

(RE)DISCOVERING I AM WORTHY: A BLACK FEMINIST
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC CONFRONTATION OF ABUSE

by

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

Boise State University

August 2021

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BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE COLLEGE

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Thesis Title: (Re)discovering I am Worthy: A Black Feminist Autoethnographic
Confrontation of Abuse

Date of Final Oral Examination: 29 June 2021

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to myself. I dedicate this thesis to my younger siblings, Spencer, Jordan and Jami. You are my reason why, so we can have the better tomorrow we all deserve. I dedicate this thesis to my community. To my Black, brown, queer, trans, and fat siblings. May we always (re)turn to ourselves. May we always (re)member we are worthy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Dr. Ivey, thank you. Thank you for holding my hand, laughing at my absurdity, and reassuring my doubts. Thank you for being my biggest cheerleader, for listening to me whine, and empowering me to just write the damn thing. I will be forever grateful for your patience. Your insight and empathy are beautiful gifts, thank you for sharing them with me.

To Dr. Arellano, thank you for introducing me to Audre Lorde and the rhetoric of my body. Thank you for holding space for my anger. Thank you for holding space for my crippling self-doubt. Thank you for introducing me to autoethnography and empowering me to believe that my story mattered. Your perspective and your way of being are inspiring, thank you for sharing them with me.

To Dr. Garza, thank you for encouraging me. Thank you for showing me gumption and unapologetic resistance. Thank you for supporting me in spirit, guidance, and confidence. Your candor, strength and wisdom are revolutionary, thank you for sharing them with me.

To my soul squad, Ashton and Cristina. Thank you. You are my home. You are my sense of security and safety. You are my loves. Thank you for meeting me wherever I am at, for showing me grace, for showing me love, for showing me that I am worthy. Thank you for understanding my dark sense of humor. Thank you for laughing with me. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for being my biggest fans. I am better for knowing you.

To my siblings, Jordan, Jami, and Spencer. You are my A team, my day ones, my family. Thank you for being my ride or dies. Thank you for helping me feel like the coolest, most awesome bigger sister. Thank you for teaching me patience and love. You are my purpose, my reason why, my inspiration.

To my smooch, my niece, my love, Aria. May you grow up to be a kick-ass radical feminist. I love you.

To “The Directors”, Adriana and Terrell. Thank you. Thank you for recognizing me, for validating me, and for roasting me. Thank you for sharing your Black and Mexican goodness. Thank you for playing the oppression olympics with me, for laughing with me where others would have cried, and generally just not giving a shit.

ABSTRACT

The following thesis is a Black Feminist Autoethnographic confrontation of white supremacist, racist ideology. I assert that Black people are in an abusive relationship with America. Utilizing the Cycle of Violence, the relationship abuse framework, Critical Race theory and Black Feminist Thought, this thesis explores the violent ways America abuses Black bodies and how that abuse affects our very beings. Utilizing autoethnography to record what others have erased, I confront my abusers in all of their different forms, including the internalized abuse of self. This writing is a process of uncovering and (re)covery. This recovery process will examine the convergence of the political, the cultural and the personal while exposing the master narrative or dominant norms that inflict violence on Black, brown, queer, trans, and otherwise marginalized bodies. I integrate Black Feminist Autoethnography, love, and Black Feminist Pedagogy to create a counternarrative which repositions my truth at the center and validates my way of being and knowing as valid, dignified, and whole.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
ABSTRACT	vii
TABLE OF FIGURES	xi
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Introducing Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	2
Introducing Chapter Three: Methodology	3
Introducing Chapter Four: Confronting my Abusers	4
Introducing Chapter Five: I am Worthy - (Re)embodying Black Self-Love.....	4
Introducing my Purpose.....	5
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	7
Enslaved Black Bodies	7
Disembodied Black Bodies.....	10
Embodied Black Bodies.....	14
Defining Intimate Relationship Abuse	18
Intimacy.....	19
Power and Control	21
Abused Black Bodies.....	23
Traumatized Black Bodies	31

Emotional Consequences	33
Physical Consequences	34
Cognitive Consequences	35
Behavioral Consequences	35
Social Consequences	36
Liberated Black Bodies	37
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	40
Black Feminist Autoethnography	43
My Personal BFA	46
CHAPTER FOUR: CONFRONTING MY ABUSERS	52
The Hopeful Beginning	57
The Warning Signs	58
The Tension Building Phase	59
The Tension Building Phase: Self-Abuse	64
The Tension Building Phase: The Self-Abuse Continues	69
The Honeymoon Phase	80
Breaking the Cycle	80
CHAPTER FIVE: I AM WORTHY - (RE)EMBODYING BLACK SELF-LOVE	81
Writing to Love	82
Loving my way to Building Trust	88
Loving my way to Leave my Abuser	92
Identifying and Deconstructing Master Narratives with Love	95
Witnessing Counter stories to Embrace Black Self-Love	97

Creating my own Counter story - I am Love.....	99
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION	102
Concluding Chapter Two.....	103
Concluding Chapter Three.....	104
Concluding Chapter Four.....	105
Concluding Chapter Five	106
Concluding the Conclusion.....	107
REFERENCES	111

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1 Power and Control Wheel.....22

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*[This] writing saves me from this complacency, I fear. Because I have no choice. Because I must keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive. Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. **I write to record what others erase when I speak**, [emphasis added] to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. **To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy . . . to convince myself that I am worthy** [emphasis added] and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 169).*

Black people are in an abusive relationship with America. To survive the legacy of hegemonic oppression, racial violence, and discrimination, means to endure trauma and to endure abuse. Historical, institutional and systemic dehumanization is abuse. This is the truth of my Black and brown siblings. This is my truth. This writing, this naming, this outcry is my protest, my counternarrative, my justice demand, and my safety plan for leaving this abusive relationship. Allen (1998) affirms, “being black and woman engenders complex ways of knowing and being” (p. 575).

I am black.

I am queer.

I am genderfluid.

I am AFAB (assigned female at birth).

I am neuro divergent.

I am college-educated.

I am fat.

I am a survivor.

I am a truth-teller.

My identities and positionality inform how I interact with the world and how the world interacts with me (Allen, 1998; Crenshaw, 1989). I am the embodiment of complex ways of knowing and being. I will explore my unique embodiment with Black feminist autoethnography to honor alternative ways of knowing alongside the Black female scholars who came before me. Utilizing Feminist Standpoint Theory (Allen, 1998), Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1989), Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, 1994; Hiraldo, 2010), and autoethnography, I will examine the interlocking web of oppression I experience at the intersections of my identities, while situating myself in the broader context of social, cultural and political power structures (Allen, 1998). This truth-telling will illuminate an alternative way of knowing what is true, what is just and what is necessary (Burke, 1941).

Introducing Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, I look to existing literature to establish a history of violence used to enact power over the Black body. I assert that kidnapping, slavery, lynching, legalized segregation, racial discrimination, mass incarceration, and police brutality are abuse tactics to maintain power and control over Black bodies. As I integrate Critical Race Theory, Black Feminist Thought and Anti-violence research, I (re)define racial violence as abuse, utilizing the framework of relationship abuse to demonstrate that Black people

are in an abusive relationship with America. As Black bodies endure physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse, we also suffer the consequences. These consequences of abuse (van der Kolk, 2014), also referred to as trauma, affect us as individuals, as a community, and as a society. I establish the social, physical, and psychological consequences of living with trauma. By contextualizing racial violence as abuse and the effects traumatic, I delineate a pathway for acknowledging harm, recognizing abuse, and healing the traumatized body. Next, I affirm that Black people's lived experiences of abuse and trauma are a systemic problem that requires systemic justice. I do this to acknowledge the source of the problem, to assign responsibility and to demand accountability. I intentionally look to Black scholars and folx with marginalized identities to assert my claims. I do this in solidarity. I do this as a means of representation, resistance, and recognition. And I do this to write myself *into* scholarship.

Introducing Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter utilizes Autoethnography and Black Feminist Autoethnography (BFA) to create the praxis of how I completed this project. In this chapter, I describe how I came to find autoethnography, through a process of validating my angry, racialized self, through the work of Audre Lorde. As Black folx have been erased from the academy, from the media, from our institutions, I write to honor the invisible (Griffin, 2012). Black Feminist Autoethnography provided me with a methodology where I was able to locate myself, validate myself, and honor the legitimacy of my lived experiences as truth and knowledge. BFA also allowed me to utilize poetry, personal (re)tellings, and self-reflection as a means to communicate the truth of my being. BFA is a tool for resistance, liberation and counter storytelling and it is the method I choose to (re)tell myself in my fifth and fourth chapters.

Introducing Chapter Four: Confronting my Abusers

Chapter four is my survival. I write this chapter, not only to survive but to resist and for the continued resistance of my community. I begin with poetry, to insert the reader into the evocative center of living in abuse. I utilize the Cycle of Violence as a guideline to share my experiences with abuse. I establish the beginning of my abusive relationship with America, and walk through the Tension Building Phases, the Acute Violence Phase, and of course the Honeymoon period. The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on my swept under the rug experiences of abuse. I (re)tell these experiences to validate the legitimacy of the violence and pain that whiteness fails to acknowledge. I write this chapter to honor my rage, my righteous indignation, my grief, and the consequential self-abuse I endure to survive living in this oppressive state. Chapter 4 allows me to acknowledge myself and deconstruct the master narratives that have been selling me the idea that I am not worthy. Through this process of deconstruction, I am able to create space for a new counternarrative that is all my own.

Introducing Chapter Five: I am Worthy - (Re)embodying Black Self-Love

Chapter 5 is my (re)turn to self. In this chapter I utilize bell hooks' love ethic and Black Feminist Pedagogy to create a pathway for healing. Through a (re)imagined love, which centers the nurturance of self, I describe how to utilize love as the revolutionary praxis for liberating Black and otherwise marginalized bodies. In this chapter, I recognize that we must confront the lack of love in our lives in order to move forward in the healing process. At the site of this confrontation with self, is where we are able to recover ourselves. I demonstrate that it is through an ethic of love that we can not only resist but dismantle the colonization that binds us to false ideas of lovelessness, inferiority, and worthlessness. I utilize Black Feminist Pedagogy as a resource for tools and strategies to

navigate Black alienation. It is through the navigation of Black alienation that we are able to create a space for ourselves. I demonstrate the importance of counternarratives. Counternarratives validate our sense of self, recognize our essence and (re)write the stories that have been so wrongly written about us by master narratives or dominant culture. In the end of this chapter, I honor the Black folx who have made a pathway for healing and love.

Introducing my Purpose

I write this thesis to honor the perseverance of the Black folx who have come before me and to hold space for the Black folx who will come after me. I write this thesis to honor my voice, my truth, and my spirit. I write this thesis to transform myself, to (re)connect with myself, and to resist the harmful yoke of colonization. This thesis is a record of my life experiences. It is a record of my grueling self-inquiry. And it is a record of the work required to acknowledge my abuser, confront my abuser, leave my abuser, and ultimately heal from my abuser. This personal, vital exploration repositions bodies who are constantly pushed and maintained at the margins to the very center and calls for a reconsideration of our political personhood as Black, as queer, as trans, as poor, as differently abled. Yes, society needs to reconsider our political personhood,

AND

more important than that,

we do,

I do.

Accordingly, here is *one of* my stories. Here is *one of* my journeys. Here is how I made way to Black self-love and found the courage to not only utter, but embody,

I am worthy.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review will examine the complex ways of knowing and being as Black folx in the United States of America. While Black folx is an encompassing term to refer to anyone who falls under the African diaspora, I specifically will be centering the experiences of Black folx assigned female at birth including queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming individuals. This literature review will examine the historical, social, cultural and political context of what it means to be Black in the United States of America. Calling upon primarily Black female scholars and other Black, Indigenous, Latinx scholars, I will utilize Black Feminist Thought, Critical Race Theory, Liberation Pedagogy, and various intersectional, critical research to establish Black folx complex relationship with America, and in turn themselves. To begin, I assert that we must understand the historical, social, cultural, and political contexts under which we operate.

Enslaved Black Bodies

Who has power over the Black body? Who controls Black bodies? The historical narrative about our ancestry has been cruelly distorted, therefore it is important to establish the inhumane beginnings. Our time on this sacred, Indigenous soil began with terror and abuse. Africans were stolen from their homeland and forced to use their bodies to produce for the white man (Wells-Barnett, 1895/2019). Unlike the typical cycle of abuse (Coleman, 1997), there was never a honeymoon period. The beginning of slavery marked the beginning of “legal tyranny”, the commodification and objectification of our

Black bodies (Buck-Morss, 2000, p. 826). Beginning in the 17th century, Africans were taken captive and forcibly shipped to stolen land¹ (Foreman et al., 2018). Enslaved Africans² were owned, traded, sold, beaten, and raped by Enslavers³ (Alexander, 2010; Foreman et al., 2018; Sharpe, 2010; Wells-Barnett, 1895/2019). Slavery, as it has been defined by dominant historical narratives, was abolished in the mid 19th century, however by then the master/slave dichotomy was deeply engrained into the fabric of society and regarded as a “justifiable institution” (Buck-Morss, 2000, p. 826). For 250 years the white man owned, traded and abused the enslaved people originating from Africa. For 250 years, enslavers crudely utilized physical punishment and inhumane conditions to establish the enslaved as objects, property and by all accounts inferior to the status of a human being. For 250 years, enslavers stole the skills, knowledge, and labor of Black bodies, rendering them too valuable to be killed, yet not valuable enough to be citizens. The enslaved people were worth \$200 during enslavement or \$40,000 in today’s economy (Bales, 1999/2012). The death of an enslaved was a huge loss for an enslaver, so white enslavers rarely killed the people whom they enslaved. Instead of murder, the *enslavers elected to discipline with violence*, revenge or sell the enslaved (Wells-Barnett, 1895/2019). Consequently, the end of enslavement marked the beginning of the intentional slaughter of Black bodies.

