Leveraging Community Cultural Wealth Through Counterspaces and Counterstories: A Black Administrator’s Autoethnography

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Leveraging Community Cultural Wealth Through Counterspaces and Counterstories: A Black Administrator’s Autoethnography

A Dissertation Presented
by
RENÉE GWENDOLYN HEYWOOD

Submitted to Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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College of Education
Department of Teacher Education & Curriculum Studies
Language, Literacy & Culture
Leveraging Community Cultural Wealth Through Counterspaces and Counterstories:
A Black Administrator’s Autoethnography

A Dissertation Presented
By
RENÉE GWENDOLYN HEYWOOD

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Robert, who has been my biggest supporter throughout this entire process. You made a commitment to me over 30 years ago to love, honor and cherish me and you have fulfilled that promise over and over again. You have made me your priority and have cleared the way for me to focus on my studies. Only a strong man could do what you have done, and I love you for it.

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ABSTRACT

LEVERAGING COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH THROUGH COUNTERSPACES AND COUNTERSTORIES:
A BLACK ADMINISTRATOR’S AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

MAY 2023

RENÉE GWENDOLYN HEYWOOD, Ph.D.
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Theresa Austin

On January 20, 2017, our nation’s leadership changed hands from the first biracial president to a president whose campaign and actions further polarized the United States of America. A part of the story of the US political journey from President Barack Obama to President Donald Trump was the rise of racism as seen in the crude, racist stereotypes of Obama that showed up on signs at Tea Party rallies, and in the mainstreaming of the conspiracy that the country’s first bi-racial president was not born in the United States (Boghani, 2020). Donald Trump’s presidency opened a door for overt racism, causing harm to our nation’s foundation and contradicts the Pledge of Allegiance that proclaims, “liberty and justice for all.”

In March 2020, major institutions, schools, and companies faced an unprecedented shutdown due to the COVID-19 virus that caused millions of deaths around the world. Schools were forced to close their doors and deliver virtual classes. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic collided with a police violence epidemic
during the first half of 2020 that illuminates longstanding and complex discrimination of Black Americans.

Being at home, provided plenty of opportunity to watch what has now become known by many people of color, their allies, and some people in the media, as “televised modern-day lynchings” (Brown, 2020). In 2020 alone, several police-involved killings of Black people, like the tragic deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, dominated news cycles and social media while also inciting protests against police brutality and racism (Jennings, 2021).

Businesses, hospitals, and schools responded to the racial tension by hiring someone to help create more inclusive environments. Using the methodology and epistemology of autoethnography, I provide a narrative account of the complexities, interpretations, and reflections on my role building the first office of equity, diversity and inclusion in a large, urban K-12 school district. I explain how I leverage counterspaces and counterstories to remain committed to this work through a Black woman community wealth (BWCW) theoretical lens. Reflection on these various experiences located narratives that are pertinent for everyone who wants to support an anti-racist environment.
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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

This autoethnographic study takes on a subjectivist epistemological position documenting my experiences as the builder of the first office of equity, diversity and inclusion in a large, urban K-12 school district and explains how I benefited from counterspaces as my nourishment to remain committed to this work. I provide a narrative account of the complexities, interpretations, and reflections on my role through a community cultural wealth theoretical lens. The genre of autoethnography, which will further be explained in this and later chapters, allows the decolonization of ethnography by centering the attention on my interpretations of events as seen through the lens of my cultural viewpoint. Some of the events had to be reconstructed or even omitted to protect the privacy of others. Reflection on these various experiences located narratives that are pertinent for everyone who wants to dismantle white supremacy culture. It is important to provide the reader with the historical and political context in which this study was done to give insight into how I experienced and interpreted the various events that are documented hereafter.

Political Tensions

On January 20, 2017, our nation’s leadership changed hands from the first biracial President to a President whose campaign and actions further polarized the United States of America. The tension between these two very different administrations and would foretell the challenges of the transition of power over the next four years. A part of the story of the US political journey from President Barack Obama to President Donald Trump was the rise of racism as seen in the crude, racist stereotypes of Obama that
showed up on signs at Tea Party rallies, and in the mainstreaming of the conspiracy that the country’s first biracial president was not born in the United States (Boghani, 2020). Donald Trump’s presidency opened a door for overt racism that has caused harm to our nation’s foundation and contradicts the Pledge of Allegiance that proclaims, “liberty and justice for all.” Judy Woodruff, an anchor and managing editor of PBS NewsHour, when asked about Trump’s use of anti-immigrant rhetoric as a political tool said:

I think for President Trump, immigration becomes another way of saying, “We don’t need to let people in who don’t look like us.” And even as he denies that it’s racist or that he’s anti-Mexico, or anti-Central America, it has the effect of being a statement about tolerance, acceptance in this country, and—in essence, it’s saying to his base: “I’m with you. If you’re worried about America changing, if you’re worried about America becoming a diverse place, where you’re not sure of how you fit in anymore, I’m here to tell you, I have some of those same worries, and I’m going to speak up, you know, for you. I’m going to be here. I’m going to fight this,” (Boghani, 2020)

Former president Trump making this statement reveals a group of people that feel an ownership of America; a group that feels they are entitled to make decisions around who is accepted and who is rejected. He and others are afraid that our country will become a diverse place where white people no longer feel they belong. I do not believe that Trump’s voice represents all white people just as my voice does not represent all Black people. I believe the fear of his supporters is not that they won’t belong, but that they may lose power because they would become the minority.
I sometimes wonder if the people of the United States are not united with each other, then who is united against whom? Although racism has existed long before the colonization of this country, the Trump presidency and administration revealed the ugliness of the United States that so many Americans of all races never wanted to see or admit its existence. People of color are experiencing more hostility, and our country has become a place where the color of your skin and your political beliefs determine the level of safety you experience, even in your own neighborhood.

**COVID, Floyd and Nichols**

March 2020, major institutions faced an unprecedented shutdown due to the COVID-19 virus that caused millions of deaths around the world. For example, schools were forced to close their doors and create plans to deliver virtual classes. Companies were forced to close for in person work causing many to either lose their jobs or work remotely. This provided plenty of opportunity to watch what has now become known by many people of color, their allies, and some people in the media, as televised modern-day lynchings (Brown, 2020).

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic collided with a police violence epidemic during the first half of 2020 that illuminates longstanding and complex discrimination of Black Americans. Beyond health disparities, COVID-19 also exacerbated longstanding racial, social, and economic disparities. In 2020 alone, several police-involved killings of Black people, like the tragic deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, dominated news cycles and social media while also inciting protests against police brutality and racism (Jennings, 2021). The following quote is an example of what was being reported on the media about George Floyd’s May 25, 2020, murder:
A video shows George Floyd, a black man, lying in the street in anguish, with his head crushed against the pavement. A white officer presses his knee into Floyd’s neck. “I can’t breathe,” Floyd, 46, says repeatedly. “Please. Please. Please. I can’t breathe. Please, man.” Bystanders, filming the scene, plead with the officer to stop. He doesn’t. As three other officers stand by, he kneels on Floyd for eight minutes and 48 seconds as life seeps from his body. “It was a modern-day lynching,” said Arica Coleman, an historian, cultural critic, and author. “This man was lying helplessly on the ground. He’s subdued. There’s the cop kneeling on his neck. This man is pleading for his life. To me, that is the ultimate display of power of one human being over another. Historically, you could be lynched for anything.” (Brown, 2021)

Bearing witness to this senseless murder was painful for so many to see. It made me question if Black people are safe anywhere. Those who are assigned to protect and serve ALL people ended up being the perpetrators of Floyd’s murder and cause of the emotional trauma to those of us who watched the video. This incident increased the distrust of police by many Black people who have also had negative interactions with police but that did not result in their death. Both of my Black adult sons and my Black husband have been stopped by police for no significant reason but fortunately were able to walk away alive. Getting home safely is not a daily assumption that can be made for many Black men and women.

The Black Lives Matter Movement, born in 2014, reacted to Floyd’s horrible murder and protests were televised across the world. The New York Times reported that
recent Black Lives Matter protests peaked on June 6, 2022, a single day, when half a million people turned out in nearly 550 places across the United States. Protests continue today. Four recent polls — including one released recently by Civics Analytics, a data science firm that works with businesses and democratic campaigns — suggest that about 15 million to 26 million people in the United States have participated in demonstrations over the death of George Floyd and others (Buchanan, Bui, & Patel, 2021b). More than ever before, we have witnessed the televised killings of unarmed Black people, and the nation has been groaning with pain as so many more lives continue to be lost.

On January 7, 2023, Tyre Nichols, a 29-year-old Black man, was just two minutes away from home when he was stopped and brutally beaten by the Memphis police. Tyre was an aspiring photographer and an avid skateboarder who, just like George Floyd, called out for his mother in his last moments of consciousness. He died three days later in the hospital and the five Black officers involved were fired and later charged with his murder. These horrible losses to the Black community are important to highlight because they influenced the climate in which I lived and worked. The Floyd and Nichols murders are examples of institutional and anti-black racism that serves as part of the backdrop for this study. This topic will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

**Issue and Problem Statement**

Months after the murder of George Floyd, businesses, hospitals, and colleges, having empathy for people of color, started to diversify their personnel to help create welcoming and affirming environments. I saw dozens of job ads for directors of diversity, equity, belonging or inclusion for many contexts. Soon thereafter, K-12 school districts
followed this practice by posting similar positions to meet the needs of students and faculty of color and to create a welcoming and culturally responsive environment.

Between September 2019 and September 2020, Indeed© job postings in diversity, inclusion and belonging have risen 56.3%—from 140 jobs per million to 219. More significantly, after the U.S. economy declined in Spring 2020, the DI&B industry recovered quickly, with job postings rising by an astonishing 123% between May and September. The timing coincides with the rise of recent nationwide protests as companies began to express their support for the Black Lives Matter movement and publicly make promises to fight for equality in and outside of the workplace.

(Murray, 2021)

While these positions were seen by many as essential to the health of a business or the climate of a school, there was an opposing group that had been fueled by fear to block the movement of progress in the area of racial healing. In September 2020, former President Trump threatened to federally defund institutions offering anti-racist trainings, calling teachings on critical race theory and white privilege “divisive, anti-American propaganda” (Associated Press, 2020). Yet on January 6, 2021, the world witnessed Trump supporters storm our U.S. Capitol building as lawmakers attempted to count the electoral college votes in an effort to exact justice for what they believed was a stolen the election from outgoing President Trump. The nation and the international world stood still as we all witnessed the insurrection of the U.S. Government by Trump supporters who wanted to prevent the ratification of the vote for President-Elect Biden. Former President Trump even put his own Vice President’s life at stake calling him a coward if
he did not use his power to block the vote to ratify the election results. Matt Pottinger, former National Security adviser, said that former President Trump's tweet calling then Vice President Mike Pence a "coward" was "fuel being poured on the fire" the day of the insurrection (Chowdhury, Forman, Hammond & Macaya, 2022).

The political climate created by our former President caused mass hysteria around the discussion of race and the use of critical race theory in schools. This hysteria did not originate from someone who was well informed about critical race theory and its proper use considering the theory itself was not meant to be used in K-12 schools. Those who continue to blindly follow the orders of the former president, have nurtured a climate that promotes a hostile environment for those committed to anti-racist education.

As the Assistant Superintendent of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion for one of the largest and most diverse student school districts in New England, this current climate made my job more challenging. Likewise, those who were committed to justice-oriented frameworks in order to move their school districts towards liberatory education experienced emotional and professional ramifications. I acknowledge that although critical race theory hysteria is a powerful force that affected my work, the pushback I experienced did not come at the hands of students, families, or community members. As a matter of fact, they have been my biggest supporters and have made a strong call to our superintendent for this position to exist.

I faced challenges from some of the white educators and one misinformed white parent who was “disgusted” that we were cramming critical race theory down our students’ throats because according to him racism doesn’t exist. I remember receiving a call from a principal saying that she had an unpleasant exchange with this white parent
because a student wore a Black Lives Matter COVID face mask. Meanwhile, this parent wore an anti-vax shirt while complaining to the principal that political agendas don’t belong in the school environment. This same parent called my office, and our conversation was not very pleasant. To respect his privacy, I will call him Parent X.

September 27, 2021, 3:30pm - Parent phone call:

Parent X: Hello, is this the diversity person?

Me: Yes, I’m the Executive Director of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion for the district.

Parent X: Yeah, ok whatever. So, are you the one that’s saying it’s ok to bring politics into school?

Me: Sir, what are you talking about?

Parent X: I’m a parent, and I just got done speaking to the principal about this kid wearing a Black Lives Matter face mask. Politics don’t belong in schools. We’re bringing all this critical race theory crap in the schools, and it doesn’t belong. Leave it out of the schools. My kids don’t need that sh*t. I’m half Mexican, and their mother is white, and we did fine. I had Black friends, and it was the ones who obeyed the rules and weren’t listening to all that rap music that did good in life. Black people are always talking about being oppressed, so we can feel sorry for them. Black people aren’t oppressed. They just need to work hard, like the rest of us.

Me: Sir, we are not teaching critical race theory because it is not usually taught in K-12 classrooms. It’s more for the college setting, so students are prepared for the world after they graduate. They need to have conversations about race, and
life, so they can be ready. And sir, inequities DO exist, and talking about them to understand our world is important.

Parent X: Black people are always complaining, but they get free college, they get jobs that they aren’t qualified for, and the rest of us have to fight for what’s left. There’s no racism. We had a Black President! You don’t believe that crap about Blacks being oppressed, do you?

Me: There’s not a quick answer for that. Black people experience racism, oppression, and a lot of other things. You’ve been misinformed about a few things.

Parent X: Wait, if I met you in person and looked at you, I would know why you believe that Blacks are oppressed. Now I get it.

Me: So, let’s put this out on the table. I’m a Black woman, and you don’t know what I experience. You can’t tell me what my story is because I know what racism looks and feels like. AND we are not teaching critical race theory. You are misinformed because it is not a theory that is taught at the K-12 level. We are trying to prepare kids for a global society, and the conversations that take place in college classrooms around race, and our American history.

Parent X: Yeah, I’m gonna take my kids out of this district. I can see where this is going.

Me: Sir you have every right to do so.

Parent X: F*ck you! (Hangs up abruptly)
At that moment I was hurt and offended on so many levels. First, he dismissed my experience as a Black woman. He painted all Blacks with such a broad brush, and he made me feel guilty for privileges I’ve never received. I had to work six hours a day to afford college. I didn’t get a significant scholarship, and I face racism and oppression every day because of the color of my skin. I was so offended because he lumped me into every stereotype that I’ve fought all my life against. I’ve worked hard. I’ve been educated and have paid all my bills yet in a few sentences, he temporarily took all that away from me in this conversation. I emphasize the word “temporarily” because after reflecting on the conversation, I made a promise to myself that I would do everything in my power to fight for myself and stand on the principles on which I was raised and be proud and determined. Thankfully, this was the only parent I spoke to that had expressed a strong opposition against the vision of the department I was building. All other parents have been grateful and have said to me that the work I am doing is long overdue which I surmise is due to the demographics of my city of which Parent X would be the minority.

I have learned that although this work is very personal, I have to maintain a level of professionalism while also not making compromises that will undermine the vision I have for the department. When Parent X referred to me as the diversity person, that was a microaggression that needed to be met with giving him my appropriate title of Executive Director which he also decided to demean me by responding with the comment, “Yeah, ok whatever.” Although he identified himself as “half Mexican”, it is important to note that racist ideologies can be reproduced and consented by people of color as evidenced in Parent X’s comments by claiming he has an insider view given his ethnic background and his proximity to Black friends. He generalized the experiences of Black people and
denied our historical oppression by systemic racism. His gaze was on meritocracy claiming that the condition of Black people is a result of their failure to work hard and he dismissed the effects of racism and the systems and structures that have been built to maintain white supremacy.

Simply because we had a biracial president does not mean we are a post-racial society. Although I was quite frustrated and offended during this conversation, it was important to counter his misinformation with the truth that equity work prepares all children for a global society which includes having conversations at the college level as well as interacting with people of other races and ethnicities. I could have told Parent X that he was “flat out wrong” or I could have called out his ignorance but this work requires a level of decorum to maintain high level conversations that will hopefully lead to reflection. I continued to call him “sir” even when he didn’t deserve that respect, but I have learned from my own upbringing not to allow people to bring me down to their level but to maintain a level of professionalism so that when I walk away from a conversation, I feel good about what I did versus shame or regret.

I live and work in a racially diverse city in the northeastern part of the United States. According to the 2021 US Census, out of the more than 105,000 citizens, 67% were people of color. The population of Black people in my city is the highest in the state at 43.7%, which includes African Americans, Cape Verdeans, and Haitians. The school district for which I work has 84% students of color (60% Black, 17%, Latino, 16% White, 4% multi-race, 2% Asian) in contrast to the teaching staff that is 85% White which is well above the national average.

I am well known in my community as someone who has sung at funerals and
weddings, has preached, counseled, and led workshops at various churches. It was the community, along with my district, which hired me for my position as the Founding Executive Director of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) which was later changed to Assistant Superintendent.

I began my new role on June 1, 2021, building a team to initiate antiracist work in my district. This work required a lot of strategic planning to address the professional development needs of the teachers as well as curriculum development to support culturally responsive instruction. It initiated conversations that caused people to consider breaking ties with loyalties to their family history developing racial consciousness and racist ideals and practices that have served them well by affording privilege and safety.

Given the current political climate and unfounded hysteria around critical race theory being taught in K-12 schools and the lack of diversity amongst educators in the United States, Black EDI Directors need to find community with each other.

The next few graphics (figures 1-4) will provide context on a national and local scale to give insight into why this work is so urgent and why people who identify as BIPOC need to persevere in order to represent the students we respect, honor and serve.
The word “Hispanic” is used in this section to mirror the census language used to described people that may currently be identify themselves as Latino/a, Lantiné or Latinx. Over the past decade nationally, children of minoritized populations increased by 11.8 percent to 38.5 million. During the same period, the non-Hispanic white child population diminished by 12.9 percent to 34.6 million. Hispanics represent 25.7 percent of the under 18 population compared to 16.8 percent of the population over 18 (Figure 1). The multiracial child population also includes a larger share of the child population (6.7 percent) than of the adult population (3.3 percent). A similar pattern exists among non-Hispanic Blacks, Native Peoples, and those of “some other” races. Only non-Hispanic whites and Asians comprise a smaller share of the nation’s child population than of the adult population (Johnson, 2021). Figure 1 shows that the child population in the United States has more members who are not white and represent minoritized groups (almost 53%) while the adult population has more members that are white (almost 61%). These data sets tell us that although all adults will not enter the teaching profession, most of these children will be in a classroom at some point in their lives. Their identity needs
to be considered when preparing teachers and administrators for their professions so they can be prepared to be culturally responsive. I am very cautious making this statement because although I work in a diverse community, my work is not reactive or a response to the students in my classrooms where the majority represent the BIPOC community. It is essential for ALL students to see diverse representations of role models that will contribute to their academic and emotional intelligence.

It should not be a surprise that our educator pool is less diverse considering the demographics of adults over 18 across the nation. A 2021 study on the K12 power gap in Massachusetts by Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy (Figures 2, 3, and 4) shows the need for a more diverse workforce where just nine percent of teachers are people of color and the other ninety-one percent are white. Principals and superintendents of color make up only twelve and fourteen percent respectively while just five percent of the Massachusetts superintendents identify as BIPOC and three of those superintendents of color are Black females. It is important to note that nine percent of assistant superintendents are women of color and three percent of superintendent’s are women of color. I share this data to show the disparities in educational leadership in my state in the hopes to leverage these positions. Although diversity increases from the title of teacher to the title of superintendent, the numbers are still significantly low, meaning there are very few people that look like me or the students in my city at high levels.
For almost twenty years, research has revealed that students of color are more likely to attend school regularly, perform better on assessments, graduate, and consider college when they have a teacher who shares their racial identity and demonstrates an understanding of their prior experiences, cultural frameworks, and learning styles (Dee, 2004; Gershenson et al., 2018). Furthermore, having a teacher of color has positive academic and social impacts on all students regardless of race. The Learning Policy Institute (November 2017) published a report on diversifying the educational field and the barriers to recruitment and retaining teachers of color. Desiree Carver-Thomas the author of the report says, “Having a teacher of color can render long-term social benefits for students, schools, and communities, such as increased multicultural awareness in schools and a decreased likelihood that children will hold implicit biases as adults”
(Carver-Thomas, 2017). Principals and other central office leadership, including superintendents, foster a culture that can either prioritize or hinder equity work. Being a Black female in my position can be quite isolating. As of 2023, confirmed through my various networks across the state, there are only three Assistant Superintendents of color with a title that prioritizes equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Research by All That’s Interesting (ATI) is an online website that writes articles on topics in history, science, and news. It prides itself at giving its customers something interesting to read each day. On October 29, 2018, ATI shared a story about a horrible form of torture that I believe is very similar metaphorically to what Black administrators in predominantly white institutions experience. From the Tang Dynasty until the final years of the Qing Dynasty, a form of capital punishment set itself apart from the rest for its particularly cruel and brutal practices. The ancient Chinese torture tactic known as lingchi — which translates loosely to “slow slicing,” “lingering death,” or “death by a thousand cuts” — was used as a method of execution from the seventh century up until 1905, when it was officially outlawed. As the name implies, lingchi was a drawn-out and brutal process, wherein an executioner would deliver justice to various lawbreakers by administering a series of cuts to the skin. Unlike most execution styles, which aim to kill sooner rather than later, the aim of lingchi was a long, slow punishment, intended to see how many cuts a person could withstand before dying, or simply losing consciousness (All That’s Interesting, 2018). As I operate in my role, I am constantly faced with incidents of lingchi where I am often the recipient of small slices throughout the day. Microaggressions are a form of lingchi because the ignorant comments or the insults on my dignity through the use of demeaning language, are the small cuts that cause injury to
my spirit. When I am slighted and disregarded because someone doesn’t feel the work I do is significant in their eyes, I experience yet another damaging slice. When I have to credentialize myself to show others that I am worthy to be heard, I am cut once again. And because my work is centered around race and identity, it is impossible to separate who I am as a Black woman with the work that I do in my school district. Some days I can go from one meeting to the next and question why I subject myself to such pain and insult because it is exhausting. Although I may still have a smile on my face, internally I am mending my wounds by finding the healthy spaces I need to recharge and maintain focus.

**Significance of the Study**

Today’s Black administrators who take strong stances against racism, and those hired to lead equity, diversity, and inclusion work, are under fire. Although many of these positions are newly created, so many of us are already growing weary and are losing focus of our purpose because we are experiencing our own version of *lingchi*. Microaggressions, assaults on dignity and other forms of hostile behavior that we experience is what contributes to our death by a thousand cuts. Each day that we are not supported and do not feel a sense of belonging is another small cut towards our death in this work.

Those who are hired to do EDI work can often be isolated and marginalized. As a Black woman attempting to dismantle structural racism within my school district, it is imperative that I find spaces that support my resilience. In the midst of all the hysteria and hostility, leaders like me can experience burnout. The ramification of doing this work involves a unique condition of whiteness as property: emotional stress (Harlow,
2003) and racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004) caused by having to teach white adults to recognize and address white privilege. As a Black administrator, anti-racist and racial justice work requires consistent emotional replenishment because challenging whiteness as property is met with much opposition. In a field where most educators and administrators are white, my observations have confirmed that BIPOC educators should find ways to: 1.) replenish their cultural resources 2.) reinforce their commitment, and 3.) remain critical of education which desperately needs their presence and perspectives.

