recently.

He asked, “like what?” In the interest of time I told him I would give him one example: Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter was founded by three Black women in response to the rampant police brutality that is plaguing our young boys and our men. He said that he didn’t know women founded that. I thanked him for proving my point. I then went on to ask him what movements Black men have started solely for the protection of Black women. He drew a blank and so did I.

I took this as a teachable moment, and Dean Smith was a very willing learner. I told him that these girls had been through a lot. Hell, I reminded him, we just figured out that they needed mediation because of the stress of having to step into adult roles and take on extra responsibility due to guardian illness. This is what was interfering with their ability to interact with each other like “normal” teenagers. I reminded him that not being born a boy or playing a sport does not negate your need for grace; if anything, it means you need more grace from us because NOBODY is checking for you…nobody. Athletes
have some perceived merit, so sometimes even when people don’t want to, they will give
them a chance. “Don’t believe me,” I told Mr. Smith, look at OJ Simpson!” Black boys
have merit within the Black community, so even when the rest of the world casts them
aside, we as a community will always do our best to uplift our men. “Don’t believe me,” I
said, “look at Steve Harvey and Chrisette Michelle. Both were lambasted for attending
Trump’s inauguration; both made a point to say they were not supporters but they felt
that having a seat at the table was a way to help the community. Who was permanently
ostracized or—as we like to call it—'canceled?’” His response was, “damn, it sure wasn’t
Steve!” I responded with, “nope, it’s been two years and we haven’t heard anything else
from poor Chrisette.” Black women are not allowed to make mistakes. Black women are
not allowed breaks.

(I wanted to take this opportunity to remind him that only one of us had the proper
and legal certifications to do the job that we are doing but I figured that would be overkill
and distract from the point I was trying to make, but no one can hold me responsible for
what I thought, and that…I thought is the personification of what I was trying to get him
to see; but I digress. I have been told I come off as petty, so I decided not to open my
mouth and remove all doubt.)

I told him that I made a point to tell those girls that I saw them, because no one
ever truly sees them. I said, Dean Smith, you were sitting right here, you tell me what her
reaction was when I said that. He admitted, “she looked like she didn’t believe you.” I
told him that could have been for one of three reasons, no one has ever said that to her
before, she didn’t believe me, or both. I also told him that I made a point to hand over her paperwork in a way that made my tattoo visible. I wanted her to know yet again that I gave a damn. As we ended our conversation, he conceded that the situation was messed up and we needed to do more to help our Black girls. My reply was simple…no shit.

Figure 4 my tattoo
CHAPTER FIVE

Findings and insights

Chapter One highlighted some of the current issues that Black girls face both in school and society at large. Chapter Two reviewed the literature that has been germane to Black women spanning two centuries. It sought to highlight and unpack the major themes that have surrounded Black women, and by default, Black girls, from a historical perspective, guided by the overarching question of how this still impacts us today. Chapter Three took the time to explain the lens through which the data would be collected and analyzed. That lens unpacked the intersections within which we live and view that which I experience daily. Chapter Four gave us the main event. It took Chapters One through Three and contextualized them within my autoethnographic experiences: experiences that centered around my duties as dean of High School X, but extended well into my life as a conference circuit lecturer and workshop provider for Black girls and women across the country. Here in Chapter Five, the proverbial “now what?”, I answer the question of how what has been discussed and researched above can be used to inform ongoing work and research on Black girlhood from an educational and societal context.