Enslavers sought new forms of intimidation and violence after they lost the right to own Black people as property. Wells-Barnett (1895/2019) testifies, “beginning with

¹ Enslaved Africans lived in all parts of the Americas, including South America, the Caribbean, and Mexico, more than half of the country we now call the United States was Mexico until 1848.

² Enslaved as an adjective acknowledges the condition of being enslaved.

³ Master connotes the power and aspirations of Enslavers without acknowledging the violent practices they utilized.

the emancipation of the Negro, the inevitable result of unbribed [sic] power exercised for two and a half centuries, by the white man over the Negro, began to show itself in acts of conscienceless outlawry” (p. 1). Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells (1895/2019) outline three justifications propagated to legitimize the unlawful lynching and violence white folks enacted upon Black bodies: alleged “race riots”, “No Negro Domination”, and lastly the “alleged” rape of white women (p. 6).⁴ These unfounded excuses allowed white men to murder unoffending Black folks as a means to incite fear, keep Black folks from voting, and evade the consequences of the law. In other words, 250 years of enslavement authorized white folks’ totalitarian commodification of Black bodies - establishing systemic power and violence against Black people. This systemic power was further legitimized through Jim Crow laws, the Black Codes and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan (Alexander, 2010; Kendi, 2019). The legacy of white supremacy perpetuated a government and people that still denied Black bodies access to citizenship. States legalized racial segregation and used violence to deny Black bodies the right to vote, hold jobs, obtain an education, and own land (Alexander, 2010; Wells-Barnett, 1895/2019). While some may argue lynching and enslavement are a relic of the past, mass incarceration, police brutality and racial discrimination continue to perpetuate the legacy of enslavement, white supremacy and oppressive power over Black bodies (Alexander, 2010; Kendi, 2019). Throughout history, legislation and physical violence has been used to establish power over the Black body; to this day, abuse tactics continue to be used to maintain power and control over Black and otherwise marginalized bodies (Kendi, 2019).

⁴ See Wells-Barnett (1895/2019), for more detailed information on how these excuses were used against Black bodies.

Black trans bodies, Black queer bodies, Black fat bodies, and Black disabled bodies all experience the consequences of systematic oppression. Black people are in an abusive relationship with America. Black folx are in an abusive relationship with America.

Disembodied Black Bodies

Do you know your ancestors? Do you know your history? Dominant cultural and historical narratives define Black people's history as beginning with slavery enslavement. Why are we not taught about African and Black history before the time period of enslavement? This story, this narrative, this "beginning" is so entrenched in America's teachings that even Black people believe we began as slaves enslaved. As a Black person, I would occasionally wonder about my history before enslavement, but I had virtually no access to this information due to colonization and white violence. I, too, accepted my history as beginning with slavery; alongside my Black siblings who did not have access to the stolen skills, labor, knowledge and culture of our ancestors.

Before we were Black Americans, we were enslaved; before we were enslaved, we were Africans. As Africans, we were doctors, mothers, farmers and creators; before we were doctors, we were the first people. As the first people, we were magic, and still to this day we are magic. Enslavement, colonization, oppression, disembodiment, and dehumanization created conditions which interfere with our magic, our spirit, and our embodiment. Slavery, another reductive naming by our colonizers, does little to capture the violent, transgenerational, and traumatic experience that was enslavement. The period of enslavement enacted intentional, cruel violence on communities, families and individual bodies. When we were stolen from our ancestral land and reduced to objects, we experienced a grave, violent and collective disembodiment. Freire (1970/2005) contends,

any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making process is to change them into objects (p. 85).

Enslavers violently removed African's decision-making processes. This is oppression. This is dehumanization. This is disembodiment. 250 years, two and a half centuries, 25 decades, 3000 months, 10 generations, 12.5 million Africans (Elitis et al., 2010), violently ripped from their families, their homes, their land, and their autonomy.

Disembodied: alienated from our consciousness, our spirits, our bodies and our magic, our relationship with ourselves, our bodies, our communities, and our land forever changed. There is an intimate relationship between Black bodies, violence, domination and sexual violation (Sharpe, 2010). Sharpe painstakingly establishes Black bodies as “the bearers (through violence, regulation, transmission, etc.) of the knowledge of certain subjection . . .” (p. 4). In other words, Black bodies hold this violence, carry this violence, bear the weight of this violence, and then pass along this violence from generation to generation. Our bodies today, continue to bear the weight of, “monstrous intimacies, defined as a set of known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desires and positions produced, reproduced, circulated, and transmitted, that are breathed in like air and often unacknowledged to be monstrous” (p. 3). In other words, monstrous intimacies encapsulate the violence which takes place at the site of our bodies. Intimate because it knows our name. Monstrous because it is inhumane. Domination and oppression created these conditions of violation, confinement, terror, shame, and intimacy. As Black bodies occupy these conditions and at the same time survive these conditions they are produced and reproduced at the site of the violence (Black bodies). Sharpe utilizes passages from Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* to demonstrate the monstrous

intimacies which “initiated enormous and ongoing psychic, temporal, and bodily breaches” (p. 4) upon the collective black consciousness. While some argue the repetition of these horrific monstrosities in and of itself contributes to the perpetuation of violence (Hartman, 1997), like Sharpe, I utilize the following passage to acknowledge and bear witness to the brutality of the trans-Atlantic slave-trade which is too often overlooked, reduced, and erased by white America.

[Master] was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding. He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of the day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, who he used to tie up in a joist and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers from his gory victim seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran faster, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember anything. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it (Douglass, 1845, p. 5).

Monstrous: spilling another’s blood, taking pleasure in another’s pain

Intimate: unclothed, naked, to inflict a personal and vulnerable position

This occurrence took place very soon after I went to live with my old master, and under the following circumstances. Aunt Hester went out one night, - where or for what I do not know, - and happened to be absent when my master desired her presence. He had ordered her not to go out evenings and warned her that she must never let him catch her in company with a young man who was paying attention to her, belonging to Colonel Lloyd. The young man’s name was Ned Roberts, generally called Lloyd’s Ned. Why master was so careful of her, may safely be left to conjecture. She was a woman of noble form and of graceful proportions, having very few equals and fewer superiors, in personal appearance, among the colored or white women of our neighborhood (Douglass, 1845, p. 6).

Monstrous: to reject Aunt Hester’s autonomy, to dictate where she goes and who she sees

Intimate: to dictate where she goes and who she sees, to have knowledge of and power over the personal and private details of her life

Aunt Hester had not only disobeyed his orders in going out, but had been found in company with Lloyd's Ned, which circumstance, I found, from what he said while he was whipping her was the chief offence. . . "Now you d-d-b-h, I'll learn you how to disobey my orders!" and after rolling up his sleeves he commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor. I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over. I expected it would be my turn next. It was all new to me. I had never seen anything like it before. I had always lived with my grandmother on the outskirts of the plantation, where she was put to raise the children of the younger women. I had therefore been, until now, out of the way of the bloody scenes that often occurred on the plantation (Douglass, 1845, p. 7).

And it is here that we witness at a personal and intimate level how enslavement and the consequential violence thereafter established the violent conditions which continue to interfere with our magic, our spirit, and our embodiment. Frederick Douglass and his Aunt Hester are only two brief accounts of the monstrous intimacies enacted upon Black bodies out of 12.5 million Africans and their descendants across the Americas⁵. There is an intimate relationship between Black bodies, violence, domination and sexual violation. This intimate relationship, these monstrous intimacies, are located upon our Black bodies, are held within our Black bodies, and are transgenerationally passed through our Black bodies. Black people are in an abusive relationship with America. Black folx are in an abusive relationship with America.

⁵ Africans were sold all across the "New World", referred to today as South America and the Caribbean; this includes Mexico, Havana, Cuba and Salvador, and Brazil (Foreman, et al., 2018.).

Embodied Black Bodies

Enslavement was the beginning of our disembodiment, not the beginning of our story. We were humans before we were enslaved. We were embodied before we were enslaved. Some of us were skilled in medicine, mathematics, astronomy and art (Fairchild, 2018) and some of us were not. We were mothers, fathers, children, and community members. All of us were embodied beings, fully deserving of our humanity, born to exist as such. World history and American history has violently erased and distorted African history and Black history. Black Studies has worked to recognize Africa as the birthplace of humanity and the cradle of civilization. The dominant narrative often describes Africa as underdeveloped and a “Third World country”, reducing an ENTIRE continent to one country, with one type of person and one type of culture. However, archeology has established that the human species began in Africa (Leakey, 1933, 1935).

Many credit the ancient Greeks with establishing civilization out of thin air; but the historical record clearly situates these achievements in Africa, many thousands of years before the first Greek learned the alphabet. Ancient Africans provided the bedrock upon which all other human cultures are built (cf. Davidson, 1969). *Africa developed the world* (Fairchild, 2018).

Africans were the first to invent language, utilize tools and fire, develop agriculture and community, laying the foundation for human culture. We were embodied, in full possession of our bodies, before enslavers ripped us from our homeland and disconnected us from our humanity. This horrific act of physical and psychological violence marked the beginning of our abusive relationship with white folks who now occupy the land we call the United States of America.

Africa has an extensive rich history, each country with its own people, culture, and origin story. I would like to acknowledge that the history and context I provide is brief and does not capture the full and expansive history of African and Black people.

The purpose of this literature review is to provide brief historical, social, cultural and political context in order to explore our current experience as Black folx living in the United States of America. Before we were Black people living in the United States of America, we were enslaved; before we were enslaved, we were doctors and mothers; before we were doctors, we were the first people. As the first people we were deeply connected to the land, our divine and sacred energy, and to our collective spirits (Atta, 2018). Today this connection to our divine energy and ancestral wisdom is situated in various religious and spiritual namings. Some African and Black folx have access to this historical and cultural knowledge. Some do not. Our history has often been distorted or erased. Black people's ancestral connection has taken the form of Afrikan indigenous wisdom, African traditional religious and spirit work, Black witchcraft, and other embodied spiritual practices (Atta, 2018; Harris, 2018).

As African descendants, we have inherited divinity as well as the ability to connect to our cultural and spiritual selves in order to liberate, heal, and create our communities (Atta, 2018). African-centered perspective (ACP) is a worldview which acknowledges,

the presence of a Higher Power or Creator, the centrality of Spirit and our Spirit-ness (humans as Spiritual beings), a holistic mind-body-spirit connection, understanding that everything in the Universe is interconnected in Oneness, with our individual identity grounded in the community (pp. 21-22).

ACP and other spirit-centered worldviews are useful namings and frameworks for the purpose of acknowledging Black folx as catalysts for change and contextualizing our stories, courage and wisdom in the pursuit of liberation (Atta, 2018; Perlow et al., 2018). However, we do not need a Name, nor permission from the Academy or Colonizers to honor our divine consciousness, our knowing, our magical spirit, as it already (past,

present and future) exists within us (Harris, 2018). As Black folx we have inherited a legacy of magic. Harris (2018) writes,

I come from a long line of Black spirit women who first believed in freedom and then used everything in their power, including their magic, conjure, and other forms of African traditional religious and spirit work, in movement toward that freedom (p. 246).

Black AFAB folx are catalysts, are truth-tellers, are knowledge, are the past, present and future.

“Where there is a woman there is magic” (Shange, 1982).

“We take the ordinary and make it extraordinary. We take the common and make it unusual. We take the standard and set new standards” - blogger/activist Feminista Jones (as cited Jordan-Zachery, 2018).

“The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (Lorde, 1978/2019).

“All knowledge comes from raced and gendered bodies that exist in particular places, across particular moments in time, and in relation to particular others in particular ways” (Baszile, 2018).

“Your magic will dismantle the master’s house” (Harris, 2018, p. 255).

Harris (2018) speaks to the embodied knowledge we have inherited and used for healing, resistance and survival. Colonization has disconnected us from our rightful, embodied, spiritual selves; consequently, we are forced to actively (re)member and (re)claim our mind-body-spirit connection. Colonization has weaponized the language of witches, conjurers, and magic. Popular culture reference “Black Girl Magic” is often used in celebration of the unique power and resilience of Black girls and women (Halliday & Brown, 2018). However, Black Girl Magic has also been weaponized against fat Black bodies, disabled Black bodies, and gender-nonconforming Black bodies (Hay et al., 2018). There is no monolithic Black experience. Dominant narratives perpetuate harmful

stereotypes reducing Black bodies to caricatures of a culture. Jordan-Zachery (2018) describes how Black Girl Magic is utilized by some, as a counternarrative to stereotypes about Black girlhood and womanhood, attempting to provide space for Black girls and women to progress an established history of self-definition (p. 5). Queer and gender-nonconforming Black folx, fat and disabled Black folx, Black girls and Black women participate in self-definition as a means to resist and identify outside of oppressive hegemonic structures that work to distort our beautiful Black bodies. While our process of self-definition can be messy, misinformed, and at times harmful to ourselves and our Black siblings (due internalized oppression) it is through self-definition that we are able to engage in practices of resistance, interrogation, and liberation. Black witch, L.J. Harris, urges us to honor our energetic connections.

That energy [divine consciousness] is all around us and we are hearing the spirits of our Ancestors. They are talking to us. We're constantly connected through that ancestral frequency. We've been colonized out of that frequency, out of our inner voice, taught not to trust it... there is ongoing colonization of Black witchcraft by white people/culture that frequently appropriate it, failing to credit those who created it and invisibilizing/erasing Black witches from modern portrayals of witchcraft. There is the lack of acknowledgement that *we* are the source of *their* information (2018, p. 254).

Lakeesha J. Harris, Derise Tolliver Atta, Rachel Alicia Griffin, Brenda J. Allen, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, and countless other truth tellers and embodied Black women have done the work to record our accurate history, document the violence enacted upon our bodies, and ultimately establish pathways for our future practices of resistance, interrogation, healing and liberation. My Black siblings remind me to honor my energy and resist the veil of colonization. It is with our divine, collective energy that I will interrogate Black people's relationship with institutions and people which perpetuate dominating hegemonic power. This dominating hegemonic power is abuse. Black people

are in an abusive relationship with America, and as we are able to honor our embodied spirits, we are able to liberate ourselves from the abuse.