Recent research by Dr. Sam Rae (2022) shown in the following two graphics (Figures 5 & 6) demonstrates the urgency for self-care and support because of the heavy burden antiracist work can have on mental health. Figure 5 shows that almost sixty-three percent of those doing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work are triggered or traumatized in the process. Figure 6 shows that sixty-seven percent of DEI practitioners experience burnout and anxiety. Although those who leave feel guilty, they will probably never return to the field again.
In order to prevent attrition, it is important to find ways to experience job satisfaction and to connect with spaces for support. It is also important to note that trust was an important factor in making the decision to leave the work. The graphic on the right documents anecdotal data from a person who experienced 5 anxiety attacks per day saying, “As much as I care about this work, I don’t trust the intentions or actions of people who might hire me.” These experiences are important to document and study so that school districts are better prepared to support these roles.

Autoethnography as a window into the issues is an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues (Poulos, 2021). Using reflexivity, I interrogated my personal experiences as well as my subjectivity as the producer and subject of the text. I integrated my experiences through the research literature as well as reflected on the commonalities and differences I noticed in the practices and experiences of others in similar roles. I juxtaposed my observations with the cultural setting of the study in order to answer the research questions. The culmination of this study intends to encourage others to make personal and professional connections to me, as the writer, resulting in reflections on their own leadership and pedagogical practices within their individual contexts.

Here is an example of a narrative account of an event and how I applied this epistemology for this study.

Journal Entry: July 25, 2022 - Interview Panel:
I was in yet another interview panel for an administrative position in the district. Out of the nine people on the panel, seven were blonde females. All the candidates were blonde except for one Black woman. The hiring manager already had her mind made up that she would pick someone with whom she was familiar. This person happened to be a teacher, with no administrative experience. I wasn’t surprised because familiarity seemed to be the theme in the room. All blonde candidates, an almost all blonde panel...so the odds were already stacked against the Black candidate.

While in the interview, I was rooting for the Black candidate because I knew that her presence in the building would make a great impact on the students. We need more administrators of color so our kids can see leaders that look like them and aspire to do the same. However, she didn’t interview well and there was no way I could convince the interview panel that she could do the job. I was a little irritated because I have grown weary of seeing the same thing over and over. They bring in candidates that appear to look the same. Sometimes there are candidates of color while most times, there are not. They were in the original pool and highly qualified but because the process took so long, some other lucky district got them. I have had to hold my thoughts accountable so I don’t get pessimistic thinking “Of course, the friend of the hiring manager is the one they already decided would get the job. Why are we wasting other people’s time? How will we change the flavor of the district if we are just shuffling around the same ingredients? Same people…with no new ideas… no new energy… just status quo.” But then I get hopeful when I see my superintendent making moves and overriding decisions because he has the same goal to diversify and to create welcoming environments for our kids. His allyship is what helps me stay.
A function of my job is to point out blind spots and to help people see how they are contributing to and maintaining white supremacy culture within our district. When I commented on what I noticed about the many blondes in the room to one of my colleagues, he looked at me in shock. We often noticed the unfamiliar so having all blondes in the room for the interviews was a space of comfort for the group but because I am outside of that group, I am able to use my contrasting perspective to see the hidden biases they may not see.

When I was a principal doing classroom observations, I would keep track of how many times the teacher would call on certain students in the class meanwhile ignoring others and wondering if the teacher was making a conscious decision to do so. I recall one teacher would only call on the student who had all the answers and not the students she thought were poorly behaved based on her own cultural and racial bias about Black children. In the observation debrief, I asked her why she did that. She said it was easier to do that rather than bother with kids who didn’t behave. She didn’t want to do the hard work, but change is uncomfortable, and it requires extra work to see the benefits. After she did some reflection, she started calling on all students and saw the behavioral issues decrease. These moments of conversation and reflection are important in making a shift in our educational practice. We just need to be conscientious and open to listening to the multiple perspectives on achieving positive results.

I take my chances every time I have a difficult conversation like this. The complex part of the job is not only exposing biases so they can be addressed but raising points to reflect upon and alternatives that give space to moving in more productive alignment with students. In both of the scenarios I previously mentioned, the people
involved chose what was easy. When addressing the biases, it is important to be careful about how these conversations are held because the listener can quickly become defensive when I want them to be in a position to listen and make the necessary adjustments. For me, the work to arrive at a healthy place is often tedious and draining.

**Research Questions**

My autoethnographic research engaged the following questions:

1. How does my participation in racial affinity groups leverage community cultural wealth?

2. How does my participation in racial affinity groups affect my job satisfaction and wellness at work?

3. In what ways does an affinity group for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Directors in K-12 settings build my capacity to persevere?

I engage in autoethnographic research to reach two audiences: 1.) to encourage other educators and administrators of color to access their own community cultural wealth so they too can persist in anti-racist education and 2.) to encourage white educators to use my experiences to analyze their practices as co-conspirators and leaders in anti-racist education.

These complexities can lead to burnout, which is why choosing this genre was important to address the dilemmas of my position and why leveraging community cultural wealth was essential to my job satisfaction and retention. In the following chapters, I will share my review of literature that examines the trends in research. I will then share my thinking tools which include Yosso’s community cultural wealth and
Black woman cultural wealth as my theoretical gaze. Next, I will explain my ways of knowing and doing by discussing the rationale for my autoethnographic design, my data making, collecting and analysis. Finally, I examine my insights and discuss their implications.

The next chapter will provide more insight into the literature and previous research that has anchored my autoethnographic study. It offers several critical perspectives on the various themes that caught my gaze and offers a more comprehensive understanding of my lens.
CHAPTER II

REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

As noted earlier, there are few Black administrators in K-12 education. Most of the research has focused on higher education, however, I include in my review of literature a sampling of articles that address my research questions, theoretical framework, cultural context, and positionality as a Black female working in predominantly white institutions.

Critical Perspectives on the Black Experience in Predominantly White Spaces

The following articles have anchored my research as a Black administrator. Reading the stories of others provides a sense of kinship and belonging and has literally given me a mental counterspace to connect with the experiences of other Black women and administrators in predominantly white institutions.

Chancellor’s (2019) article on racial battle fatigue explains the burden that Black faculty carry in higher education. Although this article focused on faculty in library information systems, it was applicable outside of that setting. This point caught my attention:

They (Black faculty) are marginalized and find that their research is discredited, especially if it concerns minority issues; they bear a tremendous burden of tokenism, including feeling like they have to be exemplars of their entire race and work twice as hard to get half as far; they feel obligated to represent their race or ethnicity on multiple committees that help the institution, but not necessarily the individual, and to mentor and advise many same-race students—a huge hidden workload that goes unrewarded in the promotion and tenure system; and they suffer from negative, unintended consequences of
being perceived as an affirmative action or target-of-opportunity hire (Chancellor, 2019, p184).

Too often, I have felt marginalized and experienced my work being discredited as a result of racial biases. In a previous job, I was the first Black director hired by a particular state organization. I recall going to my first statewide leadership meeting and hearing how they were working to diversify the workforce at the senior level. At the moment this discussion began, it felt as though everyone in the room was looking at me smiling. One person started clapping as if something wonderful had just happened. I said to myself, “Lady, there’s only one of me out of forty people here. You can clap when we really start to diversify. I’m not interested in tokenism as a trophy of your kindness to grant me a seat at the table. I want to be valued at the table for what I bring and not be placed in a box when what I bring gets uncomfortable for you.” I have spent (probably) too much time trying to override stereotypes and biases.

There was a lot of pressure to succeed because I represented an entire race (although that’s unfair). I have often put the pressure on myself to be a perfect representation of Black excellence, so I didn’t close the door for those coming behind me. I was often put in a position to speak for Black people as a whole when asked for my opinion. I struggle with wanting to represent us all in a positive way while also feeling the burden of representing us all. Perhaps I feel more pressure internally because I want to do well for all of us and I don’t want my glass ceiling to turn to become cement for others. I truly believe our collaboration with whites and other people of color is what we need, to bring this nation to a place of healing. So, when I’m given a seat … wait… so
when I’ve earned a seat at the table, I’m there as Congressman John Lewis would say to get into *good trouble*.

However, Maylor’s (2019) article documented the experience of a Black female researcher drawing on critical race theory. It also examined Black feminism in the face of recognition, misrecognition, and non-recognition. It also drew upon Yosso’s work in CRT and resonated with me because of the lens of CRT and finding one’s voice through counter-storytelling. This section of the article resonated with me the most:

Black feminists, like bell hooks, Cynthia Dillard, Kimberly Crenshaw to name a few have long argued for dominant (white) ways of knowing to be challenged and for Black women to define their own reality. They suggest that there are multiple and different ways of knowing for Black women, and that Black women’s experiences/knowledge claims should be validated and not seen as threatening (Maylor, 2019, p. 53).

Chancellor’s (2019) article, Black women must continue to overcome stereotypes and have found themselves in situations where they must choose wisely how they will respond to microaggressions. As Chancellor speaks to tokenism and marginalization, Reynolds (2002) argues that:

moving Black women’s voices ‘from the margins to centre stage … encourages critical and reflexive thinking about gender and race, and it provides a challenge to the normative discourse within … academic debates. Challenging Maylor’s notions of womanhood also involves uncovering Black women’s experiences of racism. Through Black feminism, Black female researchers can be self-reflexive and comprehend
more fully ‘the double or (multiple) consciousness [they] operat[e] in’
(Ladson-Billings 2003, p. 421) as researchers. (Reynolds, 2002, p. 54)

Counterstories and counter narratives have been helpful in providing relief from the racial tension that Black women have often faced. Yosso (2005) states that: “when the ideology of racism is examined and racist injuries are named, victims of racism can often find their voice.’ As well as finding one’s voice, hooks (1991, 1994) notes that without the naming of one’s experiences there can be no counter hegemony, resistance, or new growth” (Yosso, 2005, p. 61-62).

Doharty’s (2020) article continued the same theme on the emotions of Black women often being under a microscope and overanalyzed. “This statement, of strength and anger along with the question about the absence of my emotions, has stayed with me into my academic career as I consider the impact of racialized emotions on the research and analytical process. It is here, in my dissertation research, that I seek to more meaningfully answer the doctoral examination question by shedding light onto the racialized-gendered controlling images regarding Black women’s emotions and the methodological challenges this raises in relation to publishing race research” (Doherty, 2020, p. 546). As a Black female researcher on race, the author documented her experiences amidst racial stereotypes and racialized images that had led African American women to draw on epistemologies such as Critical Race Theory.

Penultimately, the paper highlights the usefulness of Black women drawing on more compatible theoretical frameworks and methodologies such as CRT, for the researched, but also to illuminate the emotional challenges of
the researcher, thereby challenging the monopoly whiteness has on Black women’s emotionality: as only angry or strong. (Doherty, 2020, p. 548)

Black women having to strategically plan when to be emotional is emotionally exhausting. It has been unfair that others have been able to freely express frustration and even anger without it being ascribed to our entire character and to that of our entire race. This reminds me of a rant I witnessed at a meeting:

**Barbara:** *I can’t believe they didn’t give the school any compliments. They just came in and had all negative things to say. I’ve worked hard and busted my butt to make things better, but did they acknowledge that? No! Instead, they were coming for my neck! Who do they think they are?*

Everyone felt sympathy for Barbara, but no one asked her to be reflective about the constructive feedback she received. Instead, it was all about how she felt in the moment, and she forgot the most important thing…the students. I had a very different experience when I ranted about an issue that focused on the students and the response to my comments confirmed that my job was going to be difficult.

**Me:** *As a district, I thought we’d be further along. We’re planning for a workshop and you’re watering down the message that is important for our teachers to hear. We are all here in the service of students and I feel like we are putting the comfort of the adults over the success of students. Our teachers need to develop more positive relationships with their students, and we can’t keep avoiding difficult conversations because the adults are afraid to put the kids first.*

**Linda:** *Now wait, Renée. I think you’re being too harsh on our teachers. They need time to adjust to all this and we can’t talk to them at a college level because*
they aren’t ready for that. I know you’re upset but try to think of it from their perspective.

During my tenure as an administrator, I have participated in emotional negotiations with myself to avoid the “angry Black woman” label while also navigating white fragility. Imagine an untenured teacher, vulnerable due to the institution’s practice of not having resources to mentor new teachers facing a Black administrator who must inform her that her performance has been poor and that she will not be invited back the following year. I was already in a difficult position because no one wanted to deliver such bad news, but her instruction and classroom management was causing our students to disengage. Instead of reflecting on her practice, she decided to falsely accuse me of discrimination. I was deeply hurt because I tried everything I could to help her find a sense of belonging and gave her constructive feedback to help her succeed. She was able to scream at the top of her lungs and cry to gain the sympathy of others but if I showed any emotion in any of those moments, I would be demonized. I simply had to take the hit and internally it made me sick, but it taught me that I can only be fully human in my counterspaces. As much as I wish that weren’t true, I know that my emotions are seen as a deficit. Although I know that any reaction I had in that moment would not have been seen as positive, I was a bit jealous that she had the privilege to express human emotions while I was forced to remain stoic for fear of misinterpretation which speaks to the tension of power relations.

Previous research on Black communities in education has been deficit-informed, as Mirza explains, based upon pathologizing Black children (2007). In so doing, research on the education of Black children naturalizes inequalities in a seemingly ‘aracial’ system
(one that does not privilege a particular ‘race’) so that underachievement is attributable to their deficit cultures rather than wider structural inequalities” (Mirza, 2007, p.549). The previously mentioned untenured teacher had problems with her students because she ascribed their behavior and lack of achievement to their upbringing and identities. She would label students saying, “You’re the one with the IEP, right? You’re gay so maybe you’d like this activity. Perhaps you need more time with your father to improve your behavior.” This is the kind of talk that many parents have complained about. Their underachievement has been ascribed to what the teacher feels is either different about them or is missing at home. What has amazed me is that my students rarely confront teachers like this. Instead, they remain quiet, so their emotions don’t get them in trouble. We are taught to take it and told not to allow our emotions to be seen because they will not serve us well. I could attribute the silencing of emotions as a response to racism, but I also have to acknowledge the connection to internalized racism because in our silence we are giving people permission to control what we feel and how we express ourselves.

Mirza’s research focused more on not theorizing emotions rather than the emotions themselves. However, this was the bondage that she faced having to be strategic about when she allowed her emotions to be witnessed because of the reality of those emotions not being important to others. “Although Jagger attributes the bearers of emotions to women (in so doing, privileges white women), I strongly concur with Bhopal (1995) who argues, ‘the difficulties experienced by Black women researchers may be very different to those experienced by white women researchers. Therefore, we are left seeking alternative epistemologies that differ from the traditional Western philosophies, in order to challenge knowledge, language and the stereotypical myths that exist of Black
women” (Bhopal, 1995, p. 551). This is painful to grapple with because the Black woman has often been silenced in so many ways. We have had something to say, and we have had emotions that were just as natural to us as another’s emotions were to them.

“Whites are primed from a very early age to view the Black body with ‘racial disgust’ and thus maintain a racial hierarchy in knowledge production by blocking or leveling accusations at Black women – of being irrational, angry, overly subjective, or inherently biased. For Yancy, this is ‘not only hegemonic, but perverse and sadistic’ (Bhopal, 1995 p. 552). This is proof that racism is taught. I do not believe that any one race is inherently good or bad but that we act on what we are taught which is why this quote offends me. If we were and are seen with racial disgust, how were our Black bodies seen as something to provide a white man with pleasure? How were our disgusting Black bodies somehow pure enough for the white baby to nurse at our breasts? This narrative has always been used to justify the horrific treatment Blacks have received since enslavement. Darwinism speaks of survival of the fittest and if you were unable to thrive it was probably because you were subhuman and not because of racism or power disparities. Despite the contradictions readily available, it was all a narrative that had been constructed to ease the guilt of the past. That is why it was perverse and sadistic as Yancy said.

The Black body, for Yancy, becomes inflicted with the impact of the white gaze, which is a violent process: the ‘antitheses of white normativity qua purity’ Black women’s decisions about drawing on alternative epistemologies or engaging with their self-defined emotions in race.
research induces white fear and constitutes a threat to white power.

(Bhopal, 1995, p. 552)

This was what post traumatic slave syndrome (Leary, 2005) has done to us because of the generations of white power over our bodies, mental health and being.

In the context of slavery, Black women have been the caretakers of the slave master’s children. Greene’s (2020) study examined othermothering and how Black female educators have been able to model mothering to support their Black female students. “Both scholars examined how Black women educators engaged in acts of pedagogical love and how Black Feminist pedagogy served as alternative, safe spaces for Black girls. With roots in women’s relationships with children in the Black community, othermothering had expanded to include Black women’s impact in education institutions and the role teachers have played in cultivating, nurturing, and sustaining relationships with Black students” (Greene, 2020, p. 6). This was a major role that I have played in the school systems to many of my Black students (male and female). My frequent presence in their schools had been a comfort to them and created a safe space for them to call home.

The purpose of Green’s study is also to foreground attention to the experiences of Black teachers supporting Black girls within a white-dominated education system. The overarching goal is to highlight the resilience of Black girls in the face of opposition and to provide teachers with depictions of teacher-student relationships in multicultural literature authored by former literacy teachers that can be used to reimagine teaching and learning in the urban secondary literacy classroom and improve the education of Black girls (Green, 2020, p. 4).
As I reflected on my work to decolonize education, it was my motherly proclivity that drove me to make the changes in the curriculum. I could not, in good conscience, be a contributor to their oppression because of that instinct but also because I could identify with their oppression.

"Taryn’s narrative highlights how Black female teachers understand the importance of focusing on the whole child and advocating to support both the academic and socioemotional needs of their students. Drawing upon both a historical and contemporary context of Black academic othermothering (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Collins, 2009; Edwards, 2000; Foster, 1993), Miss Ruthie and Taryn’s narratives provide insight into the many facets of the role of Black female teachers in the lives of their Black students and served as the impetus for this analysis” (Green, 2020, p. 2).

In summary, these articles provide clear insight into the challenges of being a Black female in education. I experience racism and have the weight of stereotypes on my shoulders. Despite having to be cautious around expressing emotions for fear of being misunderstood, I understand my value to my students and what my presence means in the school setting in terms of othermothering.

The following authors document their experiences with racism either firsthand or second hand. They discuss the effects of racism whether it be linguistic oppression or racial trauma due to the wounds that it causes. They also address the different experiences of being a Black educator in a predominantly white institution (PWI) and a historically Black institution. It is important to say that navigating these spaces has its own challenges. A predominantly white space does not equal constant persecution and
oppression any more than a historically Black space provides total comfort and freedom. There are nuances in both spaces because there are nuances in the Black community.

Kohli (2008) made good use of vignettes as she reflected on breaking the cycle of racism in the classroom. I identified with the feelings of the teachers of color and their students as they discussed in the various vignettes how they had been affected by racism in the classroom. Here is an example of a vignette:

All the women in this study had a story to tell about the racism they went through in their own education, but many of them expressed that they had not thought about these things since they happened. Only now, as adults, had they begun to realize how deeply it affected them. Reflecting on discomfort within her own education and its impact on her learning and her identity, this student was committed to making her classroom a safe space for students. She saw community building as a means to create an atmosphere of unity, trust, and respect (Kohli, 2008, p. 186).

Although the study did not include administrators of color, the experiences were very similar to that of my own. Like Bhattacharya’s article, Kohli expressed a need for belonging or to feel “at home” in the school setting. Like my experience, the environment did not welcome a full representation of who I was, so it was infrequent that I felt a sense of home in most spaces at work. One of the participants mentioned how she was talking to another Spanish speaking person and was told to stop speaking in another language. That was an indication that a part of her was not welcomed in the academic space. Similarly, speaking African American Vernacular English was not respected in most spaces, especially in academia so again, I echo that sentiment. “The racism that students
endure and internalize does not always occur by individuals or in overt ways. Resource inequalities tend to exist between mostly white schools and schools serving Students of Color (Oakes, Roger, & Silver, 2004). This reality is a manifestation of structural racism and can have an extremely negative effect on the educational opportunities of non-white youth (e.g., access to libraries, Advanced Placement courses, and even college), but also in the way they learn to see themselves” (Kohli, 2008, p.184).

An apparent blind spot I identified was the need to be clearer about the subject of the study. The article was written in such a way that I was not always clear if I was reading about an adult or a student. The experiences were similar, but I wanted to make sure I was understanding what was happening and to whom.

I have had experiences like that of Anthym and Tuitt (2019). Their study documented the experiences of two Black professors of a predominantly white institution and how they experienced racial trauma. The authors refer to the work of Dr. Ken Hardy whose research was captured in an article entitled “Healing the Wounds of Racial Trauma: Reclaiming Children and Youth.” He is a psychologist that I have done a lot of work with to support my teachers in learning about racial trauma. The discussion and implications did not go in depth about how racial trauma affects “health and wellbeing, effectiveness and a sense of belonging and safety of Black people in higher education” (Anthym & Tuitt, 2019, p. 14). The author uses Hurricane Katrina as “a reminder and a warning 'that the fate of Black lives cannot be separated from that of whole communities. Ultimately, all lives do not matter unless Black Lives Matter" (Anthym & Tuitt, 2019, p. 17).
Like some of the previously mentioned articles, Anthym and Tuitt made great use of vignettes to tell the story. It also referred to Spike Lee’s movie “When the Levees Broke” (2006). I have been using vignettes to write my autoethnography. Spike helped us understand that racism cannot be fixed with just one person alone. There are structures and systems that have been built to support and perpetuate its effects. “But we reject attempts to assign individuals ultimate responsibility for ameliorating systemic effects that should be handled institutionally (Capper, 2015; Franklin, 2016). Returning to the metaphor: self-care is a sandbag. There are many minor storms it can withstand. But when what is needed is a levee, a sandbag simply will not serve” (Anthym & Tuitt, 2019, p.14).

Although not formally identified as such, I perceived the work of Anthym and Tuitt as an ethnographic study in which two professors in a predominantly white institution were observing one another’s behavior and documenting it. You can tell who is being described because they referred to each other as he/she. They also quoted each other and some of the quotes revealed who was speaking or who was being observed. I wished the authors were more explicit about ethnographic study. They reconstructed memories that had been documented years ago which is a great technique. They use counter-narrative and storytelling which is a great way to keep the reader engaged. A person doing a word search using just “autoethnography” and “Black” might miss this article. However, since they were doing racial justice work and using critical race theory, I was able to locate it.

A collective autoethnography is represented by Decuir, Johnson, Edwards, McCoy and White (2020) who document a study on 15 African American
instructors/professors and administrators and the racial microaggressions they experienced despite being in an HBCU and a PWI and how they coped with the various challenges. This article affirmed my experiences and I identified with having to work twice as hard as my white counterparts to disrupt the negative narratives placed upon me. This is an adage that has existed and reused to connote the tension that Black people can feel in workspaces where they are the minority. This sentiment is like pedaling twice as fast just to get half as far. This can also be connected to the long existing thought that Blacks in positions like this should be filled with gratitude because they were “given” (not earned) a place at the table.