As I write this, the country that was built on the oppression of Black people is coming apart at the seams. Cities are literally burning, and protests are erupting across the country. Police in Minnesota have killed an unarmed Black man by putting a knee to the back of his neck. Now, Eric Garner is not the only Black man to utter the words, “I can’t breathe” as he took his last breath at the hands of law enforcement while onlookers
documented the incident and begged police to spare his life. They did not, and George Floyd has become the most recent hashtag documenting the use of deadly force by police against Black people. George Floyd has lost his life over what we now know was a dispute with a shop owner over a counterfeit $20 bill. This, in the same county where armed White people stormed capital buildings armed with automatic weapons amidst a global pandemic with a six-figure death toll in this country alone...because...they...want...their...God...given...right...to...a...damn...haircut. But while people take to the streets for George Floyd, we are also starting to hear rumblings about the killing of Breonna Taylor at the hands of law enforcement. Breonna Taylor was killed by police who were delivering a no-knock warrant...to the wrong address. She was shot eight times by law enforcement officers in Louisville, Kentucky (Oppel 2020). Killed in her bed, while she slept, even though the perpetrators they were looking for were already in custody. Breonna Taylor’s life mattered. Breonna Taylor was killed by law enforcement, two months prior to the incident in Minneapolis with George Floyd. However, the coverage of her murder, even within our own Black community, has paled in comparison to the coverage that George Floyd has received. I don’t say this to minimize George Floyd’s murder—and yes, he was murdered. I say this to point out that even in equally-yoked situations; situations Black women are on the front lines protesting the treatment of our sons, while our daughters get left behind in every way imaginable. And then we expect them to come to school and behave as the status quo would dictate.
I recently watched a video on CNN of a 21-year-old man named Tye Anders. He was pulled over by the police for a traffic stop. Instead of stopping, he drove an additional two blocks and pulled into his grandmother’s driveway. In the video, you see Anders and the police going back and forth verbally, and eventually Anders exits his vehicle. Police put him on the ground and begin to handcuff him; there is yelling on both sides. During the commotion Anders’ 90-year-old grandmother exits her home to confront the police officers and plead for her grandson’s life. She places her physical body in between the police officers and her grandchild—a physical action to compliment her verbal pleas. At one point, the grandmother is pushed by law enforcement and she lands on top her grandson, but still she persists. All of this is occurring while several officers on the scene have guns drawn (Waldrop 2020). This matriarch has placed herself in between her grandson and the harm that could possibly, and very realistically befall him at the hands of the law enforcement officers trying to take him into custody over a traffic stop.

I watched this video in horror thinking, “oh my God! Are these police about to shoot down a 90-year-old woman in her driveway!” The overwhelming dread that came next reminded me that this is rooted firmly in the realm of possibility. The police have shown us time and time again, that in this incarnation of the world we live in, they are indeed “about that life.” The video continued and the altercation ended with grandmother and grandson being unharmed. A sigh of relief was uttered while simultaneously knowing that the situation could have ended differently. A sigh of relief was uttered
because this family is not burying anyone at the hands of law enforcement. A sigh of relief was uttered because I don’t have the bandwidth or emotional capacity to do much else right now. Moments later, that relief subsided, and another feeling of dread washed over me. Not because of anything that happened on that video, but because of where the madhouse of mania, also known as my mind, went next. What if Tye Anders had been a girl? Would the grandmother have still given her body to the police in exchange for the safe passage of her granddaughter? The shittiest part of having to ask this question is that I genuinely don’t know the answer. It has been a topic of discussion for me lately amongst my sister circle and honestly, they don’t know either, which gives me even greater pause, because within the mélange of Black women that I trust with my heart, hopes, dreams and ideas, there is usually a version of events that I didn’t consider, that challenges my way of thinking…but not this time. All of this is to say, no, I don’t know if this grandmother would have protected her granddaughter in the same way. I don’t know that the tenacity exhibited in preservation of life shown here would have been afforded to a daughter. I just don’t know. But, what I do know is, I have spent the last four chapters, the last 160+ pages, exposing what happens when Black women “love their sons and raise their daughters”—a saying that I can’t even properly cite because I’ve grown up hearing it my entire life. It was given as the reason that I had to be strong in the face of adversity as a child and why I had to be strong and understanding in the face of fuck boy behavior as an adult. But…I digress. As we dive into the analysis of findings, let’s take a moment to recap and begin in one accord.
Summary of Findings

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How does the way that African American women have been depicted historically in mass media inform how they see themselves? How do African American female archetypes still inform African American women and teenaged girls?

**RQ2:** What role does misogynoir play in the treatment of African American girls in schools? Is there a need for “Black girl-centric” spaces to combat this? What do those spaces look like?

**RQ3:** How does the dichotomous nature of being an African American woman and an educator inform interactions with African American girls and school policies?

The observation and analysis of the aforementioned research questions were filtered through the intersection of my life as mother, educator, Black woman and advocate. This is the lens through which my world is viewed and encapsulates the tapestry of my life, for the purposes of this autoethnography and beyond.