Defining Intimate Relationship Abuse

The historical and present-day tactics of power and control over Black bodies certainly demonstrates abuse. Relationship abuse provides a framework to define the violence Black folx endure. Relationship abuse, also referred to as domestic violence and intimate partner violence in the literature, is characterized by “a pattern of behaviors used by one partner to maintain power and control over another partner in an intimate relationship” (Breiding et al., 2015, p. 11). There is no universal definition for what constitutes intimate partners. The awareness, scope and definition of intimate partner violence has varied greatly, influenced by the criminal legal system, the public health system, and various feminist’s movements (Mitchell & Anglin, 2009). Historically the term intimate partners have indicated two people who are married or divorced. However, as our political and cultural landscape has changed, definitions have expanded to adapt accordingly. Various definitions include married couples, divorced couples, cohabitating partners, any two in a romantic relationship, and two people who have a child together. These hegemonic definitions characterize intimacy based on the nature of the entanglement as pertaining to its connection to our institutions. The lived reality of people experiencing relationship abuse demonstrates that the essence is in fact the intimacy. To conflate intimacy to state determined definitions of “intimate partners”, not only reduces the significance intimacy plays in a relationship, but also excludes folx who do not fit in state defined categories of “intimate partners”. Intimacy can take place between any two people, regardless of the nature of the relationship. Therefore,

relationship abuse can occur where there is intimacy and a relationship present. There is intimacy present for Black folx. There is abuse present for Black folx. Black folx are in an abusive relationship with America.

Intimacy

Intimacy is a nebulous concept that seems to evade clear definition. The phenomenology of intimacy has been researched, defined and debated in traditional frameworks such as psychotherapy and social psychology since before 1953 (Register & Henley, 1992). The dictionary definition of intimacy states: “marked by close association, contact or familiarity” (as cited in Register and Henley, 1953, p. 478). Harris-Perry (2011) defines citizenship as a social contract in which, “individuals subject themselves to rules, constraints and collective burdens imposed by the state (such as taxes and military service) in exchange for safety and services provided by the state (such as security and social programs)” (p. 36). Given this exchange between citizen and state, citizenship dictates a relationship with the state. This relationship is not only intimate, but also laden with power and control, effectively meeting the terms of relationship abuse. Citizenship determines an individual’s access to safety and services, including but not limited to housing, food, economic security, and healthcare. The association between the citizen and the state is daily, is constant, is pervasive, absolutely meeting the standards of “close association”, close “contact” and “familiarity”. Register and Henley (1953) conducted a study to further the understanding of intimacy. While it is an old study to reference, many modern-day studies on intimacy focus on sexual and romantic relationships. I reference Register and Henley’s findings as they provide an extensive and broad definition of intimacy. Participants filled out a questionnaire in response to the

following, “Please recall and describe a specific incident in which you experienced what you would call an ‘intimate experience’” (p. 469). They established seven themes based on their findings:

- **Non-Verbal Communication** - “I look directly into the child’s eyes. I don’t say anything or smile or gesture. I simply try to communicate peace and warmth and love” (p. 477).
- **Presence** - “noticeable existence of a person, or ‘spirit’, in the presence of another” (p. 473).
- **Time** - “length of experience” (p. 474).
- **Boundaries** - “the removal of boundaries between people” (p. 474).
- **Body** - “body awareness and bodily touching” (p. 475).
- **Destiny/Surprise** - “paradox... something they [participants] knew was surprising or unusual, and yet it had felt very natural, even destined” (p. 475).
- **Transformation** - “creating something new through a movement or a merging” (p. 475).

The themes they establish effectively characterize the physical and psychological association of intimacy. These characterizations of intimacy offer context to establish that being a citizen of the United States of America conceives an intimate relationship with Black folx. America is the abuser. Black folx are the victims. And they are intimately connected in the following ways:

- **Non-Verbal Communication** - Media, Institutions, side-ways glances, obscene gestures, silent tongues, communicate the inferiority and the otherness of the Black body.

- **Presence** - America's presence is overwhelming. Whiteness pervades our social contract. As a Black person, I am never not aware of my Blackness.
- **Time** - 400 years
- **Boundaries** - The boundaries between Black folx and America are both stagnant and ever-changing. Stagnant in the fact that boundaries in the relationship are given, taken and maintained at will by America, with the inherent principle that there are no boundaries. Ever-changing in the fact that laws and social norms have evolved to permit a guise of boundaries between person and state.
- **Body** - America owns the Black body. America inscribes the Black body.
- **Destiny/Surprise** - Citizenship feels natural. Social conditions feel natural. Yet, the surprise is the monstrosity and manufactured reality of it all.
- **Transformation** - America shapes, claims, and transforms the Black body. The Black body shapes, claims and transforms America.

Black people are in an intimate relationship with America. America knows our name, and demands we know its. Intimacy lends itself to a particular experience of violence that can greatly differ from violence between strangers. Intimate violence is personal. It is knowing. And it is painful. It reaches deep, vulnerable parts of your being. Violence done by a stranger is ordinary, general, anonymous, done by another for an unbeknownst reason. However, violence done by an intimate partner is particular, secluded, reserved just for you, done by another marking your self-worth as null.

Power and Control

As Black folx experience physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse interpersonally, socially and institutionally, relationship abuse offers a parallel paradigm

to examine the complexities of our positionality. The relationship abuse paradigm acknowledges power and control as crucial components to abuse. As power is utilized to maintain Black folx as willful subjects (Baszile, 2018), understanding the nature of power is crucial to understanding the nature of this relationship. Experts in the field use the Power and Control Wheel, developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project in Duluth, MN, to assist with describing the characterization of these violent relationships (Pence & Paymar, 1993).



Figure 2.1 Power and Control Wheel

The Power and Control Wheel (see Figure 2.1) depicts the various tactics an abusive partner will utilize to maintain control of the other in a relationship (Chavis & Hill, 2009). The outer ring represents the physical and sexual violence that is utilized to reinforce the more subtle methods, while the inside of the wheel consists of subtle, continuous behaviors which include: coercion and threats, intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, minimizing, denying, and blaming and economic abuse (Chavis & Hill, 2009). It is important to note that the use of physical and sexual violence is often infrequent and sporadic, contrary to popular belief. The consistent threat of these forms of abuse is used to strengthen the influence of the other more subtle and continuous behaviors on maintaining power and control over the abused partner (Chavis & Hill, 2009). For example, Black folx are often compelled to mask our emotions and hold our tongues (Allen, 1998). This silencing is a result of abusive experiences where we previously experienced minimizing, denying, threats and even physical or sexual abuse. In turn, we internalize these messages, blame ourselves, and dismiss the harm. Identifying this silence as abuse, allows us to recognize we are worthy of dignity, respect, as well as emotional, physical, and spiritual wellness. As Black folx are able to identify and deconstruct the abuse we have endured, we are able to seek new ways of living and being which can include healing and liberation.

Abused Black Bodies

Black folks are in an abusive relationship with America. This relationship is intimate. This relationship is personal, and this relationship has persisted for over 400 years. Emancipation, segregation, desegregation, the first Black president, a police officer finally convicted for the murder of our Black sibling, George Floyd, – is this freedom?

Much has changed since 1619, our laws, our educational system, the name of the lands we inhabit, even still our relationship with America has remained the same (Alexander, 2010). The presentation of the abuse has changed, but the essence has remained the same. The essence of this abusive relationship is dehumanization. Recall Freire (1970/2005),

Any situation in which some individuals [white folks] prevent others [Black folks] from engaging in the process of inquiry [critical consciousness] is one of violence. **The means used** are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making [their humanity] is to change them into **objects** (p. 85, emphasis added).

The means are power. The means are control. The means are conditions. The means destroy our aspirations and our pursuit for freedom (Love, 2019); the means position us at war for our bodies (Coates, 2015); and the means deny us access to citizenship (Alexander, 2010, Love, 2019; Harris-Perry, 2011).

Embodiment, citizenship, recognition and autonomy are intimately connected. According to recognition scholarship, humans participate in society, society's rules, as well as strive to maintain right relationship with each other and the state as a means to achieve both public and private recognition (Harris-Perry, 2011). Citizenship provides access to recognition; to be recognized exemplifies the humanity and uniqueness of an individual (p. 36). While recognition provides access to social, cultural, and political resources such as safety and community, misrecognition is extremely painful and distorts one's sense of self and identity. Black folx want to matter. We want to thrive. And we want to be recognized. Love (2019) affirms, "mattering, citizenship, community sovereignty, and humanity go hand in hand with the ideas of democracy, liberty, and justice for all, which are the unalienable rights needed to survive" (p. 2). The struggle for these unalienable rights is unique to each and every one of us. There is no monolithic

black experience. In order to recognize Black folx's humanity, we also need to recognize the intersectional complexities of our identities. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term "intersectionality" to demonstrate how our identities of marginalization come together to shape our unique reality. Culture, race, nationality, language, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, and class as well as numerous other aspects of our identity must be understood in relation to one another as, "multiple oppressions [which] reinforce each other to create new categories of suffering" (Taylor, 2017, p. 4). As Black, as trans, as queer, as differently abled, as fat, as woman, and as poor, our struggle for recognition is painful, consequently so is survival.

Black folx are in an abusive relationship with America. Black AFAB folx are in an abusive relationship with America. Harris-Perry (2011) explores the question, "What does it mean to be a black woman and an American citizen?" (p. 20) affirming that "the internal worlds of black women are both **constituted by** and **influential in** the political realities in which they live" (p. 20, emphasis added). In other words, Black AFAB folx are by-products of our environment and their social conditioning. America's derogatory assumptions of their character has profound impacts on our identities. Harris-Perry (2011) demonstrates this impact by describing a psychological study in which participants were tasked with aligning themselves vertically in a crooked room, with a crooked chair. As participants attempted to stand upright, many utilized their tilted surroundings to measure their sense of verticality. As a result, some participants could be tilted as much as 35 degrees and still believe that they were standing perfectly straight. Their surroundings and the images before them altered their perception. Black women experience a similar sense of fallacy. America is the crooked room. Effectively deceived

on which way is up, Black women's sense of reality is manipulated. This research effectively demonstrates the psychological, emotional and individual experiences of Black women in America.

When they confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion (p. 29).

Harris-Perry asserts Black women accommodate degrading stereotypes and other people's expectations by shifting their tone of voice, outward behaviors and expressed attitudes – in their attempts to stand upright in a crooked room. It is here that I would like to make a distinction: Black folx are born standing up right. Black folx are born being able to see the crooked room for what it is. However, the conditions of our oppression distort our ability to connect with our humanity, connect with our curiosity, and connect with our consciousness, which culminates in our inability to see the crooked room for what it is. Subsequently, we attempt to crookedly align ourselves with the crooked room and the crooked chair if only to access citizenship, recognition and survival.

The crooked room is our modern-day whips and chains. America works tirelessly to deny Black AFAB folx access to their humanity and access to their citizenship.

Statistics reveal the inequality that marks black women's lives. In the United States today more than one in four black women lives in poverty, a rate more than double that of white women. Babies born to black women are two and a half times more likely to die before their first birthday than white babies. Compared to white women, black women are significantly more likely to be the sole wage earner in their household . . . Black women heads of households are twice as likely to live in inadequate housing . . . On the whole, black women have less education and higher rates of underemployment, poverty, disease, and isolation than white women. . . Statistics show that race and gender strongly determine life opportunities for black women. On the other hand, the inherent variety among individual black women's lives sometimes reinforces, sometimes defies, and always complicates the simple story of the numbers. . . (Harris-Perry, 2011, pp. 45-47).

Black AFAB folx each experience the crooked room differently at the intersections of their individual complex identities. However, America wields a “powerful web of myth” (p. 45) which conflates, erases, dramatizes, and mis-recognizes us, effectively reducing us to one of three Black women:

Jezebel⁶ (mixed-race, European features, thin lips, straight hair)

- Black women who are hypersexual,
- Black women who are seductive,
- Black women who are open for *anyone*’s taking,
- Black women who are insatiable breeders (Harris-Perry, 2011, pp. 51-69; West, 1995).

Sapphire⁷ (large but not obese, brown or dark brown)

- Black women who are hostile,
- Black women who are shrill,
- Black women who are sassy,
- Black women who are loud,
- Black women who are aggressive,
- Black women who are angry,
- Black women who are irrational (Boylorn, 2014, Harris-Perry, 2011, pp. 86-96, West, 1995).

⁶ “The ‘bad-Black-girl’, originated during slavery when white slave owners exercised almost complete control over Black women’s sexuality and reproduction. Value on the auction block was determined by childbearing capacity and rape, perpetrated by both Black and White men, was routinely used to augment the slave population” (West, 1995, p. 462).

⁷ “The Sapphire image . . . was the hostile nagging wife . . . and was portrayed as ‘iron-willed, effectual, [and] treacherous toward and contemptuous of Black men (West, 1995, p. 461).

Mammy⁸ (big, soft, fat, dark-skinned, unfeminine)

- Black women who are asexual,
- Black women who are docile,
- Black women who are maternal,
- Black women who are selfless,
- Black women who are subservient (Boylorn, 2014, Harris-Perry, 2011, pp. 69-86, West, 1995).

America wields this powerful web of myths, as an enslaver once wielded a whip. These stereotypes, this crooked room, this misrecognition is insidious and painful. The abusive violence is still present, restricting, confining and distorting Black AFAB folx's relationship with themselves and their community. And it is here, at the intersections of our identity, of our pain, of our struggle, that we must remember who we are, where we come from and (re)ignite the magic within ourselves.

Black folx are in an abusive relationship with America.

Black AFAB folx are in an abusive relationship with America.

I am in an abusive relationship with America.