Decuir, Johnson, Edwards, McCoy and White (2020), when talking about their experiences in an HBCU, “I just speak up. I try to call people out on it. I try to call people out on it and let them know that this is unacceptable. You’re not going to treat me like this. You’re not going to treat our students like this” (Decuir, Johnson, Edwards, McCoy & White, 2020, p. 502). We (Blacks) have often been more vocal with our own and we have been more silent outside of our own racial group probably as a means of self-protection because of the consequences mentioned in the previous quote. The authors have their way of coping, “I like to laugh. So that’s it. I like to laugh, and TV is probably my favorite thing because I get to just be still. I just relax my body, relax my mind, and that’s that” (Decuir, Johnson, Edwards, McCoy & White, 2020, p. 502). I agree with the authors on this pastime which is probably my favorite way to decompress; just to *veg out* and watch television. The fully humanizing experience includes the range of emotions needed to replenish which includes ways of “keeping it real” meaning staying grounded to my roots so I don’t lose myself in the process of trying to fit in.
African American professors and administrators are significantly impacted by racism and racial discrimination. This affects them psychologically and physically. With a CRT lens they use their counter stories as a coping mechanism. “Few studies, however, discuss the presence of racism in higher education workplaces. Instead, many studies minimize the impact of racism on institutional norms and People of Color” (Harper, 2012, p. 492). The article speaks about the racial microaggressions in higher ed. “Sadly, racial microaggressions that are experienced by People of Color in higher education are often perpetuated by white faculty, administrators, staff, and students who are unaware of the racist origins or implications of their actions (Constantine et al. 2008; Louis et al. 2016; Sue et al. 2011)” (Harper, 2012, p. 493).

“Coping with microaggressions - Coping mechanisms are independent of the institutional structure and are based upon an individual’s personal resources or beliefs. It is important to understand the current tension using the word “microaggression.” Ibram X. Kendi, an author famous for his 2019 book, How to Be an Antiracist does not use the term “microaggression because it does not fully describe the trauma that is inflicted. He names it as racial abuse which more accurately reflects the effect of such behavior. I will expand the discussion on microaggressions, racial abuse and other descriptive phrases to address this behavior in later chapters but research has shown that African Americans typically utilize emotional coping strategies (i.e., relying upon family, friends, church, other personal networks) when they are in distress. These strategies have been connected to African Americans experiencing high levels of discrimination such as what occurs in the higher education workplace (Vassilliere, Holahan, & Holahan, 2016)” (Harper,
20212, p. 495). This connects to Tara Yosso’s Cultural Wealth Theory, the foundation for my resilience and a theory I will use in my autoethnographic study.

Although the fifteen participants experienced negative behaviors in both HBCU’s and PWI’s, they had different responses depending on which setting they were in. I would want to understand more about how the participants felt having to deal with microaggressions and negative behaviors in the HBCU settings and what expectations they had entering those universities. In chapter five, I will talk about some of the unexpected racial dilemmas that I faced with my Black peers in affinity spaces to highlight how biases also affect homogeneous communities.

In summary, these articles demonstrated that Black educators deal with a variety of issues that are related to race within academic settings. The effects of and responses to experiences of racism varied depending on the circumstance but in each case, the educators found ways to foster their own resilience by either speaking out or connecting with affinity groups which helped them persist in these settings.

The following articles articulate the various experiences of Black women in academic settings captured in autoethnographic accounts. These autoethnographies documented their lived experiences and the price they paid for working towards racial justice in academic settings.

Kessler’s (2020) self-study also took place in a college setting. It included a focus group over the time span of two semesters and articulates the tensions between being a junior faculty member and wanting to dismantle normative deficit practices through critical reflection. Kessler had learned that teachers of color could also buy into colorblind ideologies that maintained white supremacy because the education programs
lacked clear social justice and anti-racist focused curriculum. They would also have a
deficit view of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students that perpetuates
inequalities at the intersection of race, gender, class, and ability (Kulkarni, 2018).

Colorblind beliefs in special education can maintain white supremacy by creating
confusion in both research and practice about the issue of disproportionality in special
education (Artiles et al., 2010; Blanchett, 2006) (Kessler, 2020, p. 23). I believe all of this
is due to internalized racism and what DeGruy (2018) refers to as Post Traumatic Slave
Syndrome where Blacks support white supremacy ideologies because they have been
indoctrinated in an American society that created structural racism.

Kessler’s findings were categorized into themes (p. 29-30):

1. Importance of Self-Reflection
2. Bias and Cultural Awareness
3. Struggling to Push Through

A notable blind spot in this research was that the author triangulated her personal
reflective journals, and the student focus group included critical self-reflection. I
wondered if that was too much to do all at the same time. Autoethnography is already a
lot to document and analyze considering the layers of reflection required. The personal is
political and where there is struggle, it is political. It is complex.

Hughes (2020) is another professor in a higher educational setting who wrote an
autobiographical account about a Black male professor. The author begins with the
essential question: “What three key institutional incidents/conditions inform my Black
scholar activism for predominantly White education in this historical moment?” He
shared three incidents from his perspective in his role as teacher racial justice/diversity
classes to answer his own question. The events were very specific to his personal experience and may not be relatable for everyone, however the following quote caught my attention: “Being the only Black male Professor of Education and teaching White undergraduates at a PWI involves a unique condition of whiteness as property: emotional stress (Harlow, 2003) and racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004) of teaching white students to recognize and address White privilege” (Hughes, 2020, p157).

As a Black administrator, anti-racist and racial justice work has been exhausting because my work challenges whiteness as property and has been met with much opposition. The purpose of Hughes’ self-study was beneficial because it caused the reader to also reflect on their own reasons for persistence in doing this work in academic settings. This is important because when our jobs get challenging and we are discouraged, we need to have our “why” to anchor us and keep us focused on the task. Hughes’ research contrasts with Kessler’s study about teachers buying into colorblind ideologies that maintained white supremacy. Kessler’s focus was on the education programs that lacked clear social justice and anti-racist focused curriculum. Hughes used his identification as a Black male to dismantle white supremacist practices while also acknowledging the price he paid doing so. Just as Hughes used his autoethnography to influence current practice, I too, expect the readers to identify with the examples I share in later chapters that should serve as a motive to dismantle white supremacy culture.

Williams (2021) documented her autoethnography focusing on her location as a female charter school leader. Being a leader of a charter school was similar to my previous role at a state agency. She was attempting to use an Afrocentric approach where I have been working to decolonize our educational services. Williams' chronological
account uses the work of other scholars on Neoliberal policy, Africanist womanism and Black feminist thought. She cites Ellis and Bochner (2000) who suggested that autoethnography is a form or representation that allows the researcher to focus “outward on social and cultural aspects of their experiences” (Williams, 2021, p. 9).

Williams made great use of definitions. “I used the qualitative method of autoethnography to present a critical narrative of my quest for transformative leadership, within an African-centered construct, as a female educator of color; and utilize such personal experience to contribute to our knowledge of social and material inequalities” (Williams, 2021, p. 9). A blank spot was that the author spent half the article grounding her work in theory and in the work of others. I wanted more of it to speak about her experiences but instead it spoke more in a passive voice about the operational challenges.

I believe that Hughes and Williams would make a good pair grounded in this thought: “Black women, I believe, intuitively know how to meet the needs of the Black community in concert with Black men. Notwithstanding my difference in class with the community that I served, I possess the historical experience of what poverty looks like and the issues that pervade disadvantaged families, thus successfully reached parents and children across class” (Williams, 2002, p. 10).

In summary, these articles provided more insight into the struggles of the Black women and the battle fatigue they experience. It is important to share our stories and to give testimony to what we personally witness and experience because it authenticates the reality of many who do not feel empowered to speak for themselves. The identification of those challenges in detail told directly from a Black woman’s perspective have the
potential to be transformative for those with whom they work.

**Critical Perspectives on Counterstories and Counterspaces/Affinity Groups**

**From Stories to Counterstories**

The following articles are examples of the benefits of community cultural wealth in the form of counterstories. The function of storytelling has been to provide a place where people can share memories and make connections with each other through the sharing of their hopes and dreams. These articles make deeper connections to storytelling under the umbrella of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW).

Martin-Beltran, Montoya-Ávila, Garcia, and Canales (2018) focus on resistant capital in their research as it relates to the telling one’s own story: “Although the students and their teacher simultaneously drew upon multiple, interconnected forms of CCW such as linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, and navigational capital, we focus on resistance capital in order to operationalize forms of resistance, corresponding to the focus of this special issue” (Martin-Beltran, Montoya-Ávila, Garcia, & Canales, 2018, p. 107). People of color live under a cloud of stereotypes so being able to hear and share real stories with those like me, reminds me that the stereotypes don't have to be what’s perpetuated but that I am able to influence the narrative about people who look like me.

As we planned for the ACT conference, we assembled a diverse group of workshop facilitators. For the first time having an in-person conference, I didn’t think the expectations were very high, however when the conference was over, the participants raved about how the experiences they had were transformative. They were very impressed with the caliber of facilitators and their professionalism, and their knowledge of the content. This is a counternarrative to what they may have been expecting based on
the subject matter. Many people were anxious that the day would be spent bashing white people but instead they got an experience that caused them to address some racial blind spots while also causing them to desire allyship. The workshop facilitators like Martin-Beltran, Montoya-Ávila, Garcia, and Canales used their resistance capital as an act of decolonization whereas the writer provides a counternarrative or a counterstory in the face of stereotypes thereby placing value on their own experiences. This is one of the reasons I chose the genre of autoethnography. It is important to hear authentic testimonies of those who are most affected by racism and stereotypes so that those outside of marginalized groups can gain insight into our experiences through our stories.

Banks-Wallace (2002) writes an autoethnography that I felt was my own story: “Nurturing the spirit-self is a primary function of storytelling. Storytelling also provides a means of articulating our hopes, fears, and dreams. The process of storytelling establishes a common experience between teller and listener, creating a connection between them” (Banks-Wallace, 2002, p. 411). The African tradition of storytelling as an empowering and healing practice, resonates with me.

In summary, the role of storytelling within the Black community is powerful because it reemphasizes our cultural identity as well as authenticates the shared struggle amongst the Black community. Being able to tell a story from one’s own perspective helps in the healing of those who have been oppressed by placing value on one’s own experiences. I am personally blessed by being able to tell the story which helps me externally process the harm I have experienced. I am then blessed by the hearing of my own story because in listening, I can bear witness to my survival of the harm I have
experienced. Those who identify with my story accompany me on the journey of healing because my story validates theirs.

**From Spaces to Counterspaces**

The following authors discuss the benefits of counterspaces for people of color and how those spaces provide them with a sense of belonging and support in predominantly white contexts. It is important to note that affinity spaces do not exist to be divisive or to isolate one group from another. They offer a place to share common struggles and to be encouraged and affirmed. These spaces are what gives us a place called “home” because love prevails over judgment or reproof. When my team was beginning to create affinity spaces for people of color in the district, a school committee member asked me to help him understand the purpose of such spaces. We met for coffee, and we had the following discussion:

School Committee Member: *So, tell me more about the affinity groups. I know they are important and I’m trying to understand more about them.*

Me: *Ok, think about Wellesley College, a private women’s liberal arts college. It was designed with women in mind so imagine if it had open admittance to men and you were one of the few who matriculated. You’re sitting in a psychology class, and you are the only male. You’re feeling uncomfortable and out of place because everything about the space you’re in is stereotypically female. I know that sounds weird coming from the EDI person but just go with me on the stereotypes so I can make my point. The desks are pink, and the curtains have flowers on them. They have all these pictures of successful women on the wall. The bathrooms only have stalls and no urinals. Every meal feels like a girls’ tea*
party with small sandwiches and delicate desserts. You just want a burger and fries. Again...I’m going with the stereotypes to make a point. You want to stay at Wellesley because you love their psychology program but you’re not sure if you are going to make it here alone. THEN... you see another guy walk in. You look at each other like you’ve just met your long-lost twin. You give each other “the nod” to say hello in your subtle way and then after class you almost run towards each other, and you say:

School Committee member: Hey, so nice to see you. I thought I was the only one.

Other Guy: Whew! I’m glad to see you too.

School Committee member: Tell me, how are you doing being one of the few guys here?

Other Guy: I’m better now that I’ve met you. I wasn’t sure I was going to be able to stay. Nothing here feels welcoming. What’s up with these foofy looking finger sandwiches? Can I get a burger and fries?

School Committee member: OMG! I was just saying the same thing. I think we’re going to be fine now that we have each other. Let’s meet for dinner so we can talk more. I know a great burger joint off campus.

Once I was able to tell this story to the school committee member, he said, “Wow I totally get it! I am so glad you’re doing this and thanks for taking the time to explain it to me.”

Counterspaces or affinity groups are essential for the survival of those who do antiracist work as well as for people of color in predominantly white institutions which is
why this term will be explicitly defined. As defined by Tauriac (2013) affinity groups (or ‘caucus groups’) are meetings in which participants gather based on a particular social identity to discuss related personal experiences. Affinity group members share similar social status, common goals, or are perceived and responded to similarly by outgroup members (e.g., other Black and Latiné students frequently report that their teachers have low expectations of them (Rosenbloom and Way, 2004). The commonality of the in-group context and shared challenges foster an atmosphere where participants speak more freely or receive validation, without fear or defensiveness related to outgroup members contesting their perspectives. Affinity groups have been utilized to address shared experiences among members of various disempowered groups in academic, corporate, and political settings (e.g., Douglas, 2008; Kidder & Stewart, 1975; Tatum, 1997).

Affinity groups have become more popular to provide safe spaces for marginalized groups and have become a major part of my retention plan for my educators of color. This grouping of literature specifically focuses on the benefits of these affinity spaces for professional development and retention of educators of color by leveraging community cultural wealth.

As defined by Pour-Khorshid (2018), racial affinity groups are an important space for learning and healing for its members. They explicitly center members’ voices, needs, and collective knowledge (a) collectively cultivates a critical, humanizing, and healing space for their sustainability; and (b) supports affinity group members in navigating various positions within socially toxic education institutions and organizations. This research focuses on cultivating sacred spaces for racial affinity groups to support critical educators of color. White supremacy negatively impacts teacher development and ignores
the needs and knowledge of teachers of color. Picower (2009) argues that white supremacy manifests as overtly racist acts, but also through everyday practices and beliefs that uphold whiteness as the standard and perpetuate racism regardless of one’s intentions. Kohli, Pizarro, and Nevarez’s (2017) review of research on racism in K–12 schools over the past decade describes a new racism that is “evasive, subtle, and challenging to identify because it is normalized and hidden under the guise of multiculturalism, color blindness, and everyday individualized interpretations of policy and practices” (Kohli, Pizarro & Nevarez, 2017, p. 195). The emotional rollercoaster a person of color experiences in environments like these requires a counterspace found with a group of people where acceptance and affirmation are part of its fabric.

The research of Kohli, Pizarro, Garcia, Kelly, Espinoza, and Cordova (2021) investigate affinity spaces as opportunities for professional development to support educators of color in K-12 settings. Research has also shown that although teachers of color are often overlooked for leadership roles, they are needed in this leadership work (Pizarro & Kohli, 2018; Kohli, 2019; Gist, 2019). Given the education profession is dominated by whites and schools are steeped in institutionalized racism, the ability to create the cultural shifts that are desperately needed in school districts. The leadership-efficacies of teachers of color flourish, however, when their culture, language, and epistemologies are valued, and they are supported to collectively reimagine the boundaries and possibilities of education.

Mosely’s (2018) Black teacher project explored how racial affinity professional development sustains Black teachers. A key finding from this initial pilot study is that racial affinity-based professional development decreases isolation and increases retention
for Black teacher’s racial affinity professional development at its core is about designing spaces of support, learning and healthy career development that are culturally responsive to a specific racialized group who experiences the consequences of institutional racism in particular ways.

**Critical Perspectives on Belonging**

Hereafter are articles that focus on finding a sense of home and belonging in predominantly white institutions as well as the benefits of connecting to community cultural wealth. What was compelling about the works of Diversi and Moreira (2016), and Griffin (2012), was their articulation of their feelings around belonging within their particular contexts. None of these researchers felt a sense of belonging because they were either misunderstood outsiders or were seen through the filter of stereotypes and negative historical depictions of Black women who felt caught between two perspectives. As Bhattacharya’s (2018) work reveals her desire to imagine home in her social context, however, she never feels fully at home anywhere:

“Home, then, may be not only an inexperienced space for some but also a space of liminalities and exile. Thus, discourses of being home, going home, being returned to a place, being banished from a space that could be home, or remembering fondly a home that never existed produce pain and isolation, yielding further personal and political marginalization” (Bhattacharya, 2018, p.14).

I too have tried to color memories at work to make them more than they actually were as I attempted to connect to some of my white colleagues.
Reframing home that becomes a permanent state of movement and unsettling requires identifying oppressive structures and disrupting previous understanding of home while also requires claiming a space, a relationship, a set of experiences, or a moment as the grounding necessary to feel “at home” (Bhattacharya, 2018, p. 15). I have found it essential to find spaces where I can feel grounded and at ease in predominantly white spaces. A person in my role can feel marginalized on many levels and finding “home,” even if for a moment, is nourishment to continue the journey. “Home” for me is a place where there is no judgment for being my full Black self which means I can use African American vernacular English or share stories with those who understand and have similar life experiences. I have found home more with the people of color at work regardless of their title because we share the experience of marginalization and existence outside the core.

I interpreted Dutta’s (2018) use of Langston Hughes’ poem, “I Look at the World” as a way to describe his positionality and context in constructing a world he only dreamed of. Dutta reminds me that although I long for a sense of belonging in a predominantly white institution, my “home” is where I am respected, and my knowledge is honored. Hughes (2020) is another professor in a higher educational setting who wrote an autobiographical account about being a Black male professor. “Being the only Black male Professor of Education and teaching white undergraduates at a PWI involves a unique condition of whiteness as property: emotional stress (Harlow, 2003) and racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004) of teaching white students to recognize and address white privilege” (Hughes, 2020, p.157). In contrast to Kessler’s study about teachers buying into colorblind ideologies that maintained white supremacy because the education
programs lacked clear social justice and antiracist focused curriculum, Hughes used his identification as a Black male to dismantle white supremacist practices while also acknowledging the price he paid doing so.

Ong, Smith, and Ko (2018) tied in their work the application of cultural wealth in creating counterspaces for women of color which has been a much-needed resource. Microaggressions also necessitate counterspaces for women of color. Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin (2007) describe microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” of which the perpetrators are often unaware (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & Esquilin, 2007, p. 273). I draw on the work of Solorzano and his colleagues (Solorzano et al., 2000; Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998), who defined counterspaces as academic and social safe spaces that allow underrepresented students to: promote their own learning wherein their experiences are validated and viewed as critical knowledge; vent frustrations by sharing stories of isolation, microaggressions, and/or overt discrimination; and challenge deficit notions of people of color (and other marginalized groups) and establish and maintain a positive collegiate racial climate for themselves” (Solorzano, 2000, p. 209). For that reason, I have found solace in counterspaces that provide me with rest from some of the oppression I experience and offer me a moment to recharge and replenish. I have noticed that other group members receive the same benefits as we bond through our common stories and find ways to bring laughter and joy into our struggles as our coping mechanism.

Similar to Bhattacharya and Kohli, Rodela, and Rodriguez-Mojica (2020) speak
to the challenges of “belonging” in a group of white administrators. The authors articulated how their upbringing influenced the way they did equity work and how they navigated white dominant administrative spaces. “Analysis of their counter stories reveals: (a) how their equity orientations and leadership were informed in large part by their Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) as bilingual and bicultural people of color and (b) the racialized politics of administration in their districts that impacted their equity advocacy” (Kohli, Rodela, and Rodriguez-Mojica, 2020, p. 291). This revelation is very powerful because it affirms that those who have a stronger connection to their community cultural wealth are more successful in navigating systems of oppression.

**Critical Perspectives on Job Satisfaction**

The following research speaks to the workplace culture affects job satisfaction, and performance and, more clearly, defines the meaning of “job satisfaction” as one of the guiding principles for this autoethnography. The research of Hendrawijaya, Hilmi, Hasan, Imsiyah, and Indrianti (2020) provides a theoretical model to hypothesize how teacher performance is affected by job satisfaction. Their study concludes that work culture, or the ethnic, linguistic, and social diversity of an environment, has a significant impact on job satisfaction for teachers, as does school leadership.

Macutay (2020) offers a similar conceptualization of job satisfaction, noting policies, supervision, salary, interpersonal relations, job performance ratings, and working conditions as determining variables. The interpersonal partnerships include “opportunities for socialization, a sense of camaraderie and cooperation, and how the university treats disruptive workers” (Macutay, 2020, p. 235). The study asserts that each of these elements affect job satisfaction for teachers, which is defined as “an attitude that
can generate a constructive or destructive influence on one’s job and responsibilities; as a set of thoughts, one feels about one’s job; and as an overall affective assessment of one’s employment situation” (Macutay, 2020, p. 235).

Since “job satisfaction” is more of an abstract term that can be subjective, I also include a definition for clarity. Recent research by Pohaci, Rus, Sandu, and Rus (2021) states an understanding of job satisfaction as it is related to worker burnout. They note that "job satisfaction is a positive emotional state, which results from the employee's personal opinion on his work or work climate, a state of balance, reached by the individual when he fully responds to needs, conscious expectations or unconscious" (Pohaci, Rus, Sandu & Rus, 2021, p. 604). The dimensions of burnout include "emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduction of personal achievements," (Pohaci, Rus, Sandu & Rus, 2021, p. 610), which contrasts with both their stated domains of job satisfaction, as well as Hendrawijaya, Hilmi, Hasan, Imsiyah, Indrianti (2020) and Macutay (2020)'s findings. Their research surveys the experiences of preschool and middle school teachers and concludes that they experience high levels of burnout and low levels of job satisfaction. There is a significant correlation between the teacher’s experiencing burnout and their job satisfaction.

**Critical Perspective on Black Language**

This literature review would not be complete without including the discussion of language in the context of identity, affinity spaces, telling counterstories, and job satisfaction. I have made conscious choices about my use of language because I understand that the various ways I speak English are either valued or not valued based on
the setting and the audience. The following articles speak to research on Black language and the variety of experiences Black people have using it.

Research by Baker-Bell, Django, Paris, and Jackson (2017) documented in an article entitled *Learning Black Language Matters: Humanizing Research as Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy* provide great insight into the power of seeing linguistic flexibility and Black language (BL) as an asset rather than seeing it through a deficit-based lens. The authors have a variety of experiences with BL based on their own upbringings. April’s family values BL sees it as beautiful and powerful while also being equally respected and necessary as Dominant American English (DAE). She does not grow up under the linguistic oppression that many people do but has started to gain a deeper understanding of that oppression when she starts teaching English language at a high school on the eastside of Detroit.

Django has a different experience being half Black. He witnesses his grandfather speaking Jamaican Patois and cannot understand why he is unable to understand this other kind of English. This would support his learning in a class he would later take with one of the authors of *Talking Black Talk*, John Baugh.

Davina, a Black woman is humiliated by insulting comments made by her college professor regarding her use of BL. Her response to that is to be careful not to do the same to her students with regards to making assumptions about their literacies and capabilities. Our own experiences are the lens through which we think and interact with others including how we teach and lead.

This connects to Smitherman’s push-pull and DuBois’ “double consciousness.” Blacks often must look at themselves through the eyes of others and adjust to the
thinking, perceptions and standards based on a larger system of white-centered linguistic hegemony (Baker-Bell, et. al, 2017, p. 364). Baker-Bell, Paris and Jackson agree that there will always be this push-pull that Smitherman talks about in her book. But they give examples from their research of the need for caution when teaching their students, the importance of code-switching or linguistic flexibility. It can be more harmful to teach code-switching without teaching the history behind it because leaving out the history can devalue a young person’s language which is very much connected to their identity.