Summarily, regarding RQ1: How does the way that African American women have been depicted historically in mass media inform how they see themselves? How do African American female archetypes still inform African American women and teenaged girls? The findings were that historical depictions of African American women throughout history have been intergenerationally damaging to our self-esteem and self-image. Those self-esteem and image issues have caused us to question our worth on every front. As adults, we have a hard time processing this issue, and it manifests very
readily in our interactions at times. So, it goes without saying that the burden of carrying that load weighs heavy on our girls. We have also discovered that they don’t get many chances to lay those burdens down. The answer to research question one revealed that African American girls feel their otherization. They know the world sees them as different, as less than, sometimes inhuman. So, when incidents such as those highlighted in Chapter Four occur, they continue the damage to the mindset of Black girls that began centuries ago. We see the tropes of Mammy and Jezebel revisited upon the girls as they emotional labor is exploited for the betterment of others. We also see the rekindling of the Sapphire when they are asked to use their “sassy” veneer to handle issues on behalf of White feminity.

Summarily regarding RQ2: What role does misogynoir play in the treatment of African American girls in schools? Is there a need for “Black girl-centric” spaces to combat this? What do those spaces look like? Misogynoir has made a point to show up and show out in school settings for as long as I can remember; as both a student and educator. The analysis of data presented in Chapter Four solidified what I have always known: schools do not value Black girls. The sanctioned mistreatment of African American women has led to the subsequent mistreatment of girls in school settings. The examples of what schools allow to be said and done to African American girls in their care highlights both how deeply ingrained and how high up the chain of command the misogynoir runs.
This question also addresses the concept of “Black girl-centric” spaces and whether or not they are necessary. Chapter four asserted that they can provide a safe haven to counteract the misogynoir that Black girls face on a regular basis. These spaces can allow girls to just breathe and just matter when the world is constantly shititng on them—even in places like schools that are supposed to protect them.

Summarily, regarding RQ3: How does the dichotomous nature of being an African American woman and an educator inform interactions with African American girls and school policies? Research Question Three spoke to the intersection of Black woman and educator, and was arguably the most personal of all three research questions. Having to sit with this and be deliberately reflective showed me that this particular intersection has always been present for me, and has always manifested in how I show up for my students. This has been the case since my career began; since before I knew what to call it. Much like those notebook documentations that started 35 years ago, my actions began and the lexicon of what to call it came later. The most notable ways that this manifests for me is in my advocacy, both with administration, and with the girls themselves. The autoethnographic experiences presented for this particular research question prove that these Black girls are fighting to matter on two fronts: against the powers that be—or the current social construct of schools—and within themselves.

Assertion of Findings

- The historical depictions of African American women in popular culture have contributed to the negative lens through which African American girls see
themselves. This devaluing of Black girls has led to severe self-esteem and self-worth issues that impact their ability to navigate institutionalized settings that also devalue them.

- Black girls are not systematically supported in school systems as a whole. Even within systems that have committed to creating programming to support Black boys, that same support is not always afforded to Black girls.
- Misogynoir is present and institutions are not willingly addressing it. The tacit ways in which they respond have allowed this dehumanizing treatment of Black girls in schools to grow and fester to almost a point of no return.
- Black girl-centric spaces are necessary to combat the all-encompassing misogynoir that Black girls face in school settings throughout the country.

Discussion of Findings

One of my very first experiences at High School X over 15 years ago was an education in how some of the White people view this very Black space. Due to my fortunate genes, I don't look like what I have been through, and I also didn't look old enough to be a high school dean when I was hired, so I got ignored a lot, by students and staff alike. I didn't mind it because with the students it allowed me to get a better understanding of what was happening with them because they didn't always notice me. It allowed me to blend in and observe unnoticed, undetected. My appearance was interpreted the same way by the teachers, and unfortunately (or fortunately depending
upon the end game here), it allowed me to sometimes experience what White teachers
really thought about the populace that they serve because...having the appearance of a
little Black girl made me invisible to them. (In retrospect, I don’t know that had my
appearance been that of a fully actualized adult woman it would have mattered much; but
ty they know me now so I guess that is all conjecture at this point.)