This relationship is intimate.

This relationship is personal.

America does not want me to tell this story.

White folks do not want me to tell this story.

⁸ "Mammy, one of the most pervasive images of Black women, originated in the South during slavery. . . Her primary role was domestic service, characterized by long hours of work with little or no financial compensation. Subordination, nurturance, and constant self-sacrifice were expected as she performed her domestic duties (West, 1995, p. 459).

The Academy does not want me to tell this story.

Especially not in this way.⁹

They want you distracted.

They want me distracted.

Explaining over and over again, my reason for being¹⁰.

Yet, it is here I make myself known.

Alongside other truth tellers who have tirelessly resisted.¹¹

And it is here,

amongst these violent, (re)traumatizing (re)tellings,

amongst the citations, the source material, proper syntax and disembodied
vocabulary,

where I choose to locate myself, return to my body,¹²

and honor the nuances of the painful, emotional, terrifying, dehumanizing process

that is resisting my oppressor, (re)counting my abuse, (re)explaining racism,

dismantling my chains, raising my own consciousness, writing myself, making

myself, and (re) connecting with my humanity.

⁹ “The conventions of scholarly writing demand a disappearance of the self” (Anthym, 2018, p. 3).

¹⁰ “Toni Morrison once said, ‘The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being’” (as cited Love, 2019, p. 9)

¹¹ “. . . Black women have furiously contested injustice in education and elsewhere for centuries” (Allen, 1998; Cooper, 1995; Davis 1998; hooks, 1981; Houston, 1992; Jones 2003; Lorde 1944; Madison, 1994, 2009; Patton, 2004; Shange, 1975; Stewart, 1992; Truth, 1992, as cited in Griffin, 2013).

¹² “. . . poetry [is] a means of demonstrating embodiment and reflexivity, a way to refuse the mind-body dialectic, a form of feminist ethnography, and a catalyst for social agitation and change” (Faulkner, 2018 CITE).

And we are born inheriting a legacy of abuse. Our birthrights sold before we were even a thought in our mother's mind.¹³

This abuser, America.

He has known me since birth.

I came out free, natural, screaming.

Aligned with myself: body, mind and spirit.

Whole.

He wrapped me in a pink blanket.

Put an identification marker on my wrist.

These were his first gestures of power.

Fresh out the womb, I defied his claimings, screaming, covered in blood, taking up space.

My body, dependent, I learned to answer to his naming.

America, the Abuser

Your body is mine. You belong to me.

Oh, how I love to hate you and hate to love you.

Your dark skin makes my white skin crawl,

with disgust, with desire, with shame for the desire.

Your soul?

It feeds my greed, fills my belly, and fixes all my broken parts.

Her body was never really hers to begin with.

Sure, she may have had it for the twenty-seven years she's been on earth.

But her body,

like all black women's bodies,

never really belonged to her.

Or maybe it never belonged just to her.

When she said she was raped by three white men,

it became clear that her body isn't hers alone.

¹³ See *Part Owner*, Michael Eric Dyson, 2007

It belongs to a history that hates black limbs
and lusts for black flesh.
It belongs to a politics that mutilates black souls
and muffles black voices.
It belongs to a nation that invaded black wombs
for pleasure and profit (Dyson, 2007).

You are mine.
Open your mouth,
get on your knees,
spread your legs.
Bear my children,
keep my home,
and never forget your place.

Her body already belonged to them
because their grandfathers had willed it to them,
just as her grandfather had done the dirty work
so, they could be clean and comfortable (Dyson, 2007).

Traumatized Black Bodies

As Black bodies continue to endure harm at the hands of racist, sexist, oppressive systems, we also bear the burden of historical, generational and unacknowledged trauma on the very land we were enslaved upon (Beal, 2008; Burstow 2003). Burstow (2003) asserts, “there is a complex relationship between trauma and systemic oppression. Oppression is the primary traumatizing condition and one to which all are subject” (p. 1308). In other words, to experience oppression, to experience racism, is to experience abuse. Abuse changes you. Trauma changes you. Abuse and trauma are intimately connected. Abuse describes the behavior of harmful actions, while trauma describes the aftermath of harmful actions. Trauma is a consequence of harm. As defined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA) Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, “trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful

or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 2). SAMHSA outlines three different types of trauma that are relevant to the experiences of Black folx: individual trauma, community trauma, and historical trauma (2014, pp. 36-40). Individual trauma is an adverse experience or set of adverse experiences that occurs to one person (p. 36). Community trauma is an adverse experience or set of adverse experiences that affect an entire culture or community, as defined as a neighborhood, school, town or reservation (p. 39). Historical trauma is an adverse experience or set of adverse experiences which has an impact across generations (p. 40). Individual, community and historical trauma impacts wellbeing, erodes a sense of safety and contributes to the prevalence of depression, grief, traumatic stress, domestic violence, and loss of cultural knowledge, language and identity (Burstow, 2003; SAMHSA, 2014). Traumatic harm impairs an individual or a community's ability to cope, as it "leave[s] traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems" (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 1). Black folx experience individual trauma in their day-to-day interactions with people, places and systems. Black folx experience communal trauma from the communities they are a part of, their neighborhoods, their schools, and their workplaces. Black folx experience historical trauma as they bear the impact of slavery and generational legacies of rape, violence and mistreatment. As Black folx inherit the indoctrinated trauma of living at the intersections and resisting hegemonic structures (Bailey & Miller, 2015), they also bear the emotional, physical, cognitive, behavioral, social, and developmental consequences of traumatization (Burtstow, 2003; SAMHSA, 2014; van der Kolk, 2014).

Emotional Consequences

Emotional developmental theory asserts that emotions are inherent and necessary for our survival. As children we learn to regulate our emotions to meet the demands of different situations or to achieve different goals (Broderick & Blewitt, 2015). Emotional reactions are likely to occur during the initial experience of the traumatic event including feelings of anger, fear, sadness and shame. An individual's socio-cultural history, or socialized history with emotions, can impact how a person navigates their emotions after a traumatic event has occurred. People who experience trauma at a young age and people who experience repeated trauma are more likely to have difficulty regulating their emotions (SAMHSA, 2014, van der Kolk, 2014). Considering that Black bodies inherit the trauma of our ancestors and endure our own trauma the moment we take our first breath, what is our socialized history with emotions? What are we taught about regulating our emotions? Research indicates that emotional reactions to trauma tend to fall under two emotional extremes: feeling too much (overwhelmed) or too little (numb) (SAMHSA, 2014). Common emotional reactions include detachment, anger, sadness, helplessness, denial, depression, anxiety, grief, shame, and feelings of vulnerability (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 62).

What are the consequences of not being allowed to experience the full spectrum of emotional reactions that traumatic experiences warrant?

I also expend energy monitoring my emotions, masking them, or both. . . . I wanted to tell him that I was insulted, but I held my tongue. I often am careful not to display negative emotions (e.g., sadness, despair, anger, disagreement) because I do not want to enact negative stereotypes. For instance, I might suppress my anger because I do not want to be seen as a militant Black person or as a domineering, loud Black woman, or as a bitchy woman (Allen, 1998, p. 580).

Allen (1998) describes the masking, the suppressing, and the repression that Black folx often employ while navigating the everyday world. While these actions are tools of defense and safety, they are not without consequences. Walker (2015) explains that society's master-narrative about emotions, compounded with our own experiences of trauma, causes damage to our authentic, human, emotional natures. In a culture that only approves of “positive” emotions, survivors often repress and avoid their “negative” emotions as they receive messages of disapproval, and often in the case of Black folx, contempt.

A reluctance to participate in such a fundamental realm of the human experience results in much unnecessary loss. For just as without night there is no day, without work there is no play, without hunger there is no satiation, without fear there is no courage, without tears there is no joy, and without anger, there is no real love (Walker, 2015, pp. 30-31).

As we are alienated from our inherent and human feeling experience, we wreak havoc on our bodies, minds and spirits. Honoring the full breadth of our emotions is necessary to experience wellness, self-esteem, love, happiness, and connection (Walker, 2015). Black folx deserve to recognize and honor their full humanity.

Physical Consequences

Trauma is an embodied experience. Traumatic stress wreaks havoc on our brains and bodies, resulting in physiological damage (Burstow, 2003; SAMHSA, 2014; Walker, 2013). There are a variety of physical symptoms that occur in response to emotional distress, these symptoms include: nausea, gastrointestinal distress, sweating, muscle tremors, fatigue, sleep disturbances, and hyperarousal (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 64). Research indicates a strong correlation between trauma and chronic health conditions; this correlation is indicative of the very real and profound mental and physical consequences of traumatic events, *even when* there is no direct physical assault on the body (Burstow,

2003; SAMHSA, 2014; Walker, 2013). Crenshaw (1994) asserts, “women of color are differently situated in the economic, social and political worlds” (p. 21), consequently Black folx are less likely to have their needs met as they experience countless structural barriers to access basic resources such as employment, child-care, and safe housing (Crenshaw, 1994). Black women (these statistics do not account for trans, queer and non-binary folx) are disproportionately affected by chronic disease and health-related risk factors (Nichols et al., 2015). As Black folx experience greater cumulative environmental and social stressors, manage the consequences of pervasive stereotypes (strong Black woman, mammy, welfare queen, etc.), their emotional and physical wellbeing suffers (Nichols et al., 2015).

Cognitive Consequences

Trauma can impact our cognitions or patterns of thinking (SAMHSA, 2014; Walker, 2013). Trauma often challenges a person’s worldview, impacting their view about the world, themselves and the future, resulting in thoughts that the world is a dangerous place, feelings of personal incompetence and an understanding that the future is hopeless and will never be the same (SAMHSA, 2014). Cognitive reactions may also include difficulty concentrating, distortion of time and space, memory problems, flashbacks, self-blame, and difficulty making decisions. Cognitive consequences can greatly impact our thoughts, feelings and beliefs about the world, as a result, impacting how we move through the world and interact with others (Walker, 2013). “Being Black and woman engenders complex ways of knowing and being” (Allen, 1998, p. 575).

Behavioral Consequences

As a person seeks to manage the aftereffects of a traumatic experience, they will engage in a variety of behavioral strategies in an attempt to reduce the traumatic stress.

Behavioral reactions are influenced by our previous traumatic experiences and how we have learned to process our emotions. People who experience trauma in childhood or people who lack the tools to handle traumatic stress, often participate in avoidant, self-medication, impulsive and self-injurious behaviors (SAMHSA, 2014). Behavioral reactions to traumatic stress can include startled reactions, restlessness, sleep and appetite disturbances, difficulty expressing oneself, argumentative behavior, withdrawal, and increased use of alcohol and drugs (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 62). It is important to note that these behavioral strategies are employed often when survivors of traumatic experiences attempt to mitigate intense feelings of terror, hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness, despair, distrust, rage, and guilt as a result of a “concrete physical, cognitive, affective, and spiritual response” to events and situations “that are objectively traumatizing” (Burstow, 2003, p. 1303).

Social Consequences

Traumatic stress can deeply impact how we interact with the world. Trauma-informed care positions social support networks as a crucial component to protecting and/or mitigating the effects of traumatic stress (SAMHSA, 2014). People close to the survivor can also experience the consequences of traumatic stress alongside the person they are supporting, as they witness or are triggered by their friend’s traumatic stress (SAMHSA, 2014). While social support networks can play an important role in navigating the healing process, survivors may choose to avoid their close relationships due to intense feelings of fear, shame and distrust as they manage the unpredictability of their emotional and physical reactions after a traumatic event (SAMHSA, 2014). Survivors of chronic trauma, such as childhood abuse and interpersonal violence, may find it challenging to navigate adult relationships, as they struggle to establish intimacy

due to a learned fear that trusting and needing others can have dangerous consequences (SAMHSA, 2014; Walker, 2013). However, as survivors are able to connect to other people, create healthy relational bonds, and learn how to handle emotional conflict in relationships, they are able to participate in healing, recovery, and sustain secure relational attachments (Walker, 2013).

Liberated Black Bodies

Black folx deserve the tools to navigate and heal from the traumatizing consequences of being a Black American citizen. Black folx experience multiple forms of violence and multiple consequences of violence at the intersections of their “omnipresent oppression” (Griffin, 2012, p. 139). These intersections demand a multidimensional analysis (Crenshaw, 1989), as Black folx encounter domination at the transgressive borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987) of race, class, gender, sexuality, (dis) ability, immigration status, nationality, language, geographic location, religion, age and family status (Allen, 1998; Beal, 2008; Collins, 1989; Petermon & Spencer, 2019). The CDC recognizes that relationship abuse is a prevalent form of violence that causes significant health and economic issues (2020). By locating racial violence within the scope of relationship abuse, Black folx can receive recognition at the state level. The CDC has identified the following societal risk factors as contributing factors to the prevalence of relationship abuse:

- traditional gender norms and gender inequality
- cultural norms that support aggression
- societal income inequality
- weak health, educational, economic and social policies/laws (2020).

Chavis and Hill (2008) contextualize abuse as a societal harm, experienced by individuals, that is a by-product of, “a society that condones the use of violence as a normative form of expressive communication and a strategy employed to maintain the domination of certain groups of people” (p. 122). The harmful impact of abuse is not only experienced at the individual level, but at the communal and societal as well.

Relationship abuse as a societal by-product does not negate the severe impact it has on individuals, but instead demands a broader scope of responsibility and accountability.