It is important for Black leaders to come to terms with their use of language; whatever that it because of its connection to identity. As a child growing up, I was not taught to have pride in speaking any language other than what was deemed “proper” or “the King’s” English. My family was adamant that we were not the kind of Black people that spoke using what they called those “do’s and dems.” This meant my verbs and nouns had to agree. I would be instantly corrected by a family member if I said, “He do study hard.” My mother or grandmother would instantly say, “He does study hard” to make sure I knew the correct way to speak English. I had to properly pronounce the word “them” and not use “dem” because that was a sign of laziness and ignorance according to them. Growing up, I felt their corrections were connecting to their desire for me to sound like white people which implied there was something wrong with my speaking differently.

Rachel Jeantel’s testimony in the George Zimmerman murder trial of Trevon Martin is an example of the devaluation of BL. Her testimony was considered not credible because of her use of Black language. What may be valued in her neighborhood or amongst her family was not valued in the context of a courtroom. As a Black leader, I
operate with what I previously referred to as DuBois’ “double consciousness” because my success as a Black woman is not just reliant on my skills and experience. My success can be blocked because of the way I may be perceived as intelligent or not based on my use of the English language.

Code meshing is the act of combining local, vernacular, colloquial, and world dialects of English on formal assignments and in everyday conversation, in an attempt to embrace the diverse world in which we reside. By combining our native language with standard English, an effective way to communicate with a broader audience is created. Code meshing is the alternative to the oppressive practice of code switching because it embraces people’s cultural differences and allows them to authentically illuminate their personality. (Young, Barret, Young-Rivera & Lovejoy, 2014, p.237)

Talking Black Talk book takes this matter a little bit further. We can value Black language in certain circles but if it is not valued in educational spaces, the devaluation will continue to happen during the academic day. The authors offer a healthy perspective on why this should matter in academic settings. It’s not just about code switching or linguistic flexibility. Taking Black language into consideration as the home language, will help teachers with their instruction and will give them insight into how to make linguistic connections for their students. BL is a form of linguistic flexibility and not a detour to a lower level of English.

Language has everything to do with power and identity. You can identify where someone is from based on the language they use. If I hear an Irish accent, I may assume
they have roots in Ireland. If I hear a southern drawl, then I can assume, they have lived or have roots in the southern part of the U.S. An assumption of power is often ascribed to people with certain accents or uses of language. For example, I was in New York at a conference with people who work in Juvenile Justice Education around the county. We had a visitor from the United Kingdom who was new to juvenile justice and came to learn from us. Not everyone was aware that she was new to this industry but when she spoke, everyone listened because her accent caused people to assume she knew what she was talking about. When we worked in small groups, one person said to her, “You are probably the smartest one in the room.” She quickly corrected the person saying, “Please don’t let my accent fool you. I know very little about this industry and came to learn from you.” Mind you, she said very few words up until that small group but the little she spoke, called up all the assumptions made about those who are closer to the European center of the world. Her accent gave her privilege and honor in the room. Something that was not afforded to the most experienced person in the room who spoke with southern drawl.

The UK accent caused people to ascribe wisdom to her that she honestly did not have. That accent gave her access to power, and she could have said almost anything to that crowd, and they would have taken it as “the gospel truth” because her accent provided that privilege. So, when you put that accent in the midst of policy makers, she would of course, get everyone’s attention. In contrast, someone speaking BL or identifying as Black speaking on what works for African American students in education based on personal experience AND research, need to first prove they are credentialed to speak on such a topic before even being considered a valid source.
As a critical educator, I continue to question the status quo. Code switching is not the answer. I have often been put in situations where I feel the need to leave behind who I am in order to fit into white society by code switching. Code meshing or language fluidity is a solution that allows me to bring my whole self and the multiple literacies I have to the table without denying my own identity and language.

Gleaning from this literature, I have learned the importance of language and its value to culture and identity. Our biases play a significant role in how we equate language use with intelligence and competence. The need to code switch is often a requirement to be allowed into and to remain in elite spaces. Language fluidity is not seen as an asset but rather a deficit in ability regardless of credentials and experience. Many who speak Black language live in the tension between speaking the language of the setting be it home or work and compromising so much of their language that they don’t feel that they belong in either setting. When I was younger, I did not attend the neighborhood school so when I came home to my neighborhood friends, I spoke differently than they did. Some kids would call it “talking white” while I just said, “I’m talking like I’m educated.” Neither was correct. Over time, I had to come to terms that both languages were valuable within their own setting. I learned that regardless of the opinions of others, I needed to feel authentically me using whatever language I spoke in whatever setting, so I wasn’t losing myself for the comfort of others. This is not an easy move as a Black leader given the double standards when it comes to the use of language, however, over the years, I have settled into who I am as a leader and how I present myself to others.
I have learned to place value on my own linguistic capital as a Black woman. In the next chapter, I will explain how I put to use my thinking tools which included community cultural wealth and an original framework as a lens for my research.
Chapter III
THINKING TOOLS

In this chapter I will discuss the thinking tools I used for my qualitative research as the lens through which I collected and analyzed my data. They were used to help me view the context in which I did my investigatory work by helping me to set my gaze. In this chapter, you will see the evolution of my thinking tools as building blocks that take into account my identity as a Black woman and as one who desires to make connections the cultural wealth I possess.

Cultural Capital & Community Cultural Wealth

Although Black teachers and administrators are rare in K-12 education, I believe that leveraging community cultural wealth that affinity groups provide will give them a sense of belonging and will support their job satisfaction, resulting in retention in their roles as educational leaders. Community cultural wealth is also known as cultural capital because it has value in social settings and can help those who leverage it to navigate predominantly white settings.

In the 1970s Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, established through his research, the idea that cultural capital is transferred within social settings, and it confers power and status to determine what is legitimate knowledge while also determining one’s position in that setting. Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, and Freitas (2010) and Yosso (2005) offer a critique of Pierre Bourdieu who argued that the knowledges held by middle- and upper-class families are capital that is valuable in a stratified society. If someone is not born into a middle- or upper-class family (i.e., with cultural or economic capital), one could still access these knowledges through school (Yosso, 2005). Bourdieu advanced the
notion that some people (including working class or people of color) do not have the capital needed to succeed in society. Yosso (2005) argues against this notion and defines community cultural wealth as "an array of knowledges, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and used by Communities of Color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).

Bourdieu’s use of cultural capital provides a great argument for the need to diversify literature and research. His voice alone, leaves us with the thought that only the affluent have cultural capital because they have economic capital. The working class in this case is coded language for people of color and Bourdieu is saying that they do not have what they need to be successful in society because they do not have economic capital. If the Tara Yosso’s of the world were not publishing their research and adding their voice to academia, we would be left with Bourdieu’s analysis which dismisses and denies the skills and abilities that communities of color possess that help them thrive in the midst of racism and oppression.

One study (Achinstein, 2008) examined cultural capital with regards to the retention of teachers of color found that:

the predominant reason that “movers” gave for changing schools related to unsupportive organizational contexts, which included a lack of multicultural capital as reflected in low expectations or negative attitudes about students of color, lack of support for culturally relevant or socially just teaching, and limited dialogue about race and equity in the school. Interestingly, all the movers went to other schools serving non-dominant communities. This suggests that the retention of teachers of color may be affected by the interaction of the humanistic
orientation of some teachers of color and the presence of multicultural capital in the schools where they work (Achinstein, 2008, p. 1516).

This study is a critique of Bourdieu’s cultural capital because it makes a case for multicultural capital. Teachers of color are watching how the white adults with whom they work, regard their students of color. If their white counterparts do not have high expectations of the students, they probably won’t have high expectations of them as educators. If the white educators are uncomfortable talking about race and using culturally responsive practices, Black educators know that they will not feel a sense of home at that school and as a result would move to a school where people of color are the majority. Educators of color are looking for places to work that affirm their cultural wealth thereby affirming the value they bring to the workplace. It is important for educators of color to leverage the wealth they possess because it benefits their students and supports their success in academic spaces.

Yosso's Cultural Wealth Model examines six forms of cultural capital that students of color experience in college: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant. I will use this model as the lens for my research which seeks to make connections to all six forms of cultural capital as they relate to the power of affinity groups, finding a sense of belonging and how they affect job satisfaction.

Yosso (2015) defines aspirational capital as the ability to see beyond the current circumstances and to sustain hopes and dreams for the future amidst real and perceived barriers. There are lots of roadblocks that come my way that intend to discourage me and although those roadblocks appear bigger than they actually are, I hold onto my ambition and purpose to make a difference in my school district and community. There is a
proverb in the Bible that says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but when longing is fulfilled, it is a tree of life (Proverbs 13:21). As a school administrator, I am motivated by my hopes and dreams to make positive changes in the lives of young people. Staying connected to my vision and experiencing success is one of the ways I am encouraged to remain in leadership. My success is what supports my job satisfaction because I am making strides towards accomplishing my own professional goals.

*Linguistic capital* is the intellectual, social and communication skills attained through a particular language, history, and experience. Dr. Jamila Lyiscott’s TEDTalk© (2015) is a reminder of the various ways speaking English provide social clout in a particular context. Black language is an example of linguistic capital because it has a history deeply rooted in the Black community and is how we relate to one another as people who have had similar life experiences. My linguistic capital offers me access into many communities as someone who is bi-lingual because I can find social well-being within diverse communities. Yosso also links this to the gift of storytelling to linguistic capital as it requires creative use of language which includes voice inflection, narrative crafting, and public speaking. We make connections through our storytelling as we either echo common experiences or enlighten others towards new experiences.

*Familial capital* is the cultural knowledge and nuance obtained from family and community. My *familial capital* at home provides a firm foundation in uncertain times. The community that I call family is not just those to whom I am related by blood but those who have earned that position in my life based on the values and beliefs we share. The familial capital that I have, provides me with a sense of home and safety. There is an understood culture of trust and loyalty that gives me confidence to navigate the nuances
of life. As a member of a family whose faith is grounded in Christianity, I am used to the
cultural practice of looking to God for approval and sustenance.

*Resistance capital* is the inherited foundation and historical legacy of
communities of color and marginalized groups in resisting inequality and pursuing equal
rights. My resistance capital refers to the knowledge and skills that are fostered through
oppositional behavior and that help me challenge inequality. When I am faced with
opposition, I am reminded of what my ancestors survived and the legacy that I am for
them. I believe I was born with resistance capital because I inherited it from my ancestors
who survived slavery.

*Social Capital* is leveraging existing community resources and connections in
building a network in support of your goals. A significant part of my job is forming
community partnerships so that we can work together to support our students. Since I am
a member of the community in which I work, I am familiar with many of the community
groups within my city. Many community leaders were involved in my being hired, so
they have become a network of support for me and the work of my department. My
*social capital* helps me be effective in my work because it requires the skill to leverage
relationships and to build community to support common goals.

*Navigational capital* is the ability to maneuver through systems and institutions
that historically were not designed for me. This form of wealth can be acquired by
watching the interactions of people to observe what works and what doesn’t in certain
situations. Navigational capital is what supports my ability to negotiate ways of being in
a predominantly white institution. I have been able to observe what behavior is
acceptable in certain settings and I have made decisions about my actions and what
cultural mindsets I will either interrupt or maintain.

Taking up this theory has been a tremendous support to me because it affirms the
various skills that I possess and what I rely on to persist in the work I do. The use of this
theory is referred to as wealth because it is a fund from which I draw to gain strength
amid oppression. Using my experiences, my thoughts and reflections as data, places
value on who I am and the story I need to tell which acts as a counter-story to the
hegemonic narrative in which I’ve been indoctrinated. Affinity groups center around
having a common story and I expect my research to demonstrate how affinity spaces will
further enhance my ability to capitalize on cultural wealth and to help others connect with
theirs. Through lens of community cultural wealth along with the following two thinking
tools, I was able to locate narratives on the maintenance of white supremacy culture,
racial dilemmas, and the power of performative arts, to name a few. These tools were
used as a set to give me a more comprehensive view of the data I collection. As you
continue to read, you will become more familiar with my gaze and why I made some of
the decisions I made with regards to the prioritization of narratives I located.

**Historical Womanist Theory: Re-visioning Black Feminist Thought**

As a Black woman, I have had challenges connecting to the thought of being a
feminist. Although I believe in equal rights for women which is foundational to
feminism, I did not feel that the quest for equal rights included me. To find a home in a
theory that better described my lens, I found historical womanist theory.

Rousseau (2013) developed historical womanist theory (HWT) in an effort to
provide a more comprehensive look at Black feminism by synthesizing key features of
relevant theories (womanist theory, material feminism, Black feminism and critical race theory) to examine the complexities of the Black female experience.

As perennial laborers within the racialized patriarchy of a capitalist structure, Black women experience ongoing historical oppressions that persist into the 21st century. Black women are vilified for both how they are perceived to relate to the political economy, as well as for their actual roles within the economic structure as: (1) reproductive laborers; (2) biological reproducers; and (3) manual laborers (Hancock, 2004; Rousseau, 2009).

Using HWT as a lens provides a more accurate description of the various perspectives that I hold which speaks to my womanhood, my blackness, and my ability to critically examine practices to call out inequities. Although it acknowledges the vilification of Black women, it limits my role to a reproduction and labor. I am more than that. I am a woman with complex layered identities but I do not see them as a deficit or something that relegates me to a lower status. I needed a theory that married my complexities to the cultural wealth I possess that helps me navigate a society that may see me through a negative lens.

**Black Womanist Cultural Wealth Theory**

Research offers an opportunity to connect with the epistemologies of others. We have often seen research done through the perspectives of the dominant culture, however, what is often missing in those epistemologies is race or the perspectives of marginalized groups. As a result, we have seen the rise of research using other theoretical perspectives like LatCrit (to represent the Latino perspective), DisCrit (to represent the perspective of those with special needs), and BlackCrit (to represent the perspective of Black people) to
make connections in research to the identities of minoritized groups. There is a proliferation of these Crit theories because they represent a focus on the lived experiences of these groups that have not been represented and theorized.

My research addressed how race and cultural wealth played a role in my own epistemology resulting in the development of my own thinking tool that I called Black Womanist Cultural Wealth Theory (BWCWT). BWCWT is a framework that makes use of the principles of historical womanist theory which embeds the tenets of womanist and critical race theories while including the tenets of community cultural wealth as a means of resilience in the face of such conditions. Although womanist and critical race theories acknowledge the complexities of race and gender in the context of the political and the social, they fail to address the resilience that Black women often possess. The epistemology of autoethnography as the theory of knowledge requires the taking into account the researcher in the context of time and space. As a tool for my research, it was important to facilitate the evolution from simply observing in time through a particular lens to using a theoretical tool to support my resilience over time in the various contexts of my research. Black Womanist Cultural Wealth Theory allowed me to use a more comprehensive approach to this study by viewing what is true to me through the lens of womanist and cultural race theories while also helping me to leverage my own personal capital.

As a Black woman, I have been raised around and have been a possessor of cultural wealth as a result of my upbringing. I have been endowed with ways to survive a world that has not always had my best interest at the center. I put to use the theoretical framework below to support the choices I make in this study. The partnership of
historical womanist: re-visioning Black feminist thought with community cultural wealth theory naturally developed into Black Womanist Cultural Wealth Theory. Figure 7 below is a graphic representation of the foundational understandings of historical womanist theory and how this version of re-visioning the Black feminist thought calls in both race and identity as a lens to research while placing value on who I am and the cultural wealth I possess.

Figure 7 – Black Womanist Cultural Wealth Theory

![Diagram of Black Womanist Cultural Wealth Theory]

In the next chapter, I provide further insight into my research lens influenced by my identity and experienced within the research context. This chapter documents how I collected and made sense of the data and explains how my gaze affected my analysis.
CHAPTER IV
WAYS OF KNOWING AND DOING

Context

This six-month study took place from May 2022 through December 2022 and was originally proposed to take place within my workplace which can be described as an urban K-12 public school district. My student population is racially diverse with most students identifying as Black (African American, Haitian, and Cape Verdean). The Haitian and Cape Verdean communities are some of the largest in the country. Other cultural communities we serve include people from Puerto Rico, Guatemala, Peru, Ecuador, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic. There are small Asian, Native American, and white communities while most of the administrators and teachers identify as white.

Although most of the study focused on my experiences at work, the nature of an autoethnography caused me to do a lot of reflection in my personal space at home and at church. I attempted to create clear boundaries between these two spaces, however, autoethnographic work is very personal and data are always being created. According to Ellingson and Sotirin (2020), the researcher self-as-data includes whatever becomes significant in the researcher’s lived experience: thoughts, memories, perceptions, dreams, emotions, behaviors, relationships, identities, events, situations, stories, discourses, and larger social, cultural, and historical contexts. Throughout this study, I explored what connections I could make to existing literature as well as to what I deemed significant based on what was important to me. On several occasions, I found it necessary to connect a memory that was outside of this scope because it provided context to how I perceived a
particular experience. The goal was to draw on my immersive experience as I narrated what was significant in this context.

**The Researcher**

I am a proud descendant of Black women who were pioneers and who dedicated their lives to helping others improve the quality of their lives. My great-grandmother was the first Black female business owner in a major city in New England who purchased her own hair salon and cosmetology school in 1949. Her school was the only one to accept and license Black students. She was able to bring students from the Caribbean, especially Jamaica, to her school to train them in hairdressing so they could earn wages to support their families. Her daughter, my grandmother, was the first Black cosmetology teacher in our neighborhood and was able to take a chemistry class at an Ivy League college to certify the cosmetology school to use chemicals. Being able to take a class during this time in history was groundbreaking. They both traveled the world and instilled in me a love for people and cultures. My mother also traveled to Martha’s Vineyard and New York City as an extension of the school helping others open their own businesses. All of them were women who had a strong faith in God and who established strong connections to the community which helped them remain stable in times of adversity.

I am an ordained pastor who uses my spiritual capital as nourishment to feed my weary soul. I am a Gospel recording artist and have sung my frustrations away using worship as my medium to connect to God, the creator and sustainer of my peace.

I am a practicing Christian. I am that before I am Black and before I am a woman. The issue with being so bold about my faith as a believer in Christ and an ordained Pastor is that many people have not had positive experiences with “the church.” My “coming out”
as an ordained Pastor can make some people uncomfortable, and they will assume they have no sense of belonging with me. Jesus was always spending time and showing love to the marginalized. As a Rabbi, he wasn’t supposed to be around the dead, however, he went into a home with a dead child only to bring them back to life. He touched the skin of those with leprosy and they were instantly healed. He spent time with tax collectors, harlots and some tough characters who ended up being his closest friends. So, in doing the work I do, I am telling a counterstory to what has been told about Christians. The life I live is doing just as I’ve been taught in scriptures to do. For God so loved the world that He gave His only son for it so they would not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16 Bible). The motivation is love so that everyone can be reconciled to God. Restorative justice is a major tenant of EDI work, so it is all connected.

I remember when I attended Brandeis University for my undergraduate degree. Brandeis was and still is a predominantly Jewish institution steeped in tradition and values of social justice. As a singer and the president of the gospel choir, I was able to meet a lot of people who loved the sound of gospel music. This gospel choir helped me develop my deep roots in the Christian faith, but I always had a reverence for the Jewish faith because Jesus was a Jew. During my time at Brandeis, the university’s Jewish Rabbi, Al Axelrad and I developed a nice friendship. He was kind to everyone, had a great sense of humor and he would arrange his schedule to come hear me sing at our gospel concerts. I looked forward to seeing him because at the end of every concert, he would come up to me, throw his arms out to welcome a hug and tell me what a great job I did. He and I had two different faiths and there were places in our faith where our beliefs collided but what we did was find our common ground which was music. He loved the
passion with which I sang, and I loved his commitment to loving people. He is one of the reasons I have so much hope for this work. Many people think that discussing differences and race can divide people which is why former president Trump threatened to defund companies that provided professional development that discussed race. I believe we don’t have to agree on everything, but we can find common ground and belonging with each other if we are motivated to do so.

Purushothaman’s (2022) research anchors my thoughts around belonging. The deeper paradox is that the more we try to fit in, the more disempowered we become, and the more disempowered we become, the less we can feel true belonging. By working to fit into existing power structures and establishments, we lose a lot of what makes us who we are. Sometimes this can make someone like me feel empty, hollow, and diminished. Somehow amid a Jewish university where Christians were the minority, I still felt a sense of belonging and Rabbi Axelrad was going to make sure of it. My beliefs could be considered divergent in such an environment, but instead, the university was successful in communicating that all people were valued. This is the heart of the work of EDI. We don’t have to believe the same thing, share the same color, or have the same lifestyle but what we can do is find common ground and rally around that.

Just as I shared the story of my friendship with Rabbi Axelrad, it is important to share other unique stories because they give insight that can change mindsets. As a child, I looked forward to bedtime stories because it was an activity that allowed me to use my imagination and connect with the characters of the stories. Storytelling is how complex ideas are communicated so that the listener can easily access the message and the meaning. It is in the story that empathy is developed as we become vulnerable in small
spaces where we have meaningful conversations with people who are different from us. In the story we share our humanity in a way that is unique yet tangible and, as the listener or the reader bears witness, they can draw their own connections to me, as the storyteller. It is then that my presence in predominantly white spaces is more than what Chancellor (2019) refers to as tokenism and marginalization but instead an authentic connection is built.

I have traveled the world to places like Guatemala, Nicaragua and Australia supporting young people and education. I have been exposed to all types of people and cultures and the diversity of this world causes me to be in awe of our country’s potential. I see life through the lens of a mother who has strong pride in being Black and wants to help others connect with their own community cultural wealth. I get excited seeing others flourish in their gifts and finding fulfillment in their work and life purpose which is why it was important for me to do this study. I want other people to learn from my experience and, in applying my story to their context, I hope that they will be nourished, encouraged, and enlightened by what I have to say.

**Ways of Knowing**

**Rationale for Autoethnographic Study Design**

As I learned more about different variations of ethnographies as part of my coursework, I was drawn to autoethnographic research (Chang, 2008) that highlights three aspects that make autoethnography similar and different from other ethnographic research practices. First, the term “autoethnography” refers to the processes and products, just as ethnography does. Second, like ethnographers, autoethnographers attempt to achieve cultural understanding through analysis and interpretation. In other words,
autoethnography is not about focusing on self alone, but about searching for understanding of others (culture/society) through self. And lastly, autoethnographers use their personal experiences as primary data (Change, 2008, p. 48-49).

Autoethnography is a type of ethnography that has been described as a "...highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2000, p.21). This analysis lets you use yourself to get to culture (Pelias, 2003, p. 372). According to Adams et al. (2015), autoethnography is a qualitative research method that:

1) uses a researcher’s personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences; 2) acknowledges and values a researcher’s relationships with others; 3) uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as “reflexivity”—to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political; 4) shows people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles; 5) balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity; and 6) strives for social justice and to make life better. (Adams, et. al., 2015, p. 2)

The personal story of the writer is what gets documented, investigated, and analyzed through the reflection done through the writing and analysis. The process provides the writer with direction and purpose as a result.

Like an autobiography, this research method allowed me to write about my experiences in a particular social setting. I initially defined the social setting as work and connected my reflections about this setting to the cultural wealth that is located through
micro-interactions in the personal and professional settings within my surroundings. However, I expanded my scope to include my experiences at home and church because they have been spaces full of cultural wealth for me. I believed that my role as the researcher was not to get lost in the research but to find myself in the data making process as it related to that wealth. After documenting my encounters, I reflected on how my cultural wealth influenced the way I showed up in and experienced particular situations in my research setting.