I will never forget this incident, partially because I document everything, and
partially because it was just way too sickening to ever leave me. I was sitting in the back
of the computer lab, prepping for my next class. There was a group of about four White
teachers in the lab presumably doing the same. There was one teacher among them who I
recognized from new teacher training. She’d started when I started, so…I was assuming
they had gotten together to give her the “lay of the land.” One teacher in particular, “Mr.
Seaver” was doing most of the talking, as he was her new teacher mentor. He started with
“I’m going to be honest with you.” In my experience, those words are always followed
by some bullshit, but I withheld judgment because, it was a new school setting, and I was
trying to give it the benefit of the doubt. But I was right, it was some bullshit. Mr. Seaver
was telling the teacher that High School X was such a great place to work for “us” (yes
the “us” you are thinking of… White people). He went on to say that the Superintendent
(a Black woman) loves us, as does the principal (also a Black woman) they think it makes
them look good to have us in positions of power so you move up the ladder very quickly
here, and you honestly don’t have to do much. The kids don’t do their homework so it’s
not like you are going home with a bunch of work, not whole bunch of papers to grade.
The lessons don’t move quickly either because most of the kids are behind so it’s not like you will be constantly humping. This will give you time to pick up an extra-curricular activity and make some extra money. I really don’t understand why White people leave this district.

I was livid! I wanted to scream. I wanted to yell. I wanted to call them all a bunch of racist assholes, but I was brand new and understood all that would do was get me labeled a troublemaker and dismissed at the end of the school year. So, I did what I know. I fell back on what has gotten me through the darkest times in my life. I wrote. I wrote and I archived, knowing that one day I would have tenure and hoping that when the time came, my documentation would matter. That time came three years later when Seaver was promoted to the position of “Freshman Academy Support Teacher.” The purpose of this position was to specifically work with freshman students that were in danger of not matriculating to the next grade, often students who exhibited behavior challenges that could prevent them from passing. It sounds good in theory, and in a school where the majority of the population is marginalized, this seems like just the thing that you should be implementing to “bridge the gap.” And had I not been present in that computer lab, I might have agreed. But, I was present on that fateful day in August when Mr. Seaver told everyone in earshot that he did not give a fuck about the students that he serviced; and his only obligation was to his convenience and his bottom dollar, and theirs should be too. Well, I’ve been me for a long time, and there was no way that I was going to let this hire happen without letting someone in administration know what I had witnessed. I talked to
my immediate supervisor, my assistant principal (the current principal) and I laid everything out for him; even showing him my documentation from years ago. His eyes got wide and he said, “really! They said all that with you sitting there?” My response was yes, and he replied with, “that sounds about right for that crew.” I’m thinking “so that’s it, you know they are racist. You know they don’t care about the kids. You know they are just here for the paycheck and perceived favor that the Powers That Be bestow upon White people, and y’all promote them anyway. Well…ok, I see how it is. There is no win for me here, and by me I mean the kids, so, I am going to take my things and go back to my office with the knowledge that a position that was created with the potential to do so much good probably won’t do any.”

This one incident encapsulates all of my research findings. It is an egregious illumination of the complicity of school administration in marginalizing and othering our students. The historical depictions and subsequent stereotypes of African Americans have led to notions of inferiority that serve as the lens through which Mr. Seaver operates. It also serves as the lens through which he interacts with students. These feelings and attitudes perfectly illustrate why Black students need Black spaces.

**Implications for Practice**

I’ve spoken about the Educating Children of Color Conference that is held yearly in Colorado Springs. The very first session that I walked into was a serendipitous experience. It was in the room I was to present in later that day. I just wanted to camp out and wait there rather than wandering the conference center. (I learned very early in this
lecture circuit work, that wandering is a recipe for disaster.) I sat down and the presenter entered. He wrote a phrase on the board that would forever change how I think about truly educating and advocating for Black Girls within school systems. He asked: What will it look like when Black lives matter in school? That simple phrase, of 11 simple words—10 of them monosyllabic—had the power to change the way I approached my work as a dean, and honestly, how I went about asking my research questions for this project. Because of the scope of my work I have to ask, what will it look like when Black girls matter in school? And the short answer is…not like this.

- Black girls must be viewed as people. We must be seen as living breathing human beings capable of experiencing feelings like everyone else. This culture of “she’ll be alright” is not working. Bruh…look around you. SIS IS NOT ALRIGHT!!

- Schools cannot continue to sit idly by while systems designed to educate children uphold White supremacist belief systems.

- Black girls need Black girl-centric spaces to unpack, unload and fortify themselves against the misogynoir that always manages to find them. They need spaces to not be somebody’s mother, somebody’s sister, somebody’s daughter, somebody’s aunt, somebody’s rock, somebody’s sounding board, somebody’s bae/boo thang/baby momma/rib. Black girls need Black girl-centric spaces that simply allow them to be…somebody.