Utilizing the CDC’s Problem Identification framework shift’s Black folx’s lived experiences of abuse and trauma from an individual problem to a systemic problem. This framework allows us to: (1) name who is affected (2) understand the extent of the problem, (3) identify and name what contributes to the problem, (4) describe when and where the problem is most likely to occur, and (5) discern the severity of the problem and its impacts (CDC, 2019). This Problem Identification framework locates Black folx’s lived experience of abuse and trauma as a public health problem, which not only places the onus on abusive structures, but allows Black folx a space to stop blaming ourselves. Shifting responsibility to a systemic problem honors the necessity for systems level justice, releasing Black folx from the idea that this is our struggle alone. “Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 47). As Black folx are able to recognize our autonomy and honor our collective experiences, we can recognize our responsibility to transform together. The purpose of this writing is to pursue freedom persistently and responsibly. In the following chapter I will outline the tools and strategies I utilized to (re)turn power to my voice,

confront my abusers, and ultimately engage in confrontational self-inquiry in a painstaking effort to acquire my freedom.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

In the Fall of my final year of my master's program, I read *Uses of Anger* by Audre Lorde (1997), and my life was forever changed. As I read Lorde's work, I felt seen, validated, righteously angry, and ultimately empowered. Lorde spoke to the pain and anger I had been holding onto while navigating a toxic higher education institution that violently othered my Black, queer body. I excitedly ran to my professor and said, "I want to write about this". My professor suggested I use the methodology of autoethnography; she told me to begin by journaling my experiences of racial violence, anger, and what I would later determine as abuse. I immediately went home to write. I spent the semester journaling about my experiences of harm I had experienced since coming to this particular predominately white institution, located in a homogenous, politically red state. It is through this process that I began to uncover all the ways my body, my psyche, and my spirit were being poisoned by dominant, white, hegemonic narratives. It is through Black feminist autoethnography (BFA) that I am able to locate myself, honor myself, and ultimately pursue a pathway for self-love and liberation.

Autoethnography utilizes personal stories as a means to understand culture and our socio-political world. Adams et al., (2017) define autoethnography as "a research method that uses personal experience ('auto') to describe and interpret ('graphy') cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ('ethno') (p. 1). This methodology recognizes the researcher as the subject of inquiry, which validates that we are only experts of our own situated experiences (Burkhard, 2020). Autoethnography offers a different way of

doing by using critical self-reflection to identify and question where the self-intersects with the social, political, and cultural in order to interrogate power and resist oppression (Adams et al., 2017; Bochner, 2013; Griffin, 2012).

Autoethnography as a methodology offers the following:

- examination of culture from the perspective of one's own experience;
- positions oneself as a social being - interacting with the world and others;
- consideration of the intersections of the social, political and cultural;
- extensive analysis centering emotion and creativity (Deitering et al., 2017).

This methodology builds on existing understandings of knowledge by offering space for lived experiences (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013; Deitering et al., 2017). As historically marginalized folx are able to situate themselves (myself) in theory, an integration of abstract knowledge, lived experience, and individual truth can create a whole picture that reflects the knowledge, experience, and truth of others who share similar meanings. It is through this iterative practice that we can examine society, culture, politics, community, relationships, individuals and ultimately ourselves, and back again.

Autoethnography offered me a starting place to begin situating my lived experiences with theory and abstract knowledge. It is through reading other autoethnographers' work that I began to understand how sharing my personal experiences not only provided means to critique oppressive structures but also provided healing as I learned to situate myself. Stacey Waite's *Becoming the Loon: Performance Pedagogy*

and Female Masculinity (2009) was one of the first autoethnographies I read. Waite applies autoethnography to examine gender, pedagogy and embodiment by sharing personal anecdotes about navigating the classroom in an androgynous, contradictory body. Waite shares their own experiences of learning what it means to have a “legitimate” body in a culture that perpetuates domination and hierarchy. Waite asserts, “I do not believe the story of my scholarship is separate from the story of my life or the body in which my life lives” (p. 53). The academy and our institutions often dictate that we separate ourselves from our bodies. I found validation and empowerment as Waite emboldened readers to interrogate and disrupt oppressive systems which mark our bodies as other. Waite engages in an embodied approach which resists the material conditions of our bodies and recognizes the body as the first text. Waite’s work encouraged me to acknowledge and then challenge how oppressive structures shape the reality of the conditions of my body.

Boylorn (2014) utilizes autoethnography to explore how dominant narratives about Black women perpetuate harmful stereotypes. In her piece, *A Story and a Stereotype: An Angry and Strong Auto/Ethnography of Race, Class, and Gender*, she offers her own experiences of internalizing stereotypes, such as *strong*, *angry*, and *poor* to critique the social, political, and cultural consequences that Black women experience at the intersections of their identity. Boylorn emphasizes how autoethnography integrates abstract knowledge with lived experience to expand upon meaning and truth, “stories allow black women to show vulnerability alongside strength, and justification alongside anger” (p. 141). In other words, storytelling allows space for Black women to share perspective on our truth, which is so often distorted by a culture that confines us to only angry or only strong. I found solace and encouragement in Boylorn’s words, as she

highlighted that the internalization of harmful stereotypes wreaks havoc on our self-worth. She acutely acknowledges the illogical fallacy wielded against Black women,

I am more than my temporary emotions... often missing from the discussion of black women's **assumed anger** is the ways in which anger is not a negative emotion, **nor is it an unreasonable reaction** to the discriminations black women are forced to endure on a daily basis. Unchecked racism, sexism, poverty, and oppression **are reasons** to be angry, but miraculously, black women **resist persistent anger**. (emphasis added, pp. 135-136)

The academy and other hegemonic institutions have violently impressed the irrationality of my emotions. Boylorn validated my emotional reality and encouraged me to resist by telling my own story. Ultimately, leading me to Black feminist autoethnography.

Black Feminist Autoethnography

While autoethnography as a methodology can offer space for lived experiences, it is important to note that the academy and the discipline of communication has historically been a place where Black folx are made invisible (Davis, 1998; Griffin, 2012; Houston & Davis, 2002). Black feminist autoethnography holds Black Feminist Thought (BFT) in conversation with autoethnography to create a space for Black female scholars to “look in (at themselves) and out (at the world) connecting the personal to the cultural” (Boylorn, 2008, p. 413). BFA offers a space for Black folx with academic privilege to utilize our voice to make visible the unique ways of knowing Black folx embody (Allen, 1998, Griffin, 2012). It is through reading Black folx and other folx of color that I was and will continue to be able to write myself (Anzaldúa, 2015; Griffin, 2012). BFA goes beyond sharing one's truth, it is a commitment to interrogation, resistance, and praxis (p. 143). BFA offers the following:

- to raise social consciousness regarding the everyday struggles common to Black womanhood;

- to embrace self-definition as a means for Black women to be labeled, acknowledged, and remembered as they wish;
- to humanize Black women at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression;
- to resist the imposition of controlling imagery;
- and self-reflexively account for how Black women can reproduce systemic oppression (p. 143).

BFA is a methodology which duly honors Black women in order to humanize our existence and offer embodied pathways of resistance and liberation.

Black women deserve recognition. To be Black, to be female, to be queer, to hold a marginalized identity in America, means persistent threats to opportunities for accurate recognition (Coates, 2015; Harris-Perry, 2011). Harris-Perry (2011) asserts the importance of accurate recognition in the lives of Black women. Accurate recognition of self creates safety, an increased sense of self-worth, and access to political and social capital; and misrecognition is painful. BFT and BFA offer a means for Black women to self-define, self-value, and resist the interlocking nature of our oppression (Collins, 1986; Griffin, 2012). While BFA is a fairly new methodology within the Communication field, Black women have been engaging in BFA since we began sharing our stories. As early as 1831, Maria Stewart urged Black women to self-define and resist confining narratives of Black womanhood (Richardson, 1987). In 1895, Ida B. Wells wrote *The Red Record*, which highlighted the lived reality of enslavement and lynching from an insider's point of view (Wells-Barnett, 2019). In 1986, Patricia Collins utilized her voice to reflexively account the intersectional lived reality of Black women and urged us to resist the status quo in her piece, *Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought* (Collins, 1986). In 1995, bell hooks wrote *Killing Rage: Ending*

Racism, which painstakingly reveals the burden and grief that is a consequence of carrying righteous rage as we are subjected to and resist interlocking oppression. These women, and countless others have utilized their voice to interrogate and resist as a practice of “social consciousness”, “self-definition” and “self-reflexivity” as the tenets of BFA

Griffin (2012) offers a beautiful example of BFA in her piece, *I AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance*, she interrogates and resists systemic oppression by sharing her own anger and experiences to highlight the everyday struggles of Black women. She calls upon other Black authors and activists for support as she humanizes herself and other Black women, despite stereotypes and harmful imagery that controls and demeans the Black female body. In other words, BFA pushes autoethnography further by contextualizing the various experiences of Black women. She ends her piece by urging people to acknowledge that Black women matter, using her voice and her academic privilege to resist and survive: “it becomes essential to understand BFA not only as a means of resistance but also as instrumental to building community. In short, the stories we tell about our lives matter” (p. 151). Griffin utilizes BFA to share her story in a way that not only resists abusive institutions, but also allows her to self-(re)define in an empowering and uplifting way. I will tell my story, like Rachel Griffin, and so many other Black women,

to resist,

to survive,

and to build community

because our lives matter,

my life matters.

My Personal BFA

First and foremost, I choose Black feminist autoethnography to validate myself and others like me. Utilizing BFA, this writing illuminated the everyday struggles common to Black womanhood; I intentionally include Black folx, including queer, trans and non-binary folx. BFA allowed me to re(define) myself (ourselves), to acknowledge myself (ourselves); I recover(ed)¹⁴ my (our) humanity; I resist(ed)¹⁵ the control of Dominant voices, and I reflect(ed)¹⁶ on my own reproduction of systemic oppression (Griffin, 2012).

For this process, I began by recording my experiences of harm and abuse, with Gloria Anzaldúa's words reverberating through my body: "I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you" (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 165). White, straight, cis, Dominant power has violently marked my body (our bodies) as other, as object, effectively alienating me (us) from my (our) humanity. I offered my own personal experiences of racial violence as well as poetic tellings and reflections (Faulkner, 2018) to bear witness to my abuse and to honor the truth of my experiences that master narratives have distorted. My experiences are positioned in the cultural, political, and social context to highlight the various ways marginalized bodies experience harm and consequently how that harm affects my (our) wellbeing.

Once I completed the journaling and cataloging of relevant lived experiences, I utilized the framework of relationship abuse to illustrate the patterns of violence I (we)

¹⁴ Recovery is a never-ending process, but the rules of grammar do not allow for such nuance.

¹⁵ See footnote 1

¹⁶ See footnote

have experienced. This framework served to identify racial violence and other identity-based violence as abusive. Violence and relationship abuse is cyclical in nature, which is how it maintains power over its victim. I illustrated the cycle of violence I experienced and how abusive tactics such as minimizing, denying, and blaming were used to alienate me from my autonomy, from my voice, and ultimately from my humanity. I shared how this process of recording created space for me to identify my experiences as abuse. This allowed me to recover myself, to discover myself, to validate myself, to save myself, so that I could acknowledge that I am worthy, that I am whole, and that my existence in this world matters (Anzaldúa, 2015). What began as a process of recording quickly turned into a process of investigation and self-inquiry. This investigation allowed me to confront my abusers, including the internalized abuse of self. As illustrated earlier, the consequence of abuse is trauma. Similar to how Lorde validated my lived experiences, I sought out other Black, queer and folx of color to hold space for me and respond to my trauma. My community provided triage, counsel, and comfort as I processed the abuse, we have all endured.

While recording my experiences and (re)cognizing my complicity in my abusive experiences, I understood I needed to actively participate in radical healing and self-love practices. With time, (im)patience, grace, love and lots of complaining to my advisor, I utilized various love ethics, liberation pedagogy, and my lived experiences to offer a pathway for healing for myself and ultimately for my community. During this process it was crucial that I rely heavily on my support system, my humans, my embodied role models, Black activists and truth-tellers, and writing that recognized me as the intersection of all my complexities. bell hooks was a vital advisor, counselor, confidant,

and inspiration. My healing journey was¹⁷ impossible without love. I utilized bell hooks' (2001) love ethic, which is grounded in the principle that abuse and love cannot coexist, as a foundational source for sustenance. What began as a process of confronting my abusers, resulted in the most challenging confrontation of all, the confrontation of self. bell hooks urged me to confront the lack of love present in my life due to the abuse I have experienced. It is through this confrontation that I was able to begin self-recovery. As I admired hooks and other folx of color, I witnessed how to practice love as an intentional action of self-nurturance. hooks' love ethic offered a space to (re)define justice, honesty, commitment and care, in a way that centered Black liberation through collective conscious raising and self-actualization.

I engaged with various other embodied truth-tellers to apply hooks' (re)imagined ethic of love. Baszile (2018) offered her wisdom and guidance as I sought strategies to mend my broken heart. Utilizing her Pedagogy of Black Self-Love, I gained insight on how to deconstruct master narratives, lean into counternarratives, and find a pathway through Black alienation. As I deconstructed master narratives, I was able to recognize how these narratives were permitting me to believe the inferiority of my Black body. However, through reading myself, seeing myself, and validating myself alongside my beloved Black siblings, I was able to witness counternarratives to the fallacy that I was not worthy of love. Ultimately, through deconstruction, recognition and validation I was able to create my own counternarrative. Surprisingly, the counternarrative is rather simple. Simple, yet easier said than done. The counternarrative I uncovered is this,

¹⁷ still is impossible, will never not be possible

I am worthy.

I must work every day to remember this truth, to embody this truth, and to honor this truth. And it is here, in this thesis, that I share *one of* my many attempts.