Using this epistemology, I reflected on my personal experiences as data to describe, understand, and analyze the culture in which I work and how participating in affinity spaces affected me. I used my jottings to explore anecdotal and personal experiences that connected my autobiographical story to cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings within my social and cultural context. I made connections with my experiences and reflections to the research literature as well as the theoretical framework to support the insights gained and conclusions made. I was the focus of this study, and my reflections were based on how my layered identities and culture affected how I interpreted my experiences in the sociocultural setting of my research. I made sense of the data by identifying common themes in my notes. I reflected on how these themes showed up in the cultural context and how they influenced my ways of being and my understanding of the worlds in which I lived.

Like autobiography, memoir, and creative nonfiction, autoethnography actively and reflexively uses writing as an integral part of research and as a primary method of inquiry. In other words, autoethnographers invoke and use the discovery available in the writing process, using writing as a research practice that drives inquiry rather than as a
“mopping up” activity after research is conducted (Poulos, 2021b, p. 31).

Use of Conceptual Framework Graphic

The conceptual framework below (Figure 8) shows the ways of knowing and doing that I used to maintain the integrity of this study. Autoethnography centers on the study of self in a social context. I reflected on my experiences to make connections to my community cultural wealth. I analyzed the connections I made, made conclusions to articulate my findings and in the end demonstrated how community cultural wealth supported my resilience in the social context in which I studied.

Figure 8 – A Conceptual Framework

Autoethnography is educational research as expressed by Bochner and Ellis (2006) because the way of knowing”… shows people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live and what their struggles mean” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111). In doing so, people are not only building meaning in their lives, but through these evocative narratives, others may be able to reflect on similar experiences and then be able to do something beneficial for themselves and for others (Ellis, 2004). By writing an
autoethnography as a Black woman, I am decolonizing this research genre by sharing my own narrative and counterstory as I reflect on my positionality in culture.

**Ways of Doing**

**Data Making**

I used Ellingson’s and Sotirin’s (2020) approach to data making with regards to autoethnography and using self-as-data in my research based on the following:

Autoethnography is “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 733), conducting “cultural analysis through personal narrative” (Boylorn & Orbe, 2016, p. 17; Ellis, 2004; Goodall, 2000). Pelias (2018, p. 31) takes autoethnography as an organizing term for a set of assumptions and strategies that characterize research approaches relying on self-as-data including personal narrative, poetic inquiry, performative enactment, research confessionals, and reflexivity. (Ellison & Sotirin, 2020, p.122)

My data making was constructed through the writing of my experiences within the cultural context of my study. I did not merely self-report or tell a story of what I witnessed. The data making included creating a personal narrative of how my identity affected how I experienced the culture within the setting. This process of datafication required writing, reflecting on that writing, and writing again to narrate the interpretation of those experiences. Autoethnography affirms that self-as-data is not described but inscribed, not collected but performed, not separately analyzed but incessantly interpreted (Ellingson & Sotirin, p 110). As the autoethnographer I played various roles in data making as the performer of actions within the cultural context. As the researcher I was
the observer of that performance and as the autoethnographer, my role was to narrate that performance as the mediator between the narrator and performer. I was able to discover my location and identity within the research context as a rhizome having various tentacles connecting to the multiple categories of cultural wealth.

Data Collection

As I found myself in different settings during this six-month study, I was able to document my experiences, reflect upon them and categorize them into different themes so that the reader of my research could easily access the stories that needed to be told without the complication of sifting through my random thoughts and feelings. The various groupings of experiences are very distinct which required them each to have a notebook of their own to compare and analyze the various themes. The list of the seven distinct categories either reflects the details of what my job entails or speaks of an affinity group. They are shown below and described so that my research settings are clearly defined. The goal here is to give the reader insight into the purpose of this setting for the research. Specific examples will be given later in this chapter.

1. Home/Church – This is the affinity space that keeps me grounded. I feel safe and heard in this space. I can speak freely with the people in my household and in my closely knit church without judgement. I can bring an issue to the group and get some solid advice. Sometimes I am told that my thoughts are on point, and I am encouraged to continue to pursue an idea. Other times, my thinking is challenged, and I am given constructive feedback. In this group, I am not offended when there is disagreement because I know that whatever feedback comes, is given from a place of love and care.
2. Districtwide administrators-of-color affinity group – This is a group that I convene monthly to support those administrators of color in my district. There are eight administrators of color but only seven identify as such. There is one female principal who is bi-racial Cape Verdean and white. She is fluent in Cape Verdean Creole but only identifies as such when absolutely necessary. All the administrators struggle with leading white people and the tension they feel with being their authentic self and watering down parts of them so that white people can be comfortable around them.

3. Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Team – This group is made up of those who work in my office and who help me lead this work. Each of them had to grapple with their own sense of value and identity in predominantly white spaces so our office is a safe and brave space to have conversations that give us courage to challenge the thinking of others but also to challenge our own thinking of what we do and how we see ourselves in this social context.

4. Diversity, Equity & Inclusion - Job Alike Group (DEI-JAG) – I was invited to join a group with others who had similar job titles across the state. This group meets monthly and shares laughs, common stories, and best practices. Our goal is to organize into a group that is respected in New England for holding the powers that be accountable for inclusive practices for the sake of students. We also understand that we need support as individuals, and we make it a priority to create space to share our individual stories.

5. Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (MASS REDI) Affinity Group – This group, that met monthly,
came out of a statewide equity initiative on the heels of the murder of George Floyd to provide a space for Superintendents and those at the Executive level to have brave conversations about race in order to make changes that will benefit our students and staff. This group was broken into racial affinity spaces where we were able to speak freely about our frustrations, be empowered and professionally developed to return to our districts to make a positive impact. This group required an application process, so it was an honor to be chosen to participate.

6. University Affinity Group – To maintain confidentiality, I chose not to name the university however, it is a local private college that has a strong focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion for all their students. They provided a space to bring a problem of practice to the table so that the group could come together, and problem solve. I was often the one to bring a problem to the table because others weren’t as vocal. I also realized that I was solving my own problems as I verbally processed my issue and chose not to sign up for a second year with the group.

7. Assistant Superintendents Leadership Series – This is a group of newer Assistant Superintendents across the state. This group started in September 2022. We meet monthly to receive professional development on how to be more effective in our current roles and how we can begin to grow in our knowledge of equity, diversity, and inclusion work. I am the only person of color in this group of 20 people.

8. Influence 100 – This is a group that began in September 2022 and required an application process. This is the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) initiative to diversify the superintendency pool. Over the next several years, the goal is to have 100 superintendents that represent marginalized
groups. There were approximately 30 people chosen out of several hundred to participate in this program. I did not apply for this because I already had a lot on my plate, however, when the Department of Education noticed I was not on the list, they requested a meeting with my superintendent and me. They asked me to join the group because I shared a unique perspective on what they would be discussing with the other Influence 100 Fellows. I didn’t have to write an essay or get recommendations, I was “voluntold” to be in the group, and I am deeply honored that my name has been spoken in rooms I haven’t even entered yet.

9. The job – Although not an affinity group, this notebook represents my thoughts and reflections on the activities required with this job and how those activities have affected my perception of culture.

Using Freeman’s (2017) narrative inquiry, I recorded my experiences in these notebooks to include the context, the action, my point of view and the theme. Data collection can be messy and disorganized and as much as I wanted to yield to what had been done by other researchers, using multiple paper notebooks and coding “physical” papers, I was unsuccessful. As the researcher and author of this autoethnography, I needed to find a method that worked for me. I purchased multiple notebooks and had them color coordinated to match the various counterspaces in which I found myself, however I was unable to carry all those notebooks with me and was missing important data that was essential to this study. I realized that an electronic version of a notebook that was accessible on my phone, computer and any other mobile device would be more helpful, so I chose to use the password protected software application called Evernote © to capture the data as shown in Figure 9.
The left side shows the different notebooks I used to record my experiences. The right side shows the various entries I made in each of the notebooks. Each journal entry was posted in a specific notebook which included the date and the topic. There were a few entries that I started in the physical color-coded notebooks that I transferred into this electronic database so that it could be easily located if necessary. After typing the note in the electronic journal, I created titles for each of those experiences as well. To maintain privacy, I blackened some of the titles and had to recreate some of the stories using unrecognizable names. I wanted to make sure that the publishing of my work kept the private conversations and experiences with others confidential.
I also needed a way to code the various data to determine emerging themes. As I documented my experiences, I used tags so I could easily search words or phrases. For example, Figure 10 shows the tags for the letters B-H. I noticed that “belonging, credentialize and elite” were common words used in my entries. For example, as I reflected on the stories attached to the word elite and paired it with other words like “white fragility,” I created a theme called “white supremacy culture.”

I collected artifacts including agendas, presentations and other documents related to this study. I understood the importance of properly documenting my experiences while also safely storing the data to protect confidential and sensitive information. I made an average of three entries per week in the Evernote app which included photos, screenshots of social media, agendas, and photographs of other artifacts so they would be attached to my logs.
My reflections were based on how my layered identities affected how I interpreted my experiences in the sociocultural setting of my research. Each week, I reviewed my notes and artifacts to make connections with the literature as it related to my identity and subculture. I reflected on how these themes showed up in the cultural context and how they influenced my ways of being and understanding of the world in which I lived.

As a product of the collected data, I wrote vignettes as a form of storytelling to share the data in a way that is accessible to the reader. Some of the vignettes had to be reconstructed rather than omitted to tell important stories while also protecting the anonymity of others. Using vignettes is a powerful tool to communicate the complex ideas and experiences I may have during this study. According to Social Research Update (1999), vignettes generally fulfill three main purposes: 1) interpretation of actions and occurrences that allows situational context to be explored and influential variables to be elucidated; 2) clarification of individual judgements, often in relation to moral dilemmas; and 3) discussion of sensitive experiences in comparison with the ‘normality’ of the vignette. The vignettes throughout my report were used as a way of taking the reader with me on the journey of self-discovery in the hopes that my journey would offer valuable insight into the challenges of being in predominantly white settings and how to access cultural wealth as a tool of resilience.

I used the various principles of Black womanist cultural wealth theory as my lens to make sense of the data. The many layers of autoethnography include: the experiences, the jotting of the experiences, the reflection on and interaction with those experiences as data as well as connecting it all to the literature and its application within the setting. It
can be tempting to overanalyze the text repeating this cycle, which is why I established boundaries on my writing and the interpretation of meaning making in this process as being the producer and the product of this text. The boundary was to hold myself accountable to not repeat the cycle so I wouldn’t get lost in the interpretation.

**Data Analysis**

I used narrative analysis as my method to analyze the data. This theory emerged in the 1970s in fields such as philosophy, history, literature, and psychoanalysis (e.g., Dray, 1971; Kermode, 1979; MacIntyre, 1977). In the 1980s, there was an explosion in the world of psychology and in the 1990s ideas about the self, consisting of multiple “voices" in dialogue with one another (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978) became influential to narrative researchers (Josselson & Hammock, 2021). As one form of qualitative method in psychology, narrative analysis provides a window into meaning making as a fundamental process of human development. Narrative analysis investigates texts that tell stories about people’s lives, maintaining an analytic focus on the concept of meaning and how individuals position themselves in their worlds and make sense of themselves through stories (Josselson & Hammock, 2021).

According to Josselson and Hammock (2021), there are six key elements to narrative analysis. I will use the first five as the most relevant to my study: 1) *Research questions and design are concerned with meaning making* - Questions are constructed to be more specific and meant to answer “how” to understand the relationship among variables. 2) *Collection of rich, narrative data* - The researcher hopes to reach the participants’ construction of and understanding of their experiences in their own terms through the construction of stories then analyzing the narratives for personal meanings.
and cultural meanings and the interaction between the two. 3) A holistic, person-centered approach that emphasizes particularity and diversity is employed - the goal of narrative analysis is to provide a “thick description” of a phenomenon (Ponterotto, 2006). In that sense, narrative analysts serve more as documentarians of social life (as in a more constructionist epistemology) than scientists pursuing universal truths (as in a more post positivist epistemology). 4) Interpretation, induction, and discovery are centered over deduction and confirmation - Narrative analysis is inductive and seeks to discover something new and insightful rather than confirm the researchers’ preconceived notions. 5) Analysis of implicit and explicit meaning is blended - Narrative researchers position themselves to decode narratives to read beneath the text for implicit meaning making. As the producer and the product in an autoethnography, it is essential to create space and time in order to appropriately be reflective on the data that has been collected in order to protect its integrity.

**Researcher Reflexivity**

During the meaning making process, it was important to include, as the documentarian of the social context, my writing as a method of analysis. Research by St. Pierre (2005) reflects on the writings of Richardson and Deleuze and considers writing as analysis or the part of nomadic inquiry that is accomplished in the writing. For her, writing is thinking, writing is analysis, writing is indeed a seductive and tangled method of discovery. St. Pierre uses her writing as a method of data analysis by writing to think as she writes her way into particular spaces that she could not have occupied by sorting data with a computer program or by analytic induction (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 970). The datafication of my own experiences through writing helped me organize and
analyze my thoughts which in turn, gave me a deeper understanding of how I was
affected by the social context and how I perceived others.

Considering autoethnography is autobiographical, I had to make sure I
appropriately navigated personal vulnerabilities while making my research public. My
logs used real names for my own writing purposes, but this document only contains
pseudonyms to protect the privacy of others. My autoethnography was exempt from
needing informed consent, however, I made sure that the more personal stories about
events and people were unidentifiable as well.

In a classic essay about writing as inquiry, Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) speak
of qualitative inquiry as a compassionately ethical and creative process of hermeneutic
self-as-data. St. Pierre (2018) argues for writing as a nomadic, rhizomatic process of
becoming. Rather than writing the self, she advocates “thinking-writing” that is not
rigorous or reflective but risky, experimental, playful, and poetic. This method of
analyzing data provided the freedom to use unconventional means by which to
decolonize the canonical methods of research and data use by placing value on my
experiences as a Black administrator. At the same time, I am following a social science
format that asks for these certain segments in my dissertation to be recognizable. Feeling
this tension, I have decided to continue with some of the traditional segmentations of the
dissertation but using representations of my life in this format. This speaks to the
creativity of using this methodology.

In the next chapter, I will construct a collection of narratives and I will focus the
attention on the insights identified as a result of making sense of the data using my
thinking tools. I will center the rising themes and will analyze and reflect upon their personal and cultural meaning as they affect the equity work I do.
CHAPTER V
THEMES

Researcher’s Reflection on Themes

In this chapter, I will discuss my reflections on the data collected during this autoethnographic study. The data has allowed me to create a core narrative grounded in the stories I created from my observations and reflections. The focus has been on narrative rather than thematic inquiry because narrative allowed me to keep the stories intact rather than pulling pieces of data out of the story thereby disconnecting it to its context and positioning within its context. As I took this approach, this study revealed my tendency to examine issues of power, race, and white supremacy culture and how I was affected by them and how I coped with them. As I reflected on the data, I was left with certain questions which led me to do further research to understand how my experiences identified with the research of others. I shared some of that additional research in this chapter and explained how it provided context and meaning to my work.

When I was first hired in this role in June of 2021, I was the founding Executive Director of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, responsible for building a team of folks to address inequities of marginalized groups through curriculum changes, professional development for teachers and staff, the inclusion of youth and family voice in the needed changes in our district and to become a leader in the state to model this work for others. As the person leading this effort, I found that the pushback wasn’t just from the whites, but the discomfort of this work crossed racial lines and had diverse effects on individuals. There was no way to predict how one racial or marginalized group would react to race and equity work by simply making assumptions from the outside. There are reasons why
certain groups and individuals either champion, reject or are complacent towards racial equity work. There are nuances in every group that should be acknowledged and handled delicately so that people are not offended by the work but are challenged to what I consider renouncing ideologies that have served them well as individuals but have done a disservice to others.

A few months into my position, my team organized a virtual conference as an introduction to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) work and how it would impact teaching and learning as well as school climate and culture. We created a conference booklet that would support virtual learning for small group activities for those gathered at their school buildings as well as a glossary of terms to support the conversations they would have. Last year, we had two pages of EDI terms. On election day, November 8, 2022, we had the second annual Achieving Change Together (A.C.T.) conference for our 2,800 employees who chose from 60 in-person workshops facilitated by teachers and leaders. The work of EDI is always evolving and what was a two-page document last year, turned into a thirty-two paged document that had to be printed separately. It was important to create a shared understanding of terms grounded in research to reduce misunderstandings because of incorrect information. As I reflected on the growth of the work from one year to the next, I couldn’t help but be proud.

The weight of this job has been heavy, and I have been tasked to change an environment that has been created and has remained upheld by the dominant majority. Thinking empathetically, I could only imagine what that feels like for those who have been comfortable with the way things have always been and here I am, an insider of the community yet an outsider of the district saying, “Hey everybody what you’ve been
doing all these years is not enough.” I could imagine how offended I might be if someone came into my space and said something similar. I have asked myself how I would handle a white male coming into my space telling me that I needed to make some changes. I would immediately be offended and perhaps slow to cooperate because I feel I know what is best. I would hope that reflection would win over rebuff for the sake of the academic and emotional health of the students. My job should be done strategically and with care because talking about race, identity and marginalization is so personal.

The Bible in Proverbs 15:18 says, “A hot tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel.” As much as I am passionate and sometimes angry about the apathy and lack of urgency to change the learning environment for the students in my city, I have had to manage my emotions so that people can hear me rather than fear me. This job often requires the brokering of conversations between two opposing thoughts while maintaining objectivity even when foolishness raises its head.

I remember hearing some of the stories when we held our first conference. It was virtual because we were still dealing with the uncertainty of COVID. Teachers gathered in their school cafeterias, and I heard there was a group of teachers that turned their back towards the screen in protest. There was one teacher who wrote on the exit survey, “This was a waste of time. They spent two hours talking about how great they were.” This comment was in response to something I said in my opening comments about how people of color often feel the need to credentialize themselves in order to be accepted in these kinds of spaces. I said this to stress how important it was for everyone to feel welcomed and respected. What was a three-sentence introduction of the 4 members of my team felt like two hours of credentializing to that teacher. As I reflected on that moment, I
regretted that I gave that person a weapon to use against the work that he/she did not deserve. I gave that teacher a term to use without making sure they were mature enough for such knowledge. I realized I needed to work differently with larger groups and move at different speeds with smaller groups to gain traction.

Every incident I just mentioned involved anonymous people meaning I didn’t know their names, gender, or their race. This is important to note because there are many complex layers to this work. I want to avoid binary thinking that one group behaves badly while the other is often the victim of that bad behavior. I can’t assume that those who protested were all white and that all my supporters represent the BIPOC community. When my sons attended the school district, they experienced behavior from Black teachers that was demeaning and rude. Since I have been working there, I have met some fiery white people who are champions of anti-racist practices and bulldozers for the dismantling of white supremacy culture. This is important because in my interview for this job, I was clear that the end goal was towards healing and not division. I believe it was that statement that determined I was the right one for the job.

After completing my first year as Executive Director, my title was upgraded to Assistant Superintendent of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion which should signify the priority this work has taken in my district. This first year helped me to clarify the focus of my research. However, I found myself in the middle of several perspectives and ideologies and had to make decisions on what I would prioritize to stay focused. I found various groups regardless of race who were champions of racial equity and others who were not. Those who had no desire to become allies didn’t come out and say they were not supporters of racial equity, but their actions spoke for them.
I heard from one of the district leaders that about four hundred teachers were going to call in sick on the day of the A.C.T. conference because they didn’t want to participate. The day before the conference, another person came to my office to confirm that we would be taking attendance. She overheard a white teacher saying that they weren’t attending the conference because they weren’t interested in “this equity and diversity crap.” The white male teacher said where he lives, he just gets in his pickup truck and drives around with a gun which is how he handles race and diversity. He wasn’t planning to call out sick but would take the day off because he was convinced that no one would notice with such a large crowd attending. This teacher taught social studies to middle school kids which is a place where EDI work can really be done in a meaningful way if done right. This is an example of some of the opposition to EDI work that someone like me faces. I believe the root is fear because he wasn’t willing to give the day a try. There were a few teachers that left in the middle of a workshop because they felt uncomfortable but at least they gave it a try.

Despite the outliers, the day was amazing! Most of the attendees enjoyed themselves in the workshops, telling me how great their experiences were and how meaningful the day was to their personal growth. I saw people taking risks and trying different foods from the various ethnic food pop-up restaurants that represented the culture of the city. This job has its victories and its challenges, and it has been my priority to be in spaces that support my emotional and professional well-being so I can continue to make a positive impact.

Hereafter, I document my reflections grouped in the narratives and concepts I have located to highlight patterns that caught my attention during this study.
Protection of White Supremacy Culture

What is White Supremacy Culture?

You may have had a visceral reaction to this question depending on your perspective. You may be wondering where the conversation is going. When I first learned the phrase white supremacy culture (WSC), it made me nervous too. It made me think of the white supremacist group the Ku Klux Klan or the Skinheads. It gave me visions of white men in white robes and hoods burning crosses and hailing the confederate flag. That’s not what I'm talking about so please keep reading. I attended a conference in 2020 on dismantling white supremacy culture based on Tema Okun and Jones’ early 2001 research which later developed into the term being defined by Tema Okun in 2021:

White supremacy culture is the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of our groups (many if not most of them), our communities, our towns, our states, our nation, teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value, whiteness is value. It teaches us that Blackness is not only valueless but also dangerous and threatening. It pits other races and racial groups against each other while always defining them as inferior to the white group. (Okun, 2021, p. 4)

Okun’s definition of white supremacy culture emphasizes that this ideology is taught and baked into a culture’s thinking and way of being. It confirms the purposeful “baking” of beliefs, values, and norms that calls out whiteness as superior and that Blacks are to be fears. What is not explicitly said in Okun’s definition is that because whiteness is heralded as supreme, the closer one is to whiteness the more value one has. This could include the darkness of a person’s skin to the lightness of one’s hair, and this often pits
one racial group against another. Yet, in the end, the thought that all non-whites are inferior, remains at the core of WSC. I will give examples of ways this ideology is maintained in this section. Here is a graphic created by Okun and Jones (2001) to give a general understanding of the tenets of White Supremacy Culture (WSC).

As you look at this graphic, you may not see much wrong with the fifteen characteristics listed above because, as those socialized in American culture, we are used to seeing these tenets at play. What you are seeing is very rigid thinking and no room for diversity. When examining the power behind the various tenets of WSC, you need to understand the message behind the words that are used. For example, perfectionism assumes that there is a definition of perfection and someone gets to decide what’s perfect. A sense of urgency is set on someone’s time. Either/or thinking requires that someone decides what the choices are. Is there only one right way? The someone who decides whose written words have value enough to be worshiped is given that power. Okun
(2021) said, “My intention is to say that white supremacy culture trains us all to internalize attitudes and behaviors that do not serve any of us” (Okun, 2021, p. 4). The requirements that these tenets ask of us, are a burden that no one should carry. As an emerging scholar who is attempting to dismantle WSC, I am confronting the fear of open conflict, defensiveness, and the right to comfort. In the past when I have confronted someone about their biases, I have been disappointed to find that the person is more offended than reflective. On some occasions, the person has cried and then I was left with the burden to comfort them. As a Black person, I have been raised to make white people feel comfortable. I believe this is the generational trauma from slavery that remains a part of my DNA. Making the white master angry was followed by severe consequences. Based on conversations I’ve had with other EDI leaders of color, they have had similar experiences where the person they are confronting requires consoling and, in the end, we have to determine what will be more effective in the moment. My response is to show empathy but to keep pushing the person to reflect.