- White teachers need to be held accountable for the things that they say and do to Black students. White supremacy does not just take the form of White hoods, tiki
torches, khakis, and wall-building presidents. White supremacy also looks like
White teachers believing their students are less-than because of the color of their
skin and the community in which they live. White supremacy takes the form of
thinking that it is okay to call a Black girl—a Black child—a hooker and then
circling the wagons of victimhood when you are called to task for your behavior,
and having it work! White supremacy is making fun of an African Math teacher’s
accent during public meetings and joking that his accent is the reason our Math
scores are so low. To that I can only assert, do better!

- An environment and school culture of safe advocacy needs to be cultivated so that
social-justice minded teachers feel safe and supported in their advocacy for
students. I have always been an advocate for students, and as documented
throughout Chapter 4, I have been ostracized for it, and…I just don’t care. But I
don’t expect everyone to be willing to risk it all for the sake of their advocacy.
What I do expect is for systems that were supposedly designed to protect children
create systems to protect and support those people who want to…protect children.

- Programs designed to repair the harm done to Black girls need to be implemented
in schools. In order to truly be restorative and move forward, we must be willing
to admit that people have been wronged by our behavior and adjust accordingly.

**Future Research**
In addition to continuing to expand upon all of the research and literature presented in the previous chapters, these findings have discovered that there are certain areas that need particular attention for future research. These include:

- Anti racist practices within school systems. How can we normalize anti racist ways of being within school cultures and implement changes with fidelity?
- A longitudinal study on the impact that Black girl-centric spaces have on students. Time needs to be taken to study these students over years, paying special attention to grades and behavior and how the baselines migrate as time in these spaces progresses.
- More action research on how microaggressions impact the learning environment.
- Zora Neale Hurston once said, “if you are silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it.” We need to do research that explores what pain looks like for Black girls and how we may need to redefine how it manifests; so that we can be about the business of truly addressing it.

**Conclusion**

*Negroes-sweet and docile. Meek, humble and kind. Beware of the day they change their mind.* -Langston Hughes.

For Black women and girls, that day came very early. The day you stopped cooking their meals. The day you stopped cleaning their homes. The day you stopped nursing their children. The day you stopped washing their clothes. The day you
stopped laying with their men so they didn’t have to. That was the day you became expendable, became disposable, became undesired. Not desired in an appreciative way; but in the way that one desires a house, a car, a bed wench. We, as Black women exist in limbo, a strange intersection that lies somewhere between I hate you and I need you. Having to admit this has caused contempt on levels that one could never imagine. It is a fight on all fronts. The demand to be seen and recognized for our labor both by the dominant culture, and our own community has created a strength and resiliency that the world has come to rely on far too much. The power to persevere and overcome has been a part of our identity that duly defines and maligns us.

We would love to be vulnerable; trust and believe we do not derive pleasure in being in battle mode 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is exhausting. As much as I, a Black woman would love to lay my burden down; there is nowhere to take it…except to our girls. Our daughters, our nieces, our sisters; and take it they do. They internalize it, suffer for it, ache because of it, and unleash it in a maelstrom of anger and pain at every turn. This happens because they too are fighting to be seen and searching for ways to be vulnerable. And the reality is these girls are the personification of “you can’t be what you can’t see.” While we were busy saving our sons, our daughters were playing with matches, and before we knew it the house was on fire and shit was burning. Now we are left to sift through the rubble and salvage
what we can while rebuilding for the future, all while trying to repair harm with no instruction manual.

When will we understand that our students deserve our time and protection? That they deserve it without qualification; even when their self-advocacy lacks responsibility and calm.

When will we understand that our students are doing the best that they can? Try and meet them where they are. I promise you, you weren't always this "put together" when they move, you move...just like that.

When will educators fully embrace the concept of Maslow? Quick to quote it, not so quick to live in its truth. If you know you can't educate a hungry child, why do you insist that you can in fact educate a scared, lost or broken child...without addressing any of this first.

When will we understand that the adults that we trust with our students bear a higher responsibility to TRY and get it right. I say try because we are all humans and fallible. But what matters most is how you acknowledge and adjust once that mistake is made. I promise everything ain't that kid's fault and the sooner you reflect on that the better.

When will you understand that there is a reason that servant is first in servant leadership. Humility and understanding go a long way. If you are able to read this, someone somewhere gave you some time, patience, and humility. Pay it forward. We need it now more than ever.
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