I wrote (write)¹⁸ this story to survive. This story was (is) my truth, my vitality. I share(d) this story to honor the perseverance of the folx who have come before me and to hold space for the folx who will come after me. I gave name to all the phenomena I was told was just in my head. I uncovered the truth. that I am truth. and I want(ed) to share this knowledge with everyone I know. There was (is) freedom in knowing. There was (is) great liberation in knowing. The more I learn(ed), the more I uncover(ed), the more fluid and expansive I became (become). As I unveil(ed), as I uncover(ed), I am freed from the restrictions, from the boxes, from the chains, from the cages They have been trying to put me in, that They have successfully put me in, that I have been in. It is a bittersweet feeling, learning that freedom was only a thought away. The possibilities really are endless, if you simply know it (in an embodied sense) to be true. How does one encapsulate the process of unveiling? How does one share the truth in discovery? The realization that you already know everything you need to, but no One wants you to know the truth. They have been burying it. Concealing it with distractions, with greed, with capitalism. Entrapping us with violence, with poverty, with scarcity. They have been hiding the truth from you, from me, covering your eyes, binding your hands, and sewing your mouth shut. If you keep someone in the dark long enough, they lose their ability to see. If you keep someone in the noise long enough, they lose their ability to hear. If you keep someone in the chaos long enough, they lose their ability to know peace. Humans

¹⁸ again, grammar, the academy, I don't know

need each other. We need love. We need empathy. We need community. This is how we are empowered. This is how we trust our voice, our truth, our experiences. However, we have been convinced otherwise. We have been sold the lie. We are animals in cages, and the key to the cage is our very own hands. We made the cage actually. We made it happily, content in deception. We didn't know it would contain us. We thought the design was good, we thought the structure was sound, we thought we deserved to be inside the cage. How do we see the cage for what it is? The violent structure that convinces us we do not know.

We look to love.

We look to each other.

We call upon our ancestors, our community, and we listen to our bodies.

We tell our stories.

We share our truths.

We record.

We write.

Writing in all its forms is a lifeforce. It gives power. It recovers voice. It creates room to process. It holds space.

And now,

we (re)imagine,

we (re)discover,

and we transform (Anzaldúa, 2015; Frank, 2013; hooks, 2001).

In the following chapter I will record my personal accounts of abuse. I utilize the Cycle of Violence to demonstrate the cyclical and insidious nature of racial violence. Visceral

poetry, bold, poignant (re)tellings, and Black Feminist scholarship come together to establish the culmination of my recovery process.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONFRONTING MY ABUSERS

my abusive relationship with america began when i was born. i was born a slave to the state. assigned a number. marked with a wristband. given a name to answer to. as soon as i was cut from my mother's womb, **the conditioning**¹⁹ began. i was conditioned to give away my body. to not claim it. i was slowly taught that my body did not belong to me.

you will be sarah.

wrapped in pink.

you will be girl.

soft and sweet.

you will be poor.

fight to eat.

you will be black.

watch your tone.

you will be straight.

chase after boys.

you will be fat.

diet and purge.

you will obey your elders.

¹⁹ Social conditioning is the crux of America's abusive strategy. My stories, my experiences and my trauma are (re)lived on these pages to acknowledge the oppressive conditions we all perpetuate and suffer under.

sit up straight.

~~can~~ I may I please be excused, no elbows on the table, close your legs, calm down, give grandpa a hug, pay attention, don't talk too loud, don't shed a tear, speak when spoken to, because

I said

so.

Relationship abuse captures the nuances of racial and oppressive violence. Abuse is categorized as a pattern of events used to maintain power and control by one human over another. Freire (1970/2005) asserts the subjective is objective when reified in multiple instances. In other words, if something is repeated enough, if there are enough examples, the something can no longer be solely based on personal feelings, beliefs or opinions, rather there is an unbiased truth, a fact, about said something. Through this assertion abuse can encapsulate the objective truth that repeated instances of racial violence are abusive by way of **social conditioning**²⁰. Relationship abuse emphasizes the pattern of abuse that exists not only in the personal but in the cultural and the political as well. The language of relationship abuse offers a framework to investigate the consistent discipling of bodies of color and otherwise marginalized bodies.

Throughout this piece I will reference supervisors, coworkers, teachers, etc. These various roles will be used to demonstrate the nuances of abusive interactions. America is the abuser, and we, in our respective roles, often perpetuate America's abuse. The people I reference and the roles I reference are merely placeholders to demonstrate how power is

²⁰ I bold social conditioning to emphasize that this is what I am referring to when I say abuse.

exerted over Black and otherwise marginalized bodies. These characters²¹ hold a multitude of experiences, while all experiences are true, they are intended to represent the instances that exemplify our social conditioning.

The social conditioning, the disciplining, marks my body as Black, as cis (presumed), as woman (presumed), as straight (presumed), as fat, as dis/abled (presumed). Each identity, each marker, inscribing the way I am *supposed* to move through the world. 5th grade, art class, I can distinctly remember my art teacher scolding me, “Sarah, the chipmunk is coming out”. My cheeks flushed. Shame and resentment coursed through my being. I learned I could not be too loud, too silly, too playful. I learned I was different, and it made others uncomfortable. I learned to hold back my laughter and to take up less space. This disciplining is abuse. Abuse creates a space of dependency, uncertainty and brokenness for the person experiencing the abuse. This space lends itself to the complicit and docile nature of bodies of color. Existing in abuse means to exist without autonomy, means to exist without humanity. Abuse transcribes a docile, downtrodden, dehumanized body, not only unable to recognize the gravity of their situation, but the gravity of the situation of others like themselves. Consequently, abused bodies are unable to honor their truth, their knowledge and their embodied power. This dissonance allows abusers to maintain their power, their control, and their agency over marginalized bodies.

²¹ I will utilize composite characters, based on true accounts of my lived experiences, in order to honestly and ethically represent the nuances of racial violence and discrimination. The intent here is not to call anyone out, place blame, or cancel any one person, but to shed light on how power and privilege can create harm for marginalized individuals. For more on composite characters and autoethnographic ethics, see Ellis (2007), Tullis (2013), and Hernandez and Ngungiri (2013).

I don't remember when I first met my abuser, but I do know they have known me since conception. My earliest memory of them was when I was 7 or 8 years old. They took the form of a young, white boy, younger than me at the time. He asked me, "why is your skin so dirty"? At 8 years old, **I had yet to accept their disciplinary nature**²², and I remember responding in anger. I had three younger siblings, and I was fiercely protective. Anger was my baseline, my defense strategy, my arsenal (Lorde, 1997). I would respond with anger at anyone who dared to disrespect or belittle my family. I remember yelling at that little boy. I can distinctly remember yelling at one of the moms in our neighborhood because she made my little sister cry. I can still remember yelling at the popular kid during fourth grade recess for playing four square unfairly.

don't set sarah off

uh oh. sarah's mad

i am so shocked she would behave in such a way, she's normally so sweet

laughing did you see how angry sarah got?

Power and control created the conditions of my body. I learned how to speak. how to dress. where to go. who to see. I learned how to spend my time. to not ask too many questions. to not make a scene. I learned crying made me sensitive and volume made me aggressive. I learned that those older than me knew what was best, and that your age directly corresponded to how much respect and authority you were granted at any given moment. I learned to shift. accommodate. twist. bite my tongue. hold my breath. calm down. shrink. submit. erase.

²² I had yet to accept the terms of my social conditioning.

How did I learn these things? I learned the rules like any good girl. There are consequences to your actions, and **if you disobey the conditions, you will suffer the consequences.** Remember the power and control wheel? The power and control wheel identifies numerous avenues to exercise power and control over an individual. These avenues are the consequences. Follow the rules, obey the conditions, or suffer the consequences:

- coercion and threats,
- intimidation - unkind looks, actions or gestures, restricting access to spaces, displaying weapons or crude offensive language,
- emotional abuse - put downs, name calling, humiliation, using guilt, playing games,
- isolation - restricting what one does, who one sees, what one reads, where one goes
- minimizing - making light of the violence, not taking it seriously,
- denying - stating it didn't happen,
- blaming - shifting responsibility, "it's your fault",
- and economic abuse - restrictions to work, restricting access to money (NCADV, 2020).

Due to the systemic power of white supremacy the person perpetrating abuse often takes the form of white folx but can also take the form of black and brown bodies by means of assimilation and internalized oppression. Remember, **if you disobey the conditions, there are consequences.** Throughout history, legislation and physical violence has been used to establish power over the black body; to this day, abuse tactics continue to be used to maintain power and control over black and otherwise marginalized bodies.

And these are my stories of abuse.

The Hopeful Beginning

Abusive relationships often begin like any other relationship, seeming like the ideal relationship. The anti-violence movement utilizes the term “red flags” to identify warning signs that there may be abuse present in the relationship (NCADV, 2020). For someone who has been in and out of abusive relationships their whole life, it may be challenging to recognize the red flags or know what to do with them. For someone who has had the opportunity to process and heal aspects of their traumatized experiences, it may be easier to recognize the signs. Either way, it is all too easy to dismiss the signs in a culture that tells you to be optimistic, to see the bright side, to not overreact or be too sensitive. We, as Black, as AFAB, as queer, as feminine, as disabled, as minoritized, learn not to trust ourselves.

and we hope this time it will be different.

The beginning of an abusive relationship always starts off sweet and full of hope. Maybe it is the excitement of a new job, a fresh start, a bigger paycheck, benefits that seem too good to be true. Maybe it is the excitement of shameless flirting with the clerk at Best Buy, who is charming and handsome and gives you a discount on your expensive purchase. Maybe it is the excitement of a new friend, commiserating over the challenging yoga class, fawning over the hot yoga instructor, and bonding over recovery smoothies after class. Whatever it is, we’ve all been there, an exciting beginning. Maybe we trusted someone who told us that this was a good decision. Maybe we were looking for a new opportunity, something, anything, good after a difficult season in our life. Maybe we were running, grasping, yearning for anything that offered the slightest promise because current reality was no longer bearable. We’ve all been there.

And my gut murmurs,
my chest tightens,
this seems too good to be true,
remember being misled last time?
my head silences my gut,
a trust friend gives encouraging advice,
my heart rate speeds up,
maybe this time it will be different.

The Warning Signs

*The following are indicators that a person is abusing their power in the relationship:
wants you to move too quickly in the relationship, flatters you constantly, seems too good
to be true, wants you all to themselves, ignores boundaries, criticizes or puts you down,
does not take responsibility for their actions, and intimidates you with threatening looks
or actions.*

The warning signs are meant to indicate there is a power imbalance in the relationship.

Who has power? Who has control? America has the power. Whiteness has the power. Heterosexuality has the power. Capitalism has the power.abled bodied has the power. Neurotypical has the power. Cisness has the power. English has the power. Patriarchy has the power.

and any other is under their control.

I remember my first day at work. My supervisor was unprepared. I had a lot of questions about the position, the training process, onboarding, none of which he knew the answer to. Ask our admin, he said smiling like a Cheshire cat, she will take care of it. I remember feeling deeply uncomfortable at his ignorance, his unabashed manner of not knowing, and his confidence that someone else, a woman, would take care of it. I witnessed the way our admin scurried around. hurried. responsive. holding an extensive knowledge of the ins and outs of the establishment's processes. always preparing. always ready. survivor knows survivor.

something's not right here.

The Tension Building Phase

As the relationship progresses the tension building phase begins. The person perpetrating abuse attempts to establish power through several different methods. The person receiving the abuse often experiences an increase in stress, pressure, and the feeling that one must walk on eggshells to avoid an explosion. This tension can build for minutes, days, weeks or even years. Typically, as the relationship lengthens, the time between phases shortens. While the tension builds the person experiencing the abuse may feel angry, hopeless, tense and afraid. They may attempt to comfort or nurture the person exerting control in hopes of minimizing the tension. They may restrain from expressing their feelings in an effort to avoid upset or conflict in order to maintain the peace. (NCADV, 2020).

America would soon sell me off to another abuser. My abuser comes in many shapes and sizes, always holding privilege over. Maybe they are in a position of power, supervisor, director, supervisor to the supervisor, board of directors, a co-worker who has been there longer than you. Maybe they are male, larger in size, toxic masculinity that fills all the empty space in the room. Maybe they are white, marking your body, the only one in the room, loud, angry, black, other. These abusers whisper sweet nothings into my ear, I feel warm, I feel special, I feel one of a kind.

“I love your creativity energy”

“I love how bold you are”

“You’ve got spunk”

“We need your voice,” they promise me.

Eager and enthusiastic I take steps to explore my new relationship. Clutching their promises to my heart, I generate new ideas, I take the time to get to know my new environment, I make plans to stay, to make myself at home, to get comfortable, to be myself.

something’s not right here.

The thought echoes through my mind and reverberates through my body. I’ve heard this song before, too good to be true. The violent reality is that most work environments do not have the infrastructure to adequately support Black bodies, trans bodies, queer bodies, disabled bodies, bodies marked as other. Unclear job expectations, undefined institutional power, a lack of racial consciousness, heck, a lack of equitable consciousness, is the

perfect breeding ground for abuse. As a Black, queer woman I am familiar with the consequences of poor planning and oversight. White folks, people in positions of power, people with privilege, don't know what they don't know, fail to anticipate all the ways they continue to forget about us, continue to erase us, continue to not plan for us. And so, this time I knew better. I stated my concerns. I voiced what I needed. But it turns out promises need accountability. Without accountability they're just empty. I was promised clarity. I was promised support. I was promised a welcoming environment, ready to disrupt old ways of being. I didn't know I needed to ask for proof. I naively trusted the wolf in sheep's clothing. When someone in power, promises you something, you assume it's real, you assume it's legitimate, you assume all that Title and power means something, because you've been told that it does, haven't you?

“Respect your elders”

“I've been around a lot longer than you have”

“Speak when spoken to”

White folks, people in power, are fabulous magicians, experts in their craft of illusion. And I, the disillusioned, eager to believe in their magic tricks.

Once **again**, I quieted the voice in my head. “Shh, this will be good for you Sarah. My gut murmured,

“something's not right here”.

My head reassured, “you'd be crazy to pass up this opportunity, what's the worst that could happen?”

And these are the tell-tale signs of the tension building phase.

i yield to those with power.

quieting myself.

eager to be rewarded with a “job well done” and “we’re so lucky to have you”.

I self-abuse.

My abusers do not have to work very hard.

After 400 years,

I know my place.