To understand white supremacy culture, we should first look at the roots of race as a construct. As early settlers came from Europe to what is now the United States, there was no such identity as white. Their identity was in their country of origin and their religion. They identified as French, Dutch, English and they were Catholic, Protestant or Puritan (Okun, 2021). However, feeling outnumbered by the Africans they enslaved and the Indigenous people of the land, they created an elite class of people under the category of “white” to maintain a hegemonic society. Okun’s (2021) website explains white supremacy culture and cites Kivel’s (2013) definition of hegemony as the predominant and pervasive influence of one state, religion, region, class, or group. A hegemonic
society functions not just to establish a homogenous way of thinking, but also to try to make any alternative disappear (Okun, 2021). Recent research by Saito (2020), gives us further insight into this concept:

The conflation of “American” with “White” in both law and popular culture has obscured the histories of varied European immigrant populations and the pressures they have felt to conform to a homogenizing norm, relinquishing their own stories as well as their cultures, languages, and other aspects of a distinct ethnicity. The racial privilege built into the dominant narrative masks the exploitation of white workers and leaves those who do not “succeed” in accordance with the expectations it creates to blame themselves or, as we have seen repeatedly, people of color for their failures. (Saito, 2020, p 34)

The tradeoff was that those from the European countries had to favor their whiteness over their country of origin and religion so that “white” people could be the majority. But in maintaining white supremacy culture everyone either loses themselves or the privilege of experiencing diversity. The language of white supremacy culture calls America “the melting pot.” Some Americans think they are embracing diversity and culture by saying that we are all one, however that is color blindness and if you don’t see my color, you don’t see me. I reject the melting pot idea because it rejects diversity. It causes the essence of my identity to disappear through assimilation. It’s an invitation for everyone to jump in the pot to lose themselves to be like the majority. I use the analogy of a salad bowl which embraces all kinds of colors, shapes, flavors, fruits, and vegetables and rejects the hegemonic idea of being boiled down to a pot of goulash!
You may have already noticed that I often capitalized the word Black and do not capitalize the word “white” unless I am using a direct quote or am referring to demographics. This move is intentional based on research documented in the Columbia Journalism Review. At the Columbia Journalism Review, “we capitalize Black, and not white, when referring to groups in racial, ethnic, or cultural terms. For many people, Black reflects a shared sense of identity and community. White carries a different set of meanings, capitalizing the word in this context risks following the lead of white supremacists” (Laws, 2020). I also agree with this rationale and for that reason, I am intentional about capitalization. As an emerging scholar who is decolonizing autoethnography, I need to emphasize the perspective and the voice of Black people, and I do so through my capitalization to internalize the power of my voice.

Throughout my administrative career, there has been an underlying tone calling to diminish the representation of my blackness to move higher up the corporate ladder. I’ll speak about this further in the chapter, but I also perpetuate white supremacy culture through my own internalized racism. I make certain choices about how I dress, how I speak, and even how I wear my hair to assimilate in spaces where I am the minority. My journey has been to push against white supremacy culture to “keep” myself and not participate in what I call the slave trade to succeed. My use of slave trade is purposeful because it connotes that I am the buyer and the property. In this exchange, I devalued my community wealth to fit in Eurocentric culture. This is an exchange I am not willing to make with myself, so I will remain vigilant.

I mentor a group of administrators of color across the state and I invited the president of the EDI affinity group as a guest. At the beginning of our meeting, I had
everyone introduce themselves and although he was Cape Verdean, our EDI affinity group president introduced himself as a recovering white supremacist. That may sound odd coming from a person of color, but he was making a point that all of us, regardless of race, can maintain white supremacy culture through our actions and ways of thinking because we have been indoctrinated in its ideologies as Americans. As a person that is trying to interrupt racist practices and interrogate marginalization, my actions can be seen as criticism against American culture. It is important to educate people, who do not understand equity work, that it is not anti-American. It is anti-racist. I love my country but to move forward, there are some painful and embarrassing issues we (Americans) should acknowledge in order to get to the healing that will allow for liberty and justice for all.

**You’ll Be Back – Still Influenced by England**

During this study, I watched the live play Hamilton: An American Musical which became one of the most critically acclaimed Broadway shows in history. The musical explores the life of Alexander Hamilton, a political figure during the beginning years of the establishment of the United States. Those who settled in the United States and were establishing a government, separated from King George III, and the British Empire. There is a song in the musical performed by Jonathan Groff entitled “You’ll Be Back.” Throughout the musical, King George III makes several brief cameo appearances, in which he treats the American colonies as a difficult lover (Sabel, 2022). One of the refrains gives us insight into the unhealthy relationship between the United States and England:
You'll be back, soon, you'll see
You'll remember you belong to me
You'll be back, time will tell
You'll remember that I served you well
Oceans rise, empires fall
We have seen each other through it all
And when push comes to shove
I will send a fully armed battalion to remind you of my love (Groff, 2015)!

A popular narrative on Twitter is that Groff drinks water backstage so he will spit during the performance invoking George III’s mania. Researchers looking into the monarch’s mental state spoke of his incessant loquacity and his habit of talking until the foam ran out of his mouth (Halleman, 2021). The actor’s depiction of King George speaks not only to his arrogance but also exposes several beliefs upheld by white supremacy culture including power hoarding, defensiveness, only one right way, I’m the only one and power hoarding.

White supremacy culture is so intertwined in American culture that although the early settlers parted ways with England, the ideals of this culture still stubbornly remain. The quest to break away from England meant to break away from power imbalance. Interrupting racism is about requiring those who have profited from it to break ties with ideologies that have served them well but haven’t served others well thereby creating an elite group while others are marginalized. This way of thinking is demonstrated in unexpected ways, and we can all fall victim to the triggers of racism that are pulled every day.
More than fifty languages are spoken in my district. I have witnessed people of color as well as white people being triggered when around other people who don’t speak English. They are threatened by not knowing what is being said and make the demand, “speak English, we're in America now.” But the language of English came from England and the original language of the United States should have come from its original inhabitants, the Native Americans whose language has had to be preserved by the natives at such a high cost. The song says, “You’ll be back,” but the evidence demonstrates that we never left that way of thinking in terms of power imbalance which is foundational to racism.

During my research, I found ways to take a mental break by playing games on my phone. There is one commercial that continues to come up which is for a game called Royal Match (Dream Games, 2020 – Figures 11 & 12).

Figure 11 – Royal Match  Figure 12 – Get the King to His Kingdom

The goal is to get the king back to his kingdom by matching colored jewels to create a bridge for him to cross over troubled water. If you are not able to match the jewels, the
king succumbs to danger. Again, the goal is to get the king back to his kingdom and to help him decorate his castle. I find it interesting that such a popular game focuses on something that the United States disconnected from so long ago. Did we really disconnect? The United States still worships royalty like a victim of abuse suffers from Stockholm syndrome. It romanticizes inequities. This is colonialism that profits from the exploitation of the colonies. I know these are harsh words, but this is one of those pain points that needs to be addressed honestly.

Our worship of royalty and elitism was even more evident with the recent death of Queen Elizabeth II and how people around the world including the United States were heartbroken at the reality of her death in September of 2022. The existence of the monarchy has been romanticized as a fairytale that is attainable when the very purpose of royalty is to create an elite society that romanticizes inequities. This is colonialism that profits from the exploitation of the colonies where some profit from the system while others are the product of the system and others are exploited by the system.

On November 30th, 2022, Prince William and Princess Kate Middleton visited Boston, MA. Boston Celtics Coach Joe Muzzulla was unimpressed with the Prince and Princess of Wales' appearance at his team's game, where they were booed and blasted with USA chants. At an after-game press conference, Muzzulla, 34, was asked if he had a chance to meet the visiting Royal Family, to which he replied: “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph? Oh no, I did not. I'm only familiar with one royal family. I don't know too much about that one,” he continued after a reporter clarified she was talking about the Prince and Princess of Wales (Morik, 2022). At the time I thought that comment was insensitive considering how fond so many of people are of royalty.
As a Black little girl, I grew up wanting to be like the white princesses because I was never taught that there were African princesses that looked like me. Little did I know at that young age, I was exchanging my identity for an unattainable fantasy. As I reflect on my younger years, I don’t believe I wanted to be white. I wanted the world to see me as beautiful and protect me as they did the white princess in many of the fairytales. Disney has capitalized on the storyline of the damsel in distress who just needs a kiss from her true love to become the princess she was born to be. It’s romantic! It sells!

Now I understand that Muzzula’s sentiment comes on the heels of the Netflix documentary about the Principals Harry and his wife Meghan giving their candid account of why they decided to step away from their royal duties. Meghan experienced racism at the hands of her in-laws and the royal institution. As Harry witnessed firsthand how poorly the media treated his wife, he realized that he could no longer stay in England. To protect his wife, Harry decided to take his family out of the country, leaving his title and all that came with it. This was important to mention as someone who, like Meghan, has ancestors that were victims of slavery perpetrated by those from England and other European countries. In this case, Harry decided to break away from a culture that served him well financially, but it did not serve his wife or other people outside the royal family well. As I reflected on the Netflix series and the current events, I wished that all of us would be so brave and willing to set aside ideologies that don’t serve others well.

As you are reading some of this, you may be a fan of the royal family and are starting to get turned off because of what the core of this narrative is saying. Equity work is messy, personal, and emotionally charged. In choosing the stories I would tell, I almost decided to delete this entire section, but I felt it was important to keep because these
stories provide a backdrop for our conversations about race and biases. The two previous sections of this chapter serve as supporting cast members to this next section. My hope is that you will see how our socialization influences our biases and how those biases affect the decisions we make.

**Why Are All These Blondes Sitting Around the Table?**

Researcher, Beverly Tatum (2003), wrote a book entitled, *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?: and other conversations about race.* Tatum’s book encourages us to have discussions on race and dominant cultures. As I did my research, the title of her book often crossed my mind and caused me to ask the question, “Why are all these blondes sitting at the table?” I was making some observations and saw a pattern amongst women in educational leadership and started to wonder if anyone else observed what I did. As I attended a women’s leadership conference this past winter, I asked a Black colleague sitting with me if she had observed that there was an unusual number of blondes in attendance. She noticed that at least half of the women at the conference were blonde and we wondered if this was a real pattern that needed to be explored.

On July 25, 2022, I was on an interview panel to hire an assistant principal at one of our schools. Out of the nine people on the panel, seven were blonde; eight if I counted the lady who had blonde streaks. All the candidates were blonde except for one Black woman. It was apparent that the hiring manager had already made his choice based on the post interview conversation. In this case, the Black candidate was not the best, but his first choice was our last choice. She had no leadership experience, and it was evident that she had no vision to improve the school. The hiring manager was going to choose the person he was most familiar with; not the most qualified. What I appreciated the most
about this group of interviewers was that I was not the lone voice speaking up for the most qualified. We all had our opinions and agreed that his first choice was our last and, in the end, he chose the right candidate…who happened to be blonde.

To further understand the patterns I was seeing in hiring blonde female educators and leaders, I decided to locate literature to either confirm or challenge what I was observing. According to research (Zetlin, 2016), if you want to be a successful woman, you can have any hair color you like. But if you crave a leadership position, such as elected office, CEO of a large company, or head of a prestigious organization, you should dye your hair blonde if it isn't that color already. Only 2% of the world’s population has naturally blonde hair. That percentage goes up to just 5% in the United States. Zetlin’s research further revealed that 35% of female senators are blonde and although the sample size for female CEOs of S&P 500 companies is admittedly small, 48 percent—nearly half—are blonde.

Most natural blondes in the world are centered around northern Europe. Scandinavian countries like Norway, Sweden, and Finland have the largest number of blondes in the world at a whopping 80 percent of their population. Jennifer Berdahl and Natalya Alonso, professors at the University of British Columbia's Sauder School of Business, have conducted research on this phenomenon, and in an interview with Inc. explained that women in roles that require a stronger, more authoritative presence have better rapport with males if they are blonde because dark-haired women are often labeled as cold and heartless for acting like a leader, whereas blondes are perceived as "soft, friendly, and not-so-smart underneath, even as they issue commands" (Width, 2022). This research confirmed that the invisible enemy that I fight against every day as a
Black female leader with black hair and dark eyes, is the preference for blondes because of the stereotypes that exist.

As I assert myself as a leader, I can be misunderstood as people may view me through stereotypes. According to Width (2022) research, women in positions of great authority are often caught in a bind. If they adopt a stereotypically female style—friendly, conciliatory, and non-confrontational—they aren’t seen as unfeminine, but they aren’t respected as strong leaders either. If they adopt a more stereotypically male stance, being forceful and authoritative, they may be respected, but they risk being labeled as *bitches* or *ball busters* (Zetlin, 2016). Basically, women are playing into blonde stereotypes because it’s the easiest way to garner respect in the male dominated workplace. Berdahl explained to The Huffington Post, “If the package is feminine, disarming, and childlike, you can get away with more assertive, independent and [stereotypically] masculine behavior” (Width, 2022).

In an interview, a blonde woman can be seen as a great leader without being a threat to the men in the room AND they check the box for those districts or companies that are trying to diversify. I am often the voice of reflection for the interview team when I hear comments about a Black female candidate when they deem her as “overconfident” when she has all the skills needed for the job. In contrast, I feel that some of the white women that have interviewed for leadership roles are “overconfident” thinking they are entitled to get a particular position based on who they know and not necessarily the skills they possess. This happened five times during my study, especially when the candidate was internal.
On July 26, 2022, an internal Black female candidate reached out to me to get feedback on her interview. She already knew she didn’t get the job and thought the reason was because she got emotional at the end as she recalled some of the work she had done with students. My honest feedback to her was that she was too humble, and her answers were not thorough enough. In her effort to be humble, she didn’t clearly articulate her ability to do the job well. She needed to speak as a leader and not someone who is striving to get there.

We often credentialize ourselves to convince white people and even people of color that we have earned our positions, but we cannot be too confident, or we will appear arrogant. I used the term “we” because although this is my autoethnography, I know that I am not alone based on the multiple conversations I have had with other Black women that have no dates. I cannot speak for every Black woman, and I could have said that this has been an experience for “many,” but I felt that even that term would diminish the impact that I believe this has had on Black women as a group.

I remember years ago; I was trying to hire my Assistant Director and the post interview debrief went like this:

Me: *So, what did you think about the third candidate? I have my opinions, but I want to hear from you first.*

Bill: *I think she was arrogant. She walked in here with her fancy suit as if she was Miss Know-it-All.*

Jane: *Yeah, she was too overconfident for me. I wish she was a bit humbler because she had the skills for the job.*
Me: *I can’t believe what I’m hearing. Were we all sitting in the same interview? How can you totally discount the fact that she has all the skills needed for this job because you are intimidated by her confidence.*

Jane: *Renée, wait... calm down. Yes, she has the skills, but would you be able to work with her?*

Bill: *She needs to be tamed a bit.*

Tracy: *I think she is a perfect fit for you, Renée. I think she would really compliment you and you’d be a great team.*

Me: *Thanks, Tracy. I agree with you but Bill and Jane, I can’t believe what I just witnessed. We’re done here. I’m making the decision so no thanks for your opinions.*

I called my supervisor at the time and was literally in tears because of how disappointed I was to see how blinded they were by their biases. He asked me if my committee was diverse. I thought I would be enough, but he reminded me that some people are stuck in their ways and have negative perceptions of strong Black women. I vowed to create more diverse hiring committees and I offered the person the job. Unfortunately, she declined the position. I’m certain she read the body language of Bill and Jane and determined this wasn’t a good fit for her.

I find myself in similar situations as the woman we interviewed. I have to balance how I present myself in various settings. I have a lot of knowledge, especially because of my research but I am strategic about when I play a lead role and when I follow. I am also careful not to downplay my leadership abilities to make others comfortable. That would
be doing a disservice to myself and the work I set out to do. The balancing act is another example of the complexities of this job because negotiating with ourselves about how we show up in a space is continuous and exhausting.

**Why Are We Missing from Leadership?**

As I reflected on the hiring panels I have participated in, I started to look for research to see if people of color were getting hired in other districts. The previous section could explain as I mentioned in my first chapter, why we don’t see many people of color at the highest levels of education. Most superintendents are white males, and most teachers are white females so if I were a white female, I would have lots of questions too. I can have my “interview panel” experiences but the data fills in the blanks.

Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, mentioned earlier in the first chapter, conducted a study to examine the power gap with regards to gender and racial disparities in K12 leadership in Massachusetts. It is important to look at this data because it speaks to the social and cultural context in which my position as an assistant superintendent resides. Although the district showed its commitment to me and this work with the job title change, I am still rare in the overall context. Therefore, it is essential to find a place where I call home, where I can leverage community cultural wealth to be sustained in my work. In these spaces, I am like the school committee member I mentioned earlier, looking for kinship in my Wellesley experience when I often am the one and only.

In education, as in our society, notions of leadership tend to be deeply ingrained with white dominant, patriarchal norms, which often supersede the credentials,
experience, and/or competence an individual brings to their job. K-12 leaders interviewed for this study report that these norms serve as barriers for women and people of color seeking to obtain district leadership positions (Rennie Center Report, 2021, p 14).

One woman superintendent was quoted in the study saying, “As a Black woman you must work twice as hard as the average white person. You are not going to make it by doing what everyone else is doing. I have gotten here through extreme hard work, above and beyond what is considered normal.” In addition, many districts struggle to retain teachers of color. Through our interviews, women of color reported that experiences of discrimination, both towards them and towards students of color, have pushed them out of schools. This reduces the pipeline of women of color to serve in leadership positions (Rennie Center Report, 2021, p. 14-15).

I participate in an Assistant Superintendent Leadership Series that meets monthly. One of the ice breaker activities at our first meeting was folding a piece of paper into six squares and writing the six most important parts of my identity in each square. The conversation unfolded like this:

**Leader:** Now that you’ve filled in your squares, I want you to rip off the top left square and tell us what it says. This represents the part of your identity that you must give up when you enter certain spaces.

(After everyone shared, they asked for reflections on the activity)

**Me:** Leaving pieces of my identity at home before entering most of the spaces I enter is what I normally have to do. I’m a Black, woman who’s a mom, a leader, a Christian and a friend. I have to leave some of these identities at home, so I don’t make
other people feel uncomfortable. I make choices about this every day and even in every situation. (In an effort to cut the heaviness of the exercise with humor, I said) I’m just glad you didn’t have us guess which square belonged to who because my square said “Black” so since I’m the only one here that would have been too easy for the rest of you.

The room erupted in laughter. As I reflected on that activity, I questioned whether I brought in humor because the activity was uncomfortable for me or if I took the opportunity to have a little fun. I have often been careful to appropriately use humor to disarm people as an olive branch for a tough conversation. I knew that being the only Black person, I would need to break down some barriers. I knew there was a lot that I brought to the conversation, and I knew there was a lot I could learn from them. I knew that I could benefit from them as thought partners as I navigated the task of systematizing my work in the district. I needed to learn from them, how can someone like me break down barriers to collaborate with someone like them. Humor was my tool of choice and since then, I have felt a sense of belonging with this group

**The White Tap**

There is a phrase that we use within the Black community called “the white tap” which simply describes how we see whites favoring each other over other racial groups for promotions and opportunities. On October 12, 2022, I attended a discussion with district leaders. I was surprised that there was a lot of focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion topics because 70% of the attendees were men and out of the remaining 30%, there was only one other Black female who was one of the few superintendents in the state. As the meeting ended, the man who was leading the session told everyone that a few vacancies needed to be filled and to think about their network and “tap a friend” so
they could apply. This statement could have been alarming if I didn’t believe they had a commitment to diversity. This confirms that those we look to hire are often people that we are familiar with which, if not careful, we can close off an entire group of people.

I was able to reflect after the meeting about my initial feelings. When he said to “tap a friend,” I automatically thought something bad was about to happen. I am often one of the few, if not the only person of color in a space like this so I am sometimes on guard. I don’t want to be hurt in settings like this. I want to belong, but I am reserved in order to preserve myself. In this context, it would have been easy to feel like I didn’t belong, however this group was very welcoming and was resolved to make positive change in the state. The work of my department is to hire and retain people from diverse backgrounds. The “tap,” with that as a priority, can create a learning environment that creates a sense of home for our students and staff.

**Just a Little Respect**

Research by Degruy (2005) states that:

> There is no single prescription for protecting people against racism, bigotry, and hatred; there is no one-shot inoculation against intolerance or fanaticism. However, it appears that educating people to understand that these things do exist, and about the manner in which they are manifested, can be helpful to those who come face to face with them. Racial socialization can be a process whereby individuals are taught how to identify and deflect the potential negative effects of assaults, overt as well as covert (DeGruy, 2005, p. 182).

What I am learning from all that I am reading and experiencing is that there is something missing in our education. Looking at racism and microaggressions and racial
and ethnic biases, I realize that what is missing in education is Black dignity. The curriculum used in our classrooms, the way that Blacks are treated in the educational system by being suspended at higher rates, the disproportionality of referrals to special education and so much more are proof of the daily assaults to dignity they endure. Most IEPs for my students of color are not intellectual but rather behavioral in nature. Could it be that they are disengaged and have behavior issues because teachers are not appropriately trained to work with students of color? Could they be reacting to the daily assaults on their dignity they receive as a result of negative interactions with their teachers? Could they be disengaged because the curriculum is harmful and does damage to their soul causing them to disconnect in the name of self-preservation?

As part of the retention of employees of color, my office established racial affinity groups to give them a counterspace to the predominantly white spaces in which they work. Those who have participated in the affinity groups have reaped the reward of belonging to a group that centers around common experiences. I have reaped the reward of being a person who understands and affirms them. Since I hosted the first meeting on February 11, 2022, for the administrators of color affinity group, I’ve been able to establish trust such that many of them call me for advice or to simply vent about the various issues they face. On July 26, 2022, I received a text from one of them named David addressed to me and Philip, a member of the same affinity group. This is an older Black male who wears long manicured locs, and always dresses professionally. The text is as follows:
David: *This just happened, and I thought I should share. One of my students said how did you become an administrator... don’t you have a record? I asked why she said that... she said I looked like someone who had a record!*

Philip: *Maybe the three of us should have lunch sometime before school opens in September? We need ongoing support and mentoring. We will have to prove for the rest of our lives that we are “good black men” “qualified enough” to do the job. Blessings!*

Me: *Say what? I can’t believe she said that. Yes, let’s get together on Friday.*

This text message conversation is evidence of the challenges of belonging in predominantly white spaces where whites hold most of the leadership roles. EDI work is important for the students to see people of color in leadership roles to prepare them for real life experiences. As I reflect on my own position in the district, it is easy to feel lumped into people’s assumptions about who I am and what I can do.

On Dec. 8th, I started an affinity group for Principals/Assistant Principals of color to give them the opportunity to network to find a counterspace in each other. One of the female participants sent me an email saying how much she appreciated having a safe space to be herself. A week later, a Black male principal who attended this same session was in the news because he was the target of threatening racist graffiti in one of the boy’s bathrooms. The words “We want a white principal” were written on the wall with a picture of a man being hung with his name written next to it. He has been supported by his superintendent, parents, and students but this doesn’t diminish the impact it has on him.