Abuse transcribes a complicit body. We follow the rules and obey the conditions to avoid the consequences²³, to mitigate the abuse, to keep ourselves safe, to mitigate cognitive dissonance. Except, we do this by abusing ourselves, policing ourselves, punishing ourselves. You can deny yourself. You can coerce yourself. You can minimize yourself. I coerced myself, ignoring my gut, trusting promises from people and institutions I didn't know, taking poisoned candy from strangers in a shiny new car. Complicit, holding the tension of mitigating the abuse and enduring the consequences, the tension builds. The tension is the inner conflict.

9:30 am meeting - three men, four women, meeting with 5 white people and 2 people of color, meeting with two coordinators, two directors, and three executive leadership members. you are the bottom of this oppression pile. white man with power ++ makes an off-hand remark about women’s breasts. the room is silent. you are silent. do I say something? is no one else going to say something? did I hear that correctly? what happens if I say something? that was not okay. am I the only one who thought it wasn’t okay? I cross my arms. am I the angry black woman? these are high up people - if I say something will I get in trouble?

²³ and it is here that I choose to note that this time I decided to obey the conditions. I chose, I was coerced, I was highly encouraged, to change details in my writing, to erase pertinent details in my writing, to manipulate the story as a means to protect the identities of the places and the people who have caused me harm.

This is one of many inner conflicts throughout a typical workday. My body, holding the tension, holding the anger, holding the grief. The name “tension building” is easy to misunderstand. Typically, tension implies a state experienced by all parties involved. With relationship abuse most, if not all, the tension is felt by the recipient of abuse. Oftentimes, the person perpetrating the abuse has a minimal understanding of the way their behavior is affecting the people around them, the recipients of their abuse. I know for a fact that the man who made that remark left that meeting entirely unaffected. I followed up with a few of the people that were present during that meeting, no one seemed to remember the comment. People who abuse power tend to have a very deep-seated need to control others, accompanied by a cunning practice of deception, so ingrained they even deceive themselves. Consequently, the person receiving the abuse bears the burden of the tension: the memorizing of the small and subtle cues of deception, the attempts to sense make the nonsensical, the monitoring of changes in mood, affect and behavior, the walking on eggshells, the emotional olympics.

Bite your tongue, there won't be an upset.

Smile politely, avoid resting bitch face, there won't be an upset.

Shrink in the corner, disappear into the walls, let the floor swallow you whole, so there won't be any upset.

grin.

and bear it.

never make white folks, or those with privilege, uncomfortable (hooks, 1995).

The Tension Building Phase: Self-Abuse

Tension leads to the acute violence episode. This episode is when the abuser executes domination. This acute violence can take the form of verbal abuse, psychological abuse or physical violence. However, the reality of abusive relationships is acute violence and domination happen all the time; this is what makes the relationship abusive. When the person receiving abuse minimizes the violence, denies the violence, or acquiesces to the violence, tension is still building, the strain, the anxiety, the pressure to make yourself smaller, by erasing all of your needs, all of your wants, all of who you are. The person receiving the abuse will continue to deny their own reality and accept the reality of the abuser. This is how the person receiving the violence survives.

In the following section I share part of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2013) Ted talk, *We Should All be Feminists*, to give voice to the reality the abuser creates. I respond in kind, expressing the embodied truth of the consequential self-abuse.

and then we do a much greater disservice to girls . . .
 we raise them to cater to the fragile egos of men
 we teach girls to shrink themselves
 to make themselves smaller . . . (Adichie, 2013, 12:53).

and i, i give away my body
 it was never mine in the first place
 i tear off pieces of my flesh
 it's easier
 blame me instead of you
 at least i get to control
 which piece to give away

we say to girls
 you can have ambition, but not too much
 you should aim to be successful, but not too successful
 otherwise, you will threaten the man . . . (Adichie, 2013, 13:01).

give a smile to the man
 who leers at you while grocery shopping
 or lose your body
 to the violence of a man
 rejected

Nikita Tomar²⁴
 Malvi Malhotra²⁵
 Tamara O'Neal²⁶
 Aisha Fraser²⁷
 Tiarah Poyau²⁸
 Ruth George²⁹

because I am female
 I am expected to aspire to marriage
 I am expected to make my life choices

always keeping in mind

that marriage is the most important . . . (Adichie, 2013, 13:11).

swallow your tongue
 so not to acknowledge
 the racist remarks
 in a room full of white people

²⁴ Indian woman who was shot in broad daylight by a man upset she was getting married to someone else (Mishra, 2021).

²⁵ Indian woman who was stabbed three times in the stomach after rejecting a marriage proposal (tribune india, 2020).

²⁶ Black woman who was shot dead by her ex-fiance after breaking off the engagement (Colias-Pete, et al., 2018).

²⁷ Black woman who was stabbed multiple times in front of her 8-year-old and 11 year old children, and left to die by her abusive ex-husband (Anderson, 2019).

²⁸ Black woman who was shot after asking a man to stop grinding on her (Goldberg, 2019).

²⁹ Indian woman who was strangled after refusing to talk to a man (Karimi, 2019).

we use the word 'respect'
 to mean something that a woman shows a man . . .
 we teach females that in relationships
 compromise is what women do (Adichie, 2013, 14:24).

neutralize your tone
 and cut off your fists
 as not to angrily aggress
 the cis person
 who assails your gender

we raise girls to see each other as competitors . . .
 for the attention of men
 we teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings . . .
 we teach girls shame
 close your legs
 cover yourself (Adichie, 2013, 14:33).

slice off your stomach
 and maim your thighs
 to squeeze
 into the airplane seatbelt

lobotomize your brain
 and pluck out your eyeballs
 so that you may nourish your body
 move your body
 take care of your body
 and silence
 the unwelcomed voices in your head

we make them feel as though by
 being born a female
 they're already guilty of something
 and so
 girls grow up to be women
 who cannot see they have desire . . .
 who silence themselves . . .
 who cannot say what they truly think
 and they grow up
 and this is the worst thing we did to girls
 they grow up to be women
 who have turned pretense
 into an art form (Adichie, 2013, 15:13).

kneel before the belt

so not to be knocked down
 to your knees
 unbuckle his pants
 and take his cock in your hands
 so not to have it forced
 down the back of your throat
 undress
 wait to receive
 deny your pleasure
 your existence
 your body
 leave your body
 give it away
 it's quicker
 fewer scratches
 less bruises
 less
 collateral
 damage

and so began my unmaking. **Conditioned** to believe everyone but myself, conditioned to leave my body, conditioned to deny my dignity, myself worth, my humanity, America violates me insidiously. It is slow, painful and very effective. An environment with uncertainty, confusion, and instability is the perfect breeding ground for gaslighting, the process of making someone question their own reality.

Have you ever been in a roomful of people and
 said something sound and reasonable that goes
 completely unacknowledged?

Maybe you ask a question to the group, or answer a question that was posed, or make a comment on a statement. Maybe they don't hear you. Maybe they don't see you. Maybe they're too shocked or too afraid. Everyone stiffens for a second. Eyes widen, bodies tense. You peer around, wondering if maybe you didn't say the words out loud.

the silence settles in

the tension in your body builds.

MaybeIwasn'tPayingAttentionMaybeImissedSomethingMaybeImadeNoSenseMaybeIwa

sToo

HarshInMyDeliveryMaybeIGotItWrong

there's a slight shift in the air or a subtle change in subject

and your words

disappear

as if they were never uttered

were they even thought?

vanished

you sit back. your heart beating out of your chest. your shoulders aching. your breath

shallow. your mind racing.

and you're left to wonder.

no longer present in the meeting.

were you ever present in the first place?

no longer occupying your body.

questioning yourself

replaying it over and over in your mind

What

Did I

Do

Wrong.

Because that is the result of the abuse, self and otherwise. I believe that I am wrong. that I am to blame. that I am worthless. America knows best.

The Tension Building Phase: The Self-Abuse Continues

The person receiving the abuse will continue to deny their own reality. They do this by self-policing: monitoring their words, agonizing over their tone, their delivery, the punctuation in their emails, their facial expressions, what they wear, and how often they speak, second-guessing themselves, their emotions, their decisions, their interpretation of every conversation, every interaction, every uttered word, and they do this by biting their tongue, holding their breath, changing their tone, swallowing their anger, masking their hurt, accommodating to everyone else around them. They will accept the reality of the abuser, the reality that they are wrong and everyone else is right, the reality that they are to blame, and no one else is responsible, the reality that they are too emotional, too sensitive, and they take everything too personally. This acquiescence, this denial, this minimizing, this self-abuse, this is how they survive in a world that doesn't make any sense to them but seems to make sense to everyone else around them.

I lost trust in myself. I lost trust in what I knew. I lost.

I find that my abuser's favorite tactic is gaslighting, a hybrid of verbal and psychological abuse. I am made to disbelieve myself, question my reality, and am often seduced to submission. This is how my abuser silences me. I question myself; I doubt myself, and I feel like an imposter in the spaces I enter. I am suspicious; I feel disempowered; I feel abnormal, and I feel like I do not

belong. I am the most insecure I have ever been. Well, middle school was a rough time, but still. I am constantly looking for feedback. ~~Did I do that right? Was that ok? Did that make sense? Am I black enough? Am I queer enough? Was I intimidating? Do they think I always find a race issue? Do I look too young? Will they take me seriously? Am I talking too much? Does what I have to say matter? Does anyone care?~~

Conditioned to know my place, I was recruited to center whiteness, white voices, and the feelings and thoughts of white people or anyone else with identities of privilege (male, cis, straight, able-bodied). ~~My place is to educate, to inform, to extend grace and to look for the well intention.~~ I have been taught that I need to save white people, as if racism still persists because Black people just aren't generous, patient, kind, polite, enough in our pursuit for justice. I kept being told over and over how important it is to have me in predominantly white spaces and how needed I was. I bought into the idea that I needed to infiltrate every white space and challenge these white folks on their ass backwards ideologies. I became burdened by the idea that if I didn't share my perspective and if I didn't bring in the voices of the people of color in the room then no one would.

And so, I attended a “diversity and inclusion” dialogue. The purpose was to explore topics on diversity, equity and inclusion while creating spaces for learning. *While creating white spaces for learning*³⁰. During the dialogue we were asked, “How do you

³⁰ Italicized text represents my inner dialog in response to coded language, racist remarks, oppressive ideology and all-around general bullshit.

perpetuate in racism and sexism”? I decided to share how the consequences of racism give me pause when interacting with white folks. I spoke about how myself and the students I work with often do not trust white folks and are apprehensive with them. One woman was processing what I had said and responded a few beats later, well “Sarah’s group hates me”, a white man chimed in and said, “hate is strong, but yes that is why I worry about talking to students”. WHO the fuck is Sarah’s group?? *You mean black and brown students. Acknowledge who it is you’re talking about, acknowledge their difference, acknowledge their identity.*³¹ I sat flummoxed, seething, anger tearing through my insides, my mind racing and my body tense. Forced to hide the storm wreaking havoc inside my body, the white folks around me witnessed a passive face, a neutral expression, a nodding head, (holding tension)³²

no angry black woman in sight.

Saving white people means centering them, putting their humanity before my own, putting their comfort over the abuse of my body. I do not get to be angry. I do not get to be loud. I must bite my tongue until the blood spills out of my mouth (Griffin, 2012). Because my rage is a distraction. It prevents them from learning. My blood runs so that they do not have to shed a single white tear.

Gaslighting is powerful because it slowly deteriorates a person’s mental health by breaking down the person’s confidence and self-esteem. Gaslighting creates confusion and causes a person to doubt themselves, in turn making it challenging for them to make decisions ~~I can’t make a decision to save my fucking life~~ and trust their emotions ~~hello~~

³¹ All the things I couldn’t say, I didn’t say, my black body silent and enraged, attempting to survive.

³² See: The Tension Building Phase: Self-Abuse

~~six years of therapy.~~ As victims of gaslighting doubt their reality they begin to wonder, “~~Am I being too sensitive?~~” and, they internalize that they are the ones to blame. Once they shift the blame to themselves, the victim tends to apologize in an effort to avoid future conflict. ~~I am sorry I made you uncomfortable. I will try not to do it again.~~

Gaslighting induces intense emotions of shame, which works to further silence the victim as they isolate to avoid embarrassment (Tobias & Joseph, 2018). Victims of abuse often blame themselves and believe that their actions are the cause of the abusive behavior of the perpetrator.

So here I am sitting in this fucking dialogue, where this white woman thinks I hate her. ~~I am wondering what did I say, how did I say it, oh shit I did the thing I was trying so hard not to do;~~ I had spent most of the dialogue pandering to their white fragility and YET here we were, ~~me still the angry black woman who hates white people.~~ So ~~naturally~~³³ after the dialogue, I am thinking, and I am reflecting. *I was questioning my reality, blaming myself.*³⁴ ~~Do I need to speak differently? How can I get my message across more effectively?~~ Why did I fuck pander to these white folks? I wasn’t even angry, but I sure as FUCK can show them anger.

Fast forward a day or two, I run into a woman at a coffee shop. Said woman was a participant in the dialogue. She had some good things to say, I coded her as an ally who knows what’s up. So, I began processing with her the awful things that were said during the dialogue. I reiterated how the white woman said, “Sarah’s group hates me”. BECKY

³³ Strikethrough is utilized here to emphasize the internalization of what is natural, normal AKA white, oppressive, colonized.

³⁴ Again, in the moment of the experience, and at the first re-telling, America’s conditioning warped my reality, and I denied the abuse.

HAD NO IDEA what I was talking about. SO THEN, ~~I had to have a whole conversation with myself.~~ *Once again, I doubted myself. I questioned my feelings. I wondered how I could have been to blame. Did she say that? Was that said? Did Deb say the words “Sarah’s group hates me?” Maybe I heard her wrong? No, I am pretty sure that’s what she said. How did Becky not hear it? Maybe I interpreted it wrong?* NO, DEBBIE fucking said I hated her.

and now,

I kind of do.