This incident is confirmation that fear is manifested through acts of racist aggression in protest of our presence in schools. The graffiti comes 13 months after students staged a walkout over a student’s racist social media video. The video posted on Snapchat showed a student using hate speech and uttering racial stereotypes. Superintendent Mulvey said the district has worked hard to diversify its staff and make
it more reflective of the student body. “Principal Ford has been spearheading that effort, another reason why the targeted graffiti is so upsetting”, Mulvey said (Lambert, 2022). Sometimes the aggression comes from the adults through assaults on our dignity through micro and macro aggressions or flat-out defiance of our leadership. Sometimes, as in this incident, racial aggression comes at the hand of white students. I wonder if they are concerned about being outnumbered.

In recent research from Purushothaman (2022), we see this being addressed. To avoid causing “discomfort” to our coworkers, we try to tamp down what hurts us. The day after George Floyd’s death, many Black employees felt they had to start yet another workday “as usual,” and many Asian women weren’t sure if they could bring up anti-Asian bigotry and violence that occurred in 2020 and 2021. I can’t forget that inclusion work includes me. It includes my whole identity, whatever that is.

Hiding pieces of myself or squelching my disdain for injustice for the comfort of others is torture because as I deny the various parts of myself, my own self-worth deteriorates as if I am not good enough to champion the cause of diversity and inclusion. As Ella L. J. Edmondson Bell and Stella M. Nkomo wrote in their introduction to Race, Work and Leadership: New Perspectives on the Black Experience, “Employees do not leave their race or racial beliefs at the entrance when they enter the workplace. “Yet we are expected to bottle up emotions, get the work done, and pretend that the constant news doesn’t frighten and anger us (Purushothaman, 2022). Black womanist cultural wealth theory is a reminder of who I am and the value I carry.

As I navigated the nuances of this job, I had to focus on how I can “keep” myself instead of “losing” myself. As I began to build the office of Equity, Diversity, and
Inclusion, I found myself making some compromises that I later corrected. As a practicing Christian, I didn’t often talk about my faith in an effort to provide space for others. Considering Christianity is the dominant faith in our country, I often left that part of me out of the conversation. In my effort to make people feel welcomed and trying to make them have a sense of belonging, I often felt like an outsider in this area. I made these decisions because I didn’t feel free to speak about who I was because I didn’t want anyone to develop any preconceived notions about how I thought and what I believed because they have had negative experiences with “the church”. But in essence by not speaking, they could make assumptions about what I believed through my silence.

Reflecting on this study, reminded me of research I had done earlier in my career about the effects of racism and microaggressions on students of color that mirror closely to the experiences of adults of color in those same settings. Although the effects of racism and microaggressions are similar, as an adult of color leading the work that interrupts this behavior, the personal penalty lands differently. In today’s political climate, it is more important than ever to have a critical eye on what is happening in certain institutions in the United States. Considering our political climate is becoming more hostile towards those of the global majority, it is important not to take what is reported through various mediums at face value. It is essential that we look at information critically and ask questions about current practices, specifically educational practices, to determine the best strategy needed to interrupt these harmful ideologies.

The article opens with two epigraphs by psychiatrist Chester Pierce about this under-researched social problem. These harmful ideologies manifest themselves in the form of microaggressions and assaults on dignity. Pierce, et. al (1978) defines them as
subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are “put downs” of blacks by offenders (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez & Wills, 1978 p. 66). They further maintain that these “offensive mechanism used against blacks often are innocuous” and that the cumulative weight of their never-ending burden is the major ingredient in black-white interactions. (p.66). Additionally, Davis (1989) defined racial microaggressions as “stunning, automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of Black inferiority. (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000, p. 60). Pierce, (1974) when referring to microaggressions says that “one must not look for the gross and obvious. The subtle, cumulative mini assault is the substance of today’s racism” (Pierce, 1974, p. 516). Over twenty years later, he claims that in and of itself, a microaggression may seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidences (Pierce, 1995, p. 281). These quotes, made twenty-one years apart, are included to provide a foundational understanding of the effects of microaggressions.

Critical pedagogue, bell hooks suggests that collective failure to address adequately the psychic wounds inflicted by racists aggressions is the breeding ground for a psychology of victimhood wherein learned helplessness, uncontrollable rage, and/or feelings of overwhelming powerlessness and despair about in the psyches of black folks yet are not attended to in ways that empower and promote holistic states of wellbeing (hooks, 1995, p. 137).

During this study, I never experienced racial aggression from my students nor has anyone used threatening language to refer to me but assaults on dignity have come. On
Dec. 7th, I was attending a monthly principal’s meeting and as I opened the door to go upstairs, a woman was standing there. I said, “Hello,” and she looked at me and said nothing. I said hello again and she remained silent. I later found out that she was one of the people who did not want to attend the ACT conference. I was amazed that she could be so disrespectful with no fear of discipline. Over the years, I have witnessed such bold disrespect that it tells me a lot about the culture of the environment. It is in these moments that we need to find the words to interrupt racism without fearing the judgment or stereotypes of others. There is a cost when you do it but in the end it is worth it. The longevity of someone in my position in part relies on how these situations are handled. I am glad to be in a place where I feel the support of my superintendent who is willing to make tough decisions for the benefit of students.

**Racial Dilemmas**

**Internalized Bias**

As I mentioned earlier, whites are not the only ones who can uphold white supremacy culture. People of color, specifically Blacks participate in maintaining white supremacy culture because they have been socialized in American culture which hails white life and ideologies superior over all others. Reflecting on these experiences, caused me to investigate previous research by others on the topic of internalized biases of Black people. Black people can as well, based on their own internalized struggle about their blackness.

Research by Ira (2020) causes us to imagine just wanting to uninterruptedly speak your truth and justify your opinions with valid statements to back your argument. Imagine just wanting to speak out on issues that affect you and those that look like you
and again support your assertions with supporting evidence. But no, upon this attempt you are immediately labeled as the villain for just stating your opinion in an argument. This is the reality for a black woman. We make choices about how we will respond to assaults on our dignity and knowing how we will be misjudged; we silence ourselves for self-preservation. In recent research, Ira (2020) speaks of this dilemma:

See when a black woman is vocal about something that is clearly wrong and when she calls out inequality the tables quickly turn on her and she, within the snap of two fingers is now the ghastly antagonist of the narrative. The angry black woman stereotype did not stop after its peak in the 19th century; it instead has continued to grow and live in the minds of society. How come men are allowed to display their frustration as it is a sign of masculinity and white women can openly project their anger, why can't the same energy be given to black women? (Ira, 2021, p.2)

Recent research by Valla and Rivolta (2019), examines stereotypical biases in Black people toward Black people. The study looks at the racial biases of white police officers but critically asks, “What if this serious social problem is partly based on automatic, unintended cognitive processes? In other words, to what degree is this social problem rooted in implicit bias? The term “implicit bias” refers to attitudes, stereotypes, or associations that we are not aware of, but which can influence our judgments and actions” (Villa & Rivolta, 2019, p. 2). As I mentioned, if we all were socialized in a country founded on white supremacy, what makes us immune to the same infection? If we are receiving the same messages in society, in schools and even at home, we as
Blacks should face our own biases against each other. Villa and Rivolta’s research answered the question:

Do these implicit anti-Black biases apply only to white people, or might many Black people also show evidence of such unconscious biases? Because most research on implicit bias has focused on white people, this is hard to know. So, in their recent research, they asked Black and white people to decide if an object, such as a gun or a teddy bear, was dangerous or non-dangerous after they saw – for a very brief period – the face of a Black person, the face a white person, or a “scrambled face” that was made up of unrecognizable facial feature (which served as the baseline comparison for our experiment). A typical example of each of the three types of faces appears below in figure 13:

Figure 13 – Anti-Black Bias

Interestingly, we found that people, regardless of their own race, identified a dangerous object more quickly after seeing a Black face than after seeing a scrambled face. There was a similar, but much weaker, tendency for both Black and white participants to identify objects more quickly (as dangerous) after seeing a Black face than a white face. This finding
suggests that both Black and white people may be subject to at least some implicit racial biases. (Villa & Rivolta, 2019, p. 2)

This is an example of the internalized bias that exists within the Black community. This research reveals that not only do white people see Black people as dangerous but Black people can see Black people as dangerous. If we have these biases within our own community, how will we find a sense of home without acknowledging those biases?

On October 31st, I was talking to my staff about our recent affinity group meeting with district wide staff of color. Out of the over 400 employees of color, only 15 attended. There were only two people that attended in person with the rest of my team and the rest chose to join via Zoom. There were only three people on Zoom that chose to speak which tells me that we have a lot to do to build trust within our affinity space so that we can support each other. When I asked one of the members why we weren’t seeing more people attend, they said that it’s hard for them to warm up to people. They need to know that it’s safe and that being transparent won’t get them fired. Another person said that we have a hard time trusting each other as we talked about a Cape Verdean woman who ran for Mayor two years prior. For a city that has so many Cape Verdeans, you would think she would win the election with no problem. However, based on the culture, if you are not from the same island in Cape Verde or if you are a woman, you have little chance to win the votes of the people. They would rather vote for a white person in whom they have more faith. This is the self-hate and lack of trust that exists within the Black community. There are assumptions that we make about each other’s abilities based on the biases we have.
It's Just Hair!

Our own biases are developed within our social context including our homes and the families with whom we were raised. On November 29th, I was talking to a colleague about her desire to wear her hair naturally or wear a hair covering as if she was asking for permission to do so. So many of us (Blacks) were raised to think that we had to process our hair to make it straight to appear more “professional” which is subjective. Just as blonde females have more success in education and in the business world, the choices Black women make about their hair is essential. The style and texture of a Black woman’s hair can have a direct effect on how they are received or rejected in certain settings. It is assumed that as you move up the corporate ladder, you either straighten your hair to fit in with white colleagues or wear it in a very neat style but definitely not braids or locs.

On July 26, 2022, Governor Charlie Baker signed into law “An Act Prohibiting Discrimination Based on Natural and Protective Hairstyles,” popularly known as the Massachusetts CROWN Act. The effective date of the new law is October 24, 2022. The Massachusetts CROWN Act has its genesis in a 2017 incident in which fifteen-year-old African American sisters at a Massachusetts charter school were disciplined for wearing braid extensions, a protective hairstyle banned by their school at the time, but now specifically addressed under the protections of this new law (Burton & Howe, 2022). Although I am glad this has finally been made official after five years, the damage has already been done. The message has been received that Black hair is heavily scrutinized and appears threatening to whites and unprofessional to Blacks. It is sad that a law
forcing people to approve of how my hair grows naturally out of my head, but this is something else that Black women face as they lead other people.

This new generation of Black men and women are wearing their hair in more natural styles and the pride and confidence with which they wear it is encouraging. So, when an older Black woman hesitates about how to wear her hair naturally, I realize we have more work to do internally and externally when it comes to biases and perceptions. Our hairstyles can represent the diverse levels of freedom within the Black community and can also divide us because we are our worst critics.

My first year in the doctoral program, I took a critical literacy course, and we examined a lot of literature by African American authors. We had a discussion on hair and how so many in the class felt free to wear their hair naturally and did not want to “sell out” by trying to change their blackness. There was a moment when I felt ashamed because I wore wigs. I have had alopecia long before Jada Pinkett Smith brought this term to the public. I choose to wear wigs because it gives me a sense of normalcy to stay connected with who I have always been. I do not want to recreate myself because I have a medical condition that makes me look different. In my role as an administrator, I have my own internal struggle about the choices I make and for me, wearing a wig keeps my identity so I can focus on the work I need to do without worrying about the pity or discomfort of others.

Reconciling with Our Bodies to Heal Our Racial Trauma

I have had multiple conversations around racial trauma and have even organized a conference to address racial trauma in education. As I reflected on my experiences during this study, I was reminded of a life changing conversation I had in 2018 with a white
woman who said that racism also hurt white people. I was taken aback because I thought she was attempting to minimize the pain of what many marginalized communities experienced. But in fact, she was taking ownership of how damaging racism is. After being silent for what felt like forever, as I called on wisdom to provide me with the best response, she said, “Racism hurts white people because racism hurts the soul.” She was so right. Racism is damaging to the soul for the oppressor AND the oppressed. The soul has to be sick for one human to dehumanize another simply based on the color of one’s skin or ethnicity or one’s language. We’ve seen this in slavery. There’s no way a human being can be so cruel as to treat another human being like an animal and create laws, policies and structures that keep them marginalized, demeaned, and suffering if the soul weren’t sick. Of course, there are varying degrees of racism to which there are varying degrees of responses by the oppressed. Hardy (2010) approaches racism from a clinical perspective while Menakem (2017) takes the clinical perspective and adds a sociocultural lens. It is through this sociocultural lens that I examined the clinical term of racial trauma and how to use the performative arts to respond to it, be resilient in the face of it, and how to resist its damage.

So much can be said about the experiences of Black people in this racially charged country called the United States of America. Racism is an ugly truth of our past AND present. Racial oppression is a traumatic form of interpersonal violence which can lacerate the spirit, scar the soul, and puncture the psyche (Hardy, 2010). Those who are marginalized, often feel voiceless and powerless because of their experienced trauma due to racism. I resonate with this idea as a Black woman who has experienced racial trauma and who has been under the oppression of racism for over a half a century.
We’ve tried to teach our brains to think better about race. But white-body supremacy doesn’t live in our thinking brains. It lives and breathes in our bodies. Our bodies have a form of knowledge that is different from our cognitive brains. This knowledge is typically experienced as a felt sense of constriction or expansion pain or ease, energy, or numbness. Often this knowledge is stored in our bodies as wordless stories about what is safe and what is dangerous. If we are to upend the status quo of white-body supremacy, we must begin with our bodies (Menakem, 2017, p. 5).

Our bodies speak. They have a language that communicates much more than words ever could. In a society where the marginalized reside well outside of the margin of privilege and agency, we have seen an increase in people’s outrage against racism and racial acts, be it police brutality, systemic racism, and unfair treatment of people of color. How people react to racism is their own choice. Some have reacted with anger while others have participated in peaceful protests.

I was in an affinity space on December 16th, 2022, and as we waited for the rest of the group to return to the virtual space, the host played Bill Withers, “A Lovely Day” to call us back to our screens. I saw so many people bobbing their heads and dancing in their seats to this song. Some of us even sang along to the song because the lyrics can turn a bad day into something exciting. Some of the lyrics are:

When the day that lies ahead of me seems impossible to face.
When someone else instead of me always seems to know the way.
Then I look at you and the world’s alright with me.
Just one look at you, and I know it’s gonna be a lovely day!
Menakem (2017) in his book, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* said:

Now I’d like to suggest some activities to help you harmonize your body with other African American bodies, and to help each other heal. I encourage you to practice these activities often – with friends, family, and trusted groups in safe settings. All these activities will seem familiar, which is exactly why I recommend them. They are family and communal strategies that African Americans have used for generations. They helped us and our ancestors to survive, remain resilient, settle our bodies, and alleviate trauma for hundreds of years. When you practice these activities with others, you recognize a shared history. Each activity is listed separately, but people often do two or three of them at the same time.

(Menakem, 2017, p. 191)

The author lists activities, such as singing together, group drumming, rhythmic group clapping, humming in sync with others and caring touches. The examples of performance art discussed in this paper are analyzed as a dialogic language of an oppressed people that often use this medium of speech as a form of cultural wealth as described by Yosso (2005) *Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth*. She challenges the traditional interpretation of critical race theory by shifting the view from a deficit-based model to an asset-based model that lifts the many cultural resources that are in abundance to communities of color that support their resilience. Her article challenges racism and reveals the various forms of cultural wealth. She refers to the implications of an ethnographic study done by Jerome Morris with two
African American school communities in the U.S. urban south and Midwest.

Jerome explains ‘Black people shared their cultural capital with one another and developed their social capital (Black social capital) for survival and success in a segregated world bounded by the omnipresent forces of racism and discrimination.’ This scholarship, documenting community mobilization efforts to create access and equity for African Americans in education, bolsters the examples of cultural wealth offered above. Such work also demonstrates that the forms of capital comprising community cultural wealth are engendered from within the context of a legacy of racism and are thus tied to a larger social and racial justice project. Morris asserts, ‘it is important that social capital theory also considers the agency and sustenance that are characteristic of African American people, culture and institutions—apart from and in response to oppressive forces.’ Indeed, the main goals of identifying and documenting cultural wealth are to transform education and empower People of Color to utilize assets already abundant in their communities (Yosso, 2005, p. 82).

According to Tatum (2018), when she asked white men and women how racism hurts, them, they frequently talk about their fears of people of color, the social incompetence they feel in racially mixed situations, the alienation they have experienced between parents and children when a child marries into a family of color, and the interracial friendships they had as children that were lost in adolescence or young adulthood without their ever understanding why. Tatum goes on to talk about how the cost of racism is not as high for whites as it is for people of color, but a price is being paid. Robin DiAngelo, when she speaks of white fragility, said that reflecting on racial frames is particularly challenging for many white people, because we are taught that to
have a racial viewpoint is to be biased. Unfortunately, this belief protects our biases, because denying that we have them ensures that we won’t examine or change them (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 11).

**Lack of Trust**

During this study, I thought about the images of strong professional Black women that have been successful in their own workspaces. These are role models like Oprah Winfrey, Eva Duvernay, Michelle Obama and so many others but I am also standing under the assumptions made about the images of Cardi B and Megan the Stallion, who dress provocatively in order to take their power back from men. I dress conservatively because I want to be respected and although Cardi B and Megan the Stallion feel empowered, I am not sure they are getting the respect they think they deserve. As a woman in power, I want to be taken seriously and for me, I was raised to “keep them guessing” which means I do not flaunt the physical gifts God has given me as a shapely Black woman. Instead, I want people I work with to focus on my face and what I am saying rather than what is spilling out of what I wear.

My research revealed that we have an issue of trust within our own community which is related to biases. As I mentioned earlier, Blacks are influenced by the culture be it white supremacy or their own internalized racism. The woman who ran for mayor that I mentioned earlier in this chapter revealed that there is so much division in the community. This community is considered the eleventh island of Cape Verde and the blackest city in the state, and yet we have only had one interim Cape Verdean mayor. If you are not from the same island or the same neighborhood, you may have to work hard to build trust. During this study, I noticed that our affinity group meetings with the
teachers and staff had low attendance. We, as people of color, are not showing up to support one another as I expected. I have noticed that the community of color is not as strong because we do not always respect each other. This was also made clear to me by the woman who ran for mayor. It is important to keep in mind that immigrant communities come with many power dynamics within their own groups. Gender also plays a part. It was puzzling to me, but it explained why I was observing certain behaviors of projected internalized racism. There is no unity with the groups of color, and I am working hard to break down those silos so that we can work together for the benefit of our students, ourselves and communities.

I highlight this in the study because gaining the trust of people of color in the district is a work in progress. An example was at the beginning of the school year, my administrative assistant sent out a meeting invitation to all who identified as BIPOC on our human resources database. Some people responded by “replying all” and some recipients got so aggravated that they asked to be removed from the group entirely. Something I thought was so minor caused some to withdraw from a group that could support them professionally. It showed me that there was a lot of work to do around trust and respect.

This research was important because it made me wonder if there was a weakness in the interpersonal relationships within the Black community and if that could be a roadblock to breaking the cycle of projecting internalized racism on each other.

Our Culture

Comedic Relief

When I experienced moments of not belonging, I found solace in returning to my
office where I had my own affinity space. The three other people on my team are Black, Haitian or Latina and although we had diverse experiences and backgrounds, we were able to connect on those things that were common to us. We used laughter to release stress and to heal from the microaggressions and daily assaults on our dignity. One morning I returned to my office after a meeting where I felt disrespected, my administrative assistant, Debra, looked at me and said, “Welp, they done got her again y’all.” The group gathered around, and I explained to them how Samantha “got on my last nerve.” Each one chimed in with a joke to cheer me up. Debra was the youngest member of my team, and she kept us all laughing. We each played a certain role in the group, and I believe hers was to break the tension that came with this job. This vulnerability isn’t normal for someone with my title and can be seen as a weakness, however, the caliber of leaders on my team makes this a safe space. As part of our norms, we have agreed to “cover each other” because the work we do is tough and so very personal.

**Linguistic Agency and Affirmation**

Language is powerful. English was the universal language where I worked which meant that the mastery of communicating in English determined the access I had to certain spaces. In research by Young (2014) argued that through a pedagogy of “code-switching,” the burden of discourse assimilation invariably falls on African American students. Instead of positioning students to switch between codes based on setting and audience, Young had proposed to the audience his term, “code-meshing.” Code meshing, he explains, is an approach to writing and interpreting texts that advocates for blending language codes in the classroom, rather than switching from one set of linguistic codes to
another, depending on the “appropriate” social and discursive contexts (Young, 2014, p 234).

I’ve code switched to fit in with the people around me. Since English is considered the language of commerce, meaning if I want to be successful in business or in my career, I need to know how to use English appropriately. I initially started my doctoral program because I wanted to be fluent in the language of the highest level of education so people would want to listen to what I had to say. I found myself code switching a lot when I started my position because I wanted to be respected. I didn’t want to be judged and compared to the stereotypes in their minds. I was feeling proud of my ability to code switch, somehow connecting it to being successful, but as I learned more about the various uses of English, I realized that I was assimilating and was in danger of losing some of myself in the process. I have multiple literacies and can communicate with diverse groups of people as a result. I grew up in an era where speaking standard English was the goal and speaking anything less was an indicator of intelligence or lack of intelligence. Holding this thought diminishes the power of my multiple literacies. I don’t need to choose one over the other.

I’ve seen the freedom of code-meshing with people like Barak Obama or Oprah Winfrey as they spoke before elite crowds intertwining African American Language to insert their culture into the conversation. The fluency is seamless. This, to me, is freedom…linguistic liberation. Code meshing is using cultural currency without losing oneself to fit in.

After reading *Word from the Mother* by Geneva Smitherman, I was inspired to think about the gift of African American Language. Dr. Jamila Lyiscott, in her Ted Talk,
speaks about the three ways she speaks English (academic, African American English) depending on which setting she is in. Her ability to speak the various versions of English, gives her credibility in the various settings. Credibility is currency. It’s valued and respected. I was able to use my linguistic fluency to navigate the various settings in which I found myself. My Black language gave me credibility with my team, my students, and other educators of color. My use of language is not binary but rather falls on a spectrum based on what I want to present in a situation. Language is my navigation tool.

It should also be stated that language is not all words. When in conversation with other Black people, we use a lot of non-verbal communication like “the nod.” It is a way to say “hello” or “I see you” or “I understand.” Many times, we will use this kind of communication in my office as our secret language. We have a joke in my office when we’re getting irritated with the microaggressions in the office. We reenact a scene from the movie, “The Color Purple” where sisters, Celie and Nettie say their last goodbyes playing patty cake and singing:

Me and you must never part. Makidada.

Me and you, us have one heart. Makidada

Ain’t no ocean, ain’t no sea. Makidada.

Keep my sister away from me, Makidada

The word Makidada is Swahili for “little sister.” We do this in my office because it is a reminder that we are not alone when we leave our affinity space.

The ability to create multiple meanings with words and phrases and the reclaiming of phrases by changing the meaning is what I call agency over assimilation.
Rather than assimilate to what is called standardized English, you will see African American Language reclaim power through language using this technique. Rap is a great example of this linguistic brilliance as demonstrated by Tupac Shakur with his use of the phrase THUG LIFE meaning *The Hate You Give Little Infants F*cks Everybody. On its face, that phrase has a totally different meaning. Anyone who knew Tupac would know that he was about influence and change considering he read everything from the social-historical writings of W.E. B. DuBois to the philosophical tracts of Freidrich Nietzsche from the feminist writings of Robin Morgan to the Black Arts Poetry of Nikki Giovanni, from spiritual literature on Buddhism to classic texts on Christianity. This knowledge coupled with African American Language becomes power in a poet’s hand.

Words and gestures can be used as weapons to regain power (agency). Words can be used to create proverbs and expressions that are directly connected to African American culture. It is an inside language used within the community and directly connected to its history. Slaves in America used what we now call Negro Spirituals to communicate with each other to avoid getting in trouble. All of this to show the power of the African American language… bilingualism…multilingualism…fluency in code meshing.

During this study, there were many times when my team would reenact an event that bothered one of us by putting our own twist on the ending to create a counternarrative that empowered us. I was recanting a story to my team when Debra played her usual comedic role “talking trash” about the person to minimize the offensive comment in my mind. Instead of being upset we used humor to retell the story. This technique removed the claws from what would normally offend us by turning it into
something that entertained us. We can twist the narrative of an event and make it medicine for the very wound it caused. This is the power of Black Language use within the community!

When we code switch, we are making a choice to leave one literacy to embrace another. In essence, code switching is hiding my true self to fit in because of an internal belief that my true identity may not be embraced by the dominant culture. Code meshing takes back the power by refusing to assimilate or shut off one identity to embrace another. Instead, it offers the freedom to express my full self in language. Tupac wasn’t limited to just speaking the language of the streets. He infused the wisdom of the many people that he followed into his music. Barack Obama can speak to international leaders while not abandoning himself or his native tongue but brings his full self into the room. Oprah has done the same as she has spoken to large audiences infusing her “sista–girlfriend” talk into a conversation to deliver a message. The following is an example of code meshing. It is a poem I wrote about breaking away from hegemony:

Hegemonic practices have caused me to bow.
But knowledge is power. I know better now.
To bring my whole self in, I will surely fight.
Because now I know I gon be aiight!

The Power of the Performative Arts

Music has grounded me emotionally and spiritually throughout this study. On many occasions, I have used music to maintain my sanity. I have also used it to express my anger by allowing the performer to do the swearing for me. I wonder if this is why some young people may want to keep their earbuds in while they are at school. Music is a
way of escape and a way to feel empowered in oppressive settings. Music has been my language of freedom and of hope and although some of these songs may not be what you would expect an ordained Pastor like me to listen to, each song has had a purpose to either help me release my pain or to help me make peace with my body as I heal from the racial trauma of being a Black woman leading equity work.

Considering the important role music and artistic expression have played in the black community, it was important to look at it as cultural capital. Music is an abundant asset in the Black community. During this study, I reflected on some of my previous research that focused on the community cultural wealth music provides. For me as someone who works in the EDI space and has spent my career in predominantly white institutions, it has been natural for me to gravitate to music that empowers me, helps me reflect and gives me a way to safely express myself.

Janelle Monae’s (2013) song, “Hell You Talmbout” was a song that spoke the cries of so many of our hearts even long before the murder of George Floyd. YouTube has a video of this song being performed by the Northwest Tap Connection that provided a release for me as I vicariously experienced this impactful piece. According to YoungArts Melba Ayco founded Northwest Tap Connection, a social justice-oriented dance studio intentionally placed in the most dangerous part of Seattle so that it could serve as a hub and refuge for youth in the area. In the wake of the killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, the directors came across a Facebook Live video of the students of Northwest Tap dancing in the streets in protest. With the support of the YoungArts Transformations film project, they traveled across the country with the hope that
they could place the voice of Northwest Tap on a cinematic platform. The taps of their toes are like the walks and talks of those chained and silenced - but at the very same time, an embodiment of revelry and resilience. It's a cry to say their names, see their names and feel their names...and it's a declaration that the list of lives lost to police brutality ends today. (YoungArts, 2016, 0:00)

The video Hell You Talmbout used African American Vernacular English in its title to speak for a community that often feels voiceless as I mentioned earlier. The phrase meant, “What the hell are you talking about?!” Its meaning expressed the outrage of the injustice of black bodies being devalued and destroyed. It was a call out to one’s neighbor asking, “What is going on in this world?” It’s a cry to the creator, “What’s going on in this world?” It is a conversation with multidirectional dialogues and the central point is the performer and the message is delivered through the performance.

This performance included red, white, and black flags that were waved throughout the dance and each dancer wore a white tee shirt that had a large X on the front. I am familiar with the use of worship flags and did further research to understand them as a dance tool. According to Riddle (2019), a worship service, flags and banners are used for God's people as a visual tool on which to focus. They can declare a time of the battle in spiritual warfare, God's love, His grace, holiness, and power. This skill is resistant capital, empowering the dancers to wage war against the enemy of racism and police brutality. Worshiping with flags can be a rallying point of healing to fight back against the enemy. According to Riddle’s article, colors of flags are carefully chosen and are used for specific purposes. For example, white symbolizes revelation, black symbolizes rebuke and red symbolizes redemption. The use of the colors white, red and
black in the Hell You Talmbout performance connects us to the social cultural theory of language in that the colors have specific meaning within the cultural context. The use of flags is linguistic capital; sending a clear message that I interpreted as the horrors of anti-black racism is being revealed (white flag) and the activity is being rebuked (black flag) but the people themselves are being redeemed (red flag) through the words and meaning behind the tap dance itself. As aspirational capital, the message in the color of the flags provides hope of justice where it cannot be readily seen.

Tap dance originated in the United States in the early 19th century at the crossroads of African and Irish American dance forms. When slave owners took away traditional African percussion instruments, slaves turned to percussive dancing to express themselves and retain their cultural identities (University Music Society, 2019). At the end of the performance, YoungArts, post the following on the closing screen:

The letter X is omnipresent. It’s a symbol of transformation, multiplication, and characterization of the unknown, even down to the very nature of who we are as X chromosomes. X is not simply a letter. It carries the hopes, fears, dreams, happiness, and trauma of the people that breathe life into it. It definitely illuminates a forgotten humanity, and the violence that buries them. We have to say their names so that Americans can remember we have work to do. We have to see their names so that America can remember we have work to do. We have to feel their names... America, we have work to do (YoungArts, 2016).

There is a Puerto Rican dance called la Bomba that dates back to the beginning of the Spanish colonial period (1493–1898). The practice was developed by West African enslaved people and their descendants, who worked in sugar plantations along the coast
of Puerto Rico (Ferreras, 2005). The towns of Mayagüez, San Juan, Loíza, and Ponce, among others, were the cradle of the various styles that make up this genre. In these areas, cane workers released feelings of sadness, anger, and resistance through fiery drums played in dance gatherings called *Bailes de Bomba* (Bomba Dances). Enslaved people also used them to celebrate baptisms and marriages, communicate with each other, and plan rebellions (Cartagena, 2004). The roots of this tradition can be traced to the Ashanti people of Ghana, and the etymology of the word “bomba” to the Akan and Bantu languages of Africa (Dufrasne-González, 1994; Vega-Drouet, 1970).

There’s something special about the drums and the stomping that releases our pain as a collective. This is why I believe the Bible says, “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a suitable helper for him (Genesis 2:18). We are meant to be in community with one another. Menakem (2017) refers to ways that we should harmonize our bodies with others in an effort to heal. Some of these suggestions are singing together, group drumming, rhythmic group clapping, humming in sync with others, and brief secure touches, many of which can be seen in the Hell You Talmbout performance. The use of translanguaging to tell a story through tap and the use of flags communicates a meaning that can be understood by the community of dancers and serves as social capital as they dance together to help to bring the body at peace.

Grammy award winning artist, H.E.R & YBN Cordae gave an eye opening and evocative performance of the song, “Lord Is Coming” at the BET (Black Entertainment Television) Awards in 2019. The performance was the opening of the awards show and began with R & B artist H.E.R. playing an acoustic bass. Then she continued with spoken word as her prayer for mankind and how we, as black people, are socialized and
victimized towards depression, hopelessness, and suicide. She likened the current state of America as Armageddon, the last battle between good and evil. She referenced unjust shootings and said that the young have been forced into a separation from their youth. Their innocence has been taken away. This was also a reference back to slavery where there was no time to be young and just as families were separated from their families during slavery, so are young people separated from the innocence of youth. History is not my brother’s story. A reference to the days of Columbus when the original founders of this country (Native Americans) were buried in the seeds of the disease brought to America by its settlers. “They justified being thieves to feed their inner demons and blaming the minorities. It’s World War III corruption vs. greed. Not you vs. me.” As linguistic capital, H.E.R. demonstrated her skills to communicate what has happened in the past and what is still happening in the present using music as her tongue.

H.E.R. spoke about the need for inner peace. “Doesn’t matter what religion. This is the devil’s world, but the Lord is coming for His people.” The background singers joined the song with foot stomping to add to the music. They became resources and support to the song as social capital, joining in by making sounds with their own bodies. They were dressed in black panther-themed clothes reminiscent of the sixties’ fight for Civil Rights. A repeating lyric in the song was, “We reach for saving hands. No help will come from man. The Lord is coming.” Rapper Cordae joined H.E.R. on the stage and spoke about themes of deportation, police brutality and stop and frisk. “They got a leash on us. Y’all voted for the anti-Christ. God bless America and God bless Sudan.” The reason Cordae said this about Sudan was that on June 3, 2019, the immediate successor to the Janjaweed militia used heavy gunfire and teargas to disperse a sit-in by protestors in
Khartoum, Sudan, killing more than 100 people. During that time the internet was completely blocked in Sudan, making it difficult to estimate the number of victims but it was said that at least forty of the bodies had been thrown in the River Nile. This line in the song allowed the community present at the awards show to mourn with their African brothers and sisters in Sudan and to pronounce a blessing upon them. This was an example of social capital in that the community became a resource for themselves as well as for another oppressed community in Africa. Resistant capital can be seen in the freedom of speech that is used to talk candidly about political issues. Cordae used his rapping skills to challenge inequality and the audience joined in by making affirmative gestures. One audience member said, “Come on now” in response to that section of the song to echo those emotions.

This performance was yet another way to use the body or voice along with music and foot stomping to tell a story. This performance tapped into the sociocultural heritage of jazz (born in the black community) and historical references in order to communicate the effects and the experience of racism. Using jazz was tapping into their own community wealth using something created within the community to support the community. The ability to articulate such a challenging message by using references to historical events to make connections to the present day, is an example of linguistic capital. In this case, linguistic capital was telling the story by translanguaging into artistic expression using instruments, poetry, and visual images used on the stage.

As H.E.R. and Cordae performed, there was a clear dialogue between them and the audience. The audience responded to their message with head bobbing, tears, expressions of awe and sadness as well as expressions of empowerment, hope and
affirmation. Aspirational capital could be observed especially when she sung the repeating phrase, “We reach for saving hands. No help will come from man. The Lord is coming.” There was a sadness accepting that no help would come from man, but I observed smiles of hope when H.E.R. finished the phrase with, “The Lord is coming.” This song spoke of the history AND the current state of the black community but grounded the audience in the faith to which they had always been connected.

This study ended soon before Christmas and during the last superintendent’s cabinet meeting of the year, one of my colleagues gave us each a keychain doll that represented our individual personalities. My keychain character was Harriet Tubman and if this were anyone else, I might not have taken the gift at face value. This colleague was a white male, but he and I have bonded because we share the same equity coach. He has felt a sense of belonging with people who identify as BIPOC because of his upbringing. He is allowed in spaces that many white people are not allowed in because he has earned trust that many don’t take the time to earn. So, when he gave me the keychain, I willingly accepted his gift.

The Harriet doll came with a tag containing the following quote, “Every great dream begins with a dreamer.” This was mind-blowing because William, a Black male colleague, has called me Harriet Tubman over the years. He was one of the first people I reached out to when I was hired for this position. I wanted to give him a bigger platform for success. I love to free people from the bondage of small spaces and cheer them on to their next level. So, I was shocked when someone who had only known me for a few months, also picked up on my personality as a dreamer.
When I think of Harriet, I see a confident Black woman with vision and determination. I have always admired her because she didn’t let anyone get in her way or distract her from her focus. She would literally shoot people dead if they became an obstacle. I willingly accepted the association with Harriet given to me by my colleagues because I face many obstacles but like Harriet, I am focused, determined, and confident in the work that lies ahead.

There is a song that has often motivated me when I’ve felt like giving up. It is the most popular song on the “Harriet” movie soundtrack performed by Cynthia Erivo. Here is a sample of the lyrics:

*Early in the mornin’*
*Before the sun begins to shine*
*We’re gonna start movin’*
*Towards that separating line*
*I’m wadin’ through muddy waters*
*You know I got a made up mind*
*And I don’t mind if I lose any blood on the way to salvation*
*And I’ll fight with the strength that I got until I die*

*So, I’m gonna stand up*
*Take my people with me*
*Together we are going*
*To a brand new home*
*Far across the river*
*Can you hear freedom calling?*
*Calling me to answer*
*Gonna keep on keepin’ on* (Echeumuna-Erivo & Campbell, 2019)

These lyrics remind me that although the struggles of this job and all that it requires are tough, I need to focus on my purpose. I have to get up early and set my mind to the work that is ahead for the day. There is a line that separates us called “racism” and the water gets muddy but I am determined to keep pressing forward. I have to stand up and fight for my people and envision a brand-new home that represents a world that is different, hard
to reach but because freedom is calling, I have to answer and remain determined. For me, freedom is a place where everyone finds a sense of belonging and purpose.

**The Power of Family**

The most powerful counterspace that provided a place of healing for me was my home. I live in a home with four generations of family members. There are eight of us including my mother, my husband, teenaged daughter and my youngest son, his wife and my two grandsons. We make it a point to eat dinner together every day to check in and share our experiences. My son would often bring some political topic to the table and the discussion would start from there. Due to the nature of my job and the focus of this study, it was hard for me to not see race in a lot of what was going on in our nation. I often found myself taking mental breaks by playing a game on my phone because the language I have acquired during this study is something they wouldn’t be able to appreciate. I didn’t want our meals together to always boil down to something racial or political so I had to pace myself in many of our conversations so I could create a line of separation between work and home. It was difficult because my identity as a Black woman doesn’t change just because I’m home. But my family is very sensitive to my needs and when they sensed that the conversation was becoming burdensome, they would switch the topic of discussion. I have always been amazed at how my children think and process the world around them. I feel I have equipped them to speak their mind and advocate for themselves and in that space, I am able to do the same.

Our dinner table discussions were very helpful because we talked about current issues, and I was able to use those stories to support my work by gaining insight into the perspectives of others. My husband provided a space for me to share my frustrations and
my victories. He was careful to make what I needed a priority. He was protective of my mind, meaning when I started to doubt myself, when I had imposter syndrome or made myself small for the comfort of others, he was my preacher. When I was having an issue at work and I started the conversation with, “Well…maybe I should…,” he said in a stern voice, “Renée, I am gonna stop you right there. Don’t let these people make you doubt what you bring to the table. I have watched your career and these people need to get it together. You know your stuff and you are more than qualified! You run circles around these guys so remember who you are and what God created you for.” I would always walk away from our conversations feeling like I could conquer the world. I am so grateful for a husband who is not intimidated by my power or my vision. He was great at sensing when it was time to buy my favorite ice cream or when to draw a hot bath. For those of us who fight the good fight against racism, we occasionally need someone to take care of us… to refill our emotional and physical tank.

I am blessed to have the support of so many people and I’m honored to be part of a culture of care because they have been the balm to the many wounds I sustained as a result of white supremacy culture and racial dilemmas.

In the next and final chapter, I will discuss the implications of this study by making connections to my literature review and my thinking tools that may contribute to helping this audience understand my experience.
CHAPTER VI
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This Was Personal

This was a personal account of being a Black female administrator building a new office of EDI in the political climate and the demographic make-up of my school district and city. I had to make tough choices about what I would and could share about what I learned about myself and others as a result of this study. There were many stories I wanted to share but to respect the privacy of others, I chose not to. It was important to me to locate stories in my research that showed the vulnerability of this work while also being careful not tell those stories that would cause political harm to me or others.

There were and still are many days that I want to walk out of meetings or conversations with others and never come back. I have been misunderstood, hurt, and demeaned in ways that I cannot share publicly. As I reflected on my journals and reconstructed stories, I realized that even changing names and locations could still cause people to misunderstand my intentions and for that reason I was unable to provide a complete look into my life as an EDI leader. Based on my experiences and those told to me by many of my EDI colleagues, it is uncertain if we should do this work long-term without taking extended breaks for healing. As I mentioned in the first chapter, burn-out is real! There is a physical and emotional toll that I am not convinced many outside of this work can fully appreciate. I couldn’t set clear boundaries between work and home because my identity was centered in both spaces. I was unable to completely turn off my lens as a Black woman and I over analyzed situations at home and what I saw in the media. My family would often remind me to turn the researcher in me off at least during our dinner discussions so that everything we discussed wasn’t about racism. I was often
over sensitized to noticing white supremacy culture which would often cripple my progress and put me in the position of the victim. I had to fight so hard internally not to give up and I was determined to actively find counterspaces to recover emotionally. This was and continues to be hard work!

I wish that it was easy to separate the personal from the professional but because my identity is intertwined with my job, it is impossible. I had to make choices about where I identified with a particular group and when I spoke as a member of a particular group. These are the tensions I faced. My race, identity and experience as a Black female leader is what got me hired in my current position in the DEI field but too often this job and the environment can gradually muffle my identity if I am not careful. The tearing off of a square that represented one of the most important parts of my identity in the previously mentioned ice breaker was a symbol of how we have to silence or diminish parts of our identity to be in certain spaces. No school district or company is looking for the Angela-Davis-type rebel to come in and fix white people but rather someone who strategically nudges mindsets and beliefs ever so carefully. Black feminist like hooks, Dillard and Crenshaw remind me that my experiences are valid but maybe they seen as threatening.

**Connecting Black Womanist Cultural Wealth to Leadership**

My counterspaces became my fueling stations to exchange the microaggressions, frustrations and disappointments I experienced as a Black woman for the cultural wealth they revealed. During this study, I had a chance to visit many schools and get to know students who worked in partnership with my office. It was their voice and their needs that gave me aspirational capital and the motivation to do what was required to provide them
with better opportunities to succeed. It was important for me to have vision and to think outside of the box because my team, district and community were counting on the positive change. As I spent time with other leaders in the various affinity groups, I was inspired to do even more because I saw the possibilities being manifested in others.

One way that navigational capital comes into power is that it capitalizes on paying it forward by bringing others up through sharing the unspoken rules of navigating an organization. I have received the reward of navigational capital through my work with other K-12 administrators of color in my district and statewide as mentioned in chapter four. Being able to support their career goals as well as provide encouragement to remain in their roles has given me job satisfaction. They have acknowledged the significant role I play in their lives as someone who can help them become better leaders.

I am blessed to have the social capital of an EDI team and each member brings something different to the work as evidenced in the previous chapter. In our last meeting of the year on December 21st, we revisited our office norms and one of the more important norms to me was “cover me.” I showed them a YouTube video that explained what the phrase “cover me” meant. It means, I’m having a hard time and I need support. It means, I need a break from those who trigger me. It means we need to stay close and take care of each other. This has become the culture of my office, which is what draws others to our space to feel the same sense of protection and belonging.

Linguistic capital of storytelling has been as asset to me especially during this study as mentioned in comic relief in chapter five. Language use has been a common thread in the many affinity spaces to which I belonged. The language I understood and used in those settings was the evidence that I belonged. The use of quick phrases,
gestures, even groans spoke volumes and were used to share painful stories or to re-
construct realities to facilitate healing.

My familial capital has been the most powerful because I belong to several groups
that I call family. My work family is my EDI team. We embrace each other in moments
of victory. We share food, tell stories, and share laughs. We give constructive feedback to
each other in private and celebrate and honor each other in public. My church is also my
family. They prayed that I was hired for this position, and they prayed for me when my
emotional tank was low. But the group that mattered the most was my nuclear family. I
have been able to let off steam with them. They helped me think through incredibly
challenging situations as evidenced in the previous chapter that talks about reconciling
our bodies to heal from racial trauma. Since I am an external processor, I needed that
space to share my thoughts and to get help making sense of them.

Throughout my career, I have often reflected on what I now understand to
be my resistant capital. The achievements of my great-grandmother, being the first Black
woman to own her own cosmetology school in Boston is something of which I am very
proud. She owned property and was successful in the 1940s when women were not seen
as business owners but better suited for domestic work. She pushed up against racism and
was determined to carve a space out for herself on this earth. She was an inspiration to
me, and I am her legacy. As I mentioned in chapter four, it was in my DNA to question
systems that oppressed people because my great-grandmother set out to provide
opportunities to marginalized groups so they could provide for their families. Just as she
opened doors for others, I have been able to do the same for administrators of color and
be a Harriet Tubman for them.
Having Black womanist cultural wealth (BWCW) as my theoretical lens allowed me to see the intersection of my identities as an asset. I find comfort in my strength as a Black woman and am proud of my heritage as someone rich with the blessings of my culture. Where community cultural wealth and feminist theories fell short by not acknowledging my racial identity, BWCW filled the gap.

My hope is that other autoethnographers can apply this theoretical lens to their research and gain insight into how their identity affects their perception and experiences as Black leaders. I pray that people of color see the cultural wealth in each other and start coming together in affinity spaces for nourishment and support.

My next steps for research will explore ways for white leaders to understand and empathize with some of the challenges I listed in previous chapters about the difficulties of leading equity, diversity, and inclusion work. I want white educators see how their words and actions affect how marginalized groups experience life within the walls of school settings. I want them to identify with the racial tension that someone like me faces as a Black leader in predominantly white spaces. I want them to make a commitment to being coconspirators with Black leaders to create equitable and just learning and workspaces for all. My hope is that the transparent stories told in this study will cause white and BIPOC leaders to re-envision equity work by seeing the obstacles and being strategic about breaking barriers. We need more “Harriets” to stand up and move this work forward. We can do this together.
What’s Next?

I am curious to explore how religion fits into this work. As someone who is a practicing Christian, I was careful not to make my religion the main focus of my work given Christianity is a dominant religion of this country. EDI makes space for the marginalized and I will further explore how there can be a balance with making space for others while also celebrating my own traditions. This might be something that only I grappled with but I’m curious if anyone else has felt the same.

I will also do more research on how districts can be more intentional about systematizing equity work which requires inter-departmental collaboration and districtwide vision. If this work is embedded in a district’s strategic plan, is monitored, and people are held accountable for the work, we will see a significant shift in our school environments which will have a direct effect on student outcomes.

Although there may be many similarities, I am curious to learn more about the experiences of Black men like David and Phillip in leadership. I wonder what challenges they face and how they are able to leverage their cultural wealth which may be very different from mine.

I would also like to see local and nationwide support for EDI leaders. It is important for us to find spaces for healing and wellness because the tension that we often live with can have a physical and emotional toll on us. I know this work has been hard but all the painful moments, all the lingchi - small cuts of microaggressions and assaults on my dignity, have been worth it to get to the victories. This autoethnographic study using the Black womanist cultural wealth lens has helped me gain confidence in the
cultural wealth I possess and has also motivated me to help others leverage theirs. The affinity spaces have been a godsend to my emotional health and my professional growth because of the unwavering support they provide. I believe we can create anti-racist environments in our schools and based on my experience, those who are leading this work need to be fully supported and given the authority to make the necessary changes. Otherwise, districts will only have an iconic figure who symbolizes EDI leadership without the results.
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