Gaslighting is a son of a fucking bitch. Gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse. It is a tactic used to make the victim question their reality. And let me tell you, it fucking works. The abuser manipulates the victim’s mental state and physical environment and then deflects the change to the victim, making them believe they are imagining things. ~~I thought I was imagining everything.~~ This tactic is enacted slowly, making it challenging to realize it is taking place consequently, demoralizing the victim. They tell blatant lies making it impossible to discern whether anything they say is the truth. They deny. They’ll fucking deny until their blue in the face. Denial is powerful. They will use denial, even if there is proof, EVEN WITH PROOF which solidifies the victim’s confusion and causes them to question their reality and believe the abuser’s reality as truth. Perpetrators will use thinly veiled assurances to manipulate their victim into complacency, and their words do not match their actions. Gaslighting is insidious; it

happens over time, similar to a frog being boiled in water, once the victim realizes the water is hot, it is too late. (Tobias & Joseph, 2018).

America,

you clever bitch.

Whipped into submission,

restricting

my

own

airways,

I am left gasping for air, wondering what

I did

to get myself here.

Once again, I decentered myself; I made myself smaller; I erased blackness; I put on whiteness at the detriment and survival of my Black body. My body instinctively reaches out for the white woman's hand. It knows the gesture so well. It almost feels more jarring not to.

Even though everything in me wants to scream,
 wants to yell,
 wants to throw things,
 and shake the white person in front of me.

WHY CAN'T YOU SEE ME?

I want to scream.

CAN YOU NOT SEE MY DIGNITY?

Do you not see how much space ~~you take up~~ I deserve?

whiteness fills the room
 until I am pressed into the walls
 and I am one with the carpet
 i am forced to rip myself from the walls
 tear myself from the ceiling
 scrape myself off the floor
 with no time to grieve
 over the pieces I have left behind
 i have been obliterated
 you'll find pieces of me scattered around ivory towers
 my blood splattered on classroom walls
 my bone smatterings discarded on hallway floors
 stupefied by ideological complicity
 destroyed by hegemonic expectations

and still

I AM

told

I HAVE

to be strategic with

MY ANGER

as if it was

MY ANGER

that denoted

and not their

hatred (Lorde, 1997).

Acute Violence: Maintaining Cognitive Consonance

The tension leads into the acute violent episode. This episode is when the abuser executes domination. This acute violence can take the form of verbal abuse, psychological abuse or physical violence (NCADV, 2020).

America's abusive conditioning is wonderfully executed in this western red state that is desperately trying to get back to the 'good ol days' of 1619 and takes no prisoners. I came to Idaho excited. hopeful. brimming with new ideas and possibilities. I was confident. I was certain. I was autonomous. I trusted myself. I remember rationalizing, "white people are white people, I've been dealing with them my whole life". It turns out, there's a lot more nuance to it all. People assume it is the overt violence that is feared the

most, that has the biggest impact on someone, that is the most challenging part of surviving abuse. For me, and many survivors, it's the covert violence that is the most troubling, the most soul-sucking, the most debilitating. I can hear a racial slur and call it violence and other people can recognize it as so. I can feel the sting of a slap to the face and other people can recognize it as harmful, not okay. But silence? a lack of response? an absence? How do you see something that isn't there? Better yet, how do other people see something that isn't there? that doesn't have a name? and if no one can see it, see the bruise, have evidence of the weight of violent words, then did it even happen? was it even real? The weight of a stare, the curtness of a tone, the stiffness in crossed arms, the silence that follows you when you speak - they are all up to interpretation, they are all up to eye-witness accounts, the impact can be explained away with the intent (I didn't mean anything by it). and once again the burden of proof is on you, the blame is on you. His tone was harsh? you're being too sensitive. No one acknowledged what you said? they didn't hear you. She was glaring at you? I didn't notice, are you sure it was about you? and you doubt. and you question. your reality disintegrating around you. if no one else noticed, if no one else heard, if no one else saw. maybe i interpreted wrong. maybe i misheard. maybe i misunderstood. maybe it is me.

Acute violence occurs the moment you accept the abuser's reality over your own. To acquiesce, to accommodate, to disbelieve the truth of your own reality, is to separate yourself from yourself. This separation, this disembodiment is a survival tactic, to live with persistent cognitive dissonance demands nothing less. Cognitive dissonance is the inner conflict, the tension our bodies hold, as we grapple with the reality we are forced to accept and the reality our bodies intrinsically know we deserve. Enduring abuse, enduring

racism, to live in America, is to live with persistent cognitive dissonance. America demands Black bodies persistently hold the two conflicting ideas, “I am worthy of dignity and respect” and “I am in an abusive situation, which commodifies my body”. Our bodies are not meant to hold extended periods of cognitive dissonance, to do so causes trauma and harm to our beings.³⁵ As individuals we are motivated to maintain a positive view of ourselves, where our actions, words, values, and beliefs are all in alignment, this is cognitive consonance (Nicholson & Lutz, 2017). As survivors living in an abusive relationship, as Black folk living in America, we seek ways to reduce our cognitive dissonance and return to a place of cognitive consonance. In order to return to cognitive consonance, we must find balance in the conflicting ideas. This can occur in the following ways:

- 1) We choose to believe we are worthy;
- 2) We choose to believe we are in an abusive situation;
- 3) We choose to deny that we are worthy;
- 4) We choose to deny that we are in an abusive situation.

The barriers to escaping this abusive relationship are endless. And thus, we do our best to cope, to reduce cognitive dissonance, and to maintain a positive sense of self. We cope by denying the abuse. We cope by minimizing the abuse. We cope by denying ourselves. We cope by minimizing ourselves. We do have moments of rupture, moments where our bodies hold the cognitive dissonance. In these moments, we see our worth. In these moments we confront our abusers. And even still, these moments are not without

³⁵ See Chapter 2, Traumatized Black Bodies

consequence. As I recognize my humanity and recognize the abuse I have endured, as I confront the reality of my own complicity in the noose around my neck, I am filled with rage (hooks, 1995). Or I am overcome with grief. Grief leaves me tired, helpless, and **I return to deny myself**. Or Rage consumes me, and I (re)stock my arsenal (Lorde, 1997). I march into battle, demanding change.

I push back with the white woman who tells me my time is less valuable than white guy number 5 with power ++.

I ask for a reprint of the university wide communication that denied my involvement in a project I directed.

I correct the supervisor who misgenders me.

I call out the coworker who sheds his white tears during my personal time, on my personal cell phone.

I demand accountability for the trans students who were excluded by university staff.

I refuse to interact with one of my abusers alone, requesting safety accommodations.

I demand accountability. I demand change. I demand justice.

And the white folks respond, some cry, some balk, some make more empty promises. and **I return to deny myself**, depleted from the battle, waiting for accountability, hoping these promises will be different.

The Honeymoon Phase

After the acute violence episode, the abuser feels sorry and responds with acts of apology and care. The abuser may give gifts or say things like: "I will never do it again," "I never meant to hurt you," "I promise I will change." This phase often reminds the recipient of abuse of the person they fell in love with, an attentive and endearing partner. As survivors work to maintain their commitments and their self-esteem, they hope that this time it will be different. The person receiving the abuse wants to believe this time it will be different (NCADV, 2020). The person receiving the abuse hopes this time they can be enough to please their abuser. We, as Black, as AFAB, as queer, as feminine, as disabled, as minoritized, hope that if we endure long enough, America will realize we are worthy of its love.

I return to deny myself and the cycle begins again.

Breaking the Cycle

In the following chapter, I look to love. Love is how I leave my treacherous abuser.

CHAPTER FIVE: I AM WORTHY - (RE)EMBODYING BLACK SELF-LOVE

Relationship abuse creates a space of dependency, uncertainty, and brokenness for the person experiencing the abuse. This space lends itself to the complicit and docile nature of bodies of color. Existing in abuse means to exist without autonomy, means to exist without humanity. Abuse transcribes a docile, downtrodden, dehumanized body, not only unable to recognize the gravity of their situation, but the gravity of the situation of others like themselves. Consequently, abused bodies are unable to honor their truth, their knowledge and their embodied power. This dissonance allows abusers to maintain their power, their control, and their agency over marginalized bodies (Keeton, Chapter 4).

This chapter is supposed to be about healing, healing from abuse. I have been avoiding this chapter. I don't know what to write. I don't know what to say. When you tell a story there is supposed to be a beginning, a middle, and an end. When I tell this story, it is for a degree, to please my committee, my advisor, a means to an end. How I get that shiny diploma and make all the heartache worth it. Except my life doesn't have a beginning, a middle, and an end. My trauma doesn't have a beginning, a middle, and an end. And my healing certainly doesn't either. I felt immense pressure to tell a linear story, unsure how to begin or what the point of it all was. The academy wants me to tell a linear story; or, at least, one that makes sense. I don't know how to make sense of my healing. Trauma? I can talk about trauma all day long: what happened, what was done to me, who did it, how it made me feel, the consequences, how it affected my life. I am a survivor.

That is my identity: living with trauma, breathing with trauma, enduring trauma. But healing? That story is less familiar to me. It doesn't quite fit. Healing is like buying new clothes. My old ones seem to be making do... although they don't quite fit and they aren't as comfortable as they used to be, but I know them, and they know me. I know where they give, and I know how to bend in them. But these new clothes. What if I get them dirty? What if I ruin them? What if I tear them the same way I tore my old clothes? I don't know how to wear these new clothes. I am not even sure I deserve to wear them. But here I am. Trying to make sense of these new clothes. In this chapter, I will do my very best to make sense of how to accept and style these new clothes. In other words, in this chapter, I will utilize a bricolage of personal reflections, various love ethics, and liberatory scholarship to establish a pathway for resistance and healing from abusive America.

Writing to Love

I am writing this thesis to save myself, to write myself, to record myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy, to love myself, to make space for myself, to center myself, and to convince myself that I am worthy (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 169).

and so,

every line feels like a lifeline.

vital,

important,

life-saving sentences.

so, I must get it right.

otherwise, what is the point?

otherwise, why did I go through all of this?

my blood on these pages. my tears on these pages. my body on these pages.

these pages.

the salve, the bandages, the saving grace.

The irony is not lost on me. I can witness alongside the reader, how I silence myself, how I minimize myself, how I question and doubt myself, how even still, I do not trust myself. The academy, white supremacy, self-care, toxic positivity, master narratives about healing, are once again lying to me. 15, and I do not love myself. 19, and I do not know how to love myself. 27, and I still do not know how to love myself.

No.

I no longer settle for the colonizer's false promises of the self-love destination. Loving yourself is a cyclical process, not a journey's end. Black radical self-love is hard work in the midst of a culture that persistently inscribes the inferiority of our Black, AFAB, disabled, queer bodies (Baszile, 2018). Healing, self-love, self-actualization, authenticity, honoring oneself, knowing oneself, embodied living, and believing that you are worthy are all intimately connected, are all one in the same – the foundation of liberation.

Revolutionaries such as Sonia Sanchez, Mari Evans, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Che Guevara and many others have advocated for rooting the resistance against colonial oppression in love (Baszile, 2018). The pursuit for justice and freedom is meaningless without love, “love as a revolutionary praxis is impossible, incomprehensible without self-love, individual and collective” (p. 267). By grounding the revolution against gendered and racial oppression in love, Black communities are able to utilize love as a

personal and communal source of healing and sustenance (hooks, 2001). Black folx are in an abusive relationship with America. I am in an abusive relationship with America. And love? Love is how we leave our treacherous abusers.

Love, self-love, communal love, is no easy feat. Love as a revolutionary praxis is an ethic (Dalmiya, 2009; Robinson-Morris, 2018), is a pedagogy (Morley, 1998; Robinson, 2007), and is a source for healing (hooks, 2001; Robinson-Morris, 2018). In order to participate in a revolutionary praxis of love, we must first recover what we have lost, and what we have lost is an understanding of what true love is and how true love does. hooks (2001) affirms this,

I cannot remember when love left me. I just know that one day I was no longer precious. Those who initially loved me well turned away. The absence of their recognition and regard pierced my heart and left me with a feeling of broken heartedness so profound I was spellbound. Grief and sadness overwhelmed me. I did not know what I had done wrong. And nothing I tried made it right. No other connection healed the hurt of that first abandonment, the first banishment from love's paradise. For years I lived suspended, trapped by the past, unable to move into the future. . . . We can find the love our hearts long for, but not until we let go grief about the love, we lost long ago . . . (pp. ix-x).

It is here, hooks beautifully describes the legacy of grief and pain we inherit, as a result of abandonment, lovelessness or attachment wounds, however identified, has on our psyches. First, hooks argues, we must confront the lack of love in our lives. As dominant narratives distort our understanding of love, we must (re)imagine an embodied definition of love. hooks adopts M. Scott Peck's words to define love and explains that love is not a feeling, but rather "the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth" (p. 4). Redefining love as an intentional action, which embraces a combination of care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, respect, commitment, and trust, offers a pathway for healing. A revolutionary love, one that

embodies radical change through resistance and innovation, leaves no room for abuse, no room for neglect, no room for domination, oppression or colonization (hooks, 2001; Robinson-Morris, 2018). Put simply, “love and abuse cannot coexist” (hooks, 2001, p. 6). To understand this is crucial. Those of us who come from homes with emotional and/or physical abuse, were taught to believe that we were loved. Confused by warped definitions of love, we believe that those who hurt us, can also love us. We carry this belief with us throughout our adult relationships, failing to confront the lovelessness in our lives. This lack of love, this lovelessness, this failure to nurture ourselves and one another, then permeates our relationships, our communities, or institutions and our society, leaving abuse in its wake.

As we participate in our own self-recovery, as we practice radically loving ourselves, we can transform our relationships, in turn our communities, and in turn our society. adrienne maree brown (2017) asserts, “how we are at the small scale is how we are at the large scale. The patterns of the universe repeat at scale” (p. 52). In other words, how we relate to ourselves and to others influences how we relate at a communal, societal, and universal level. And it is here that we must hold two complicated, conflicting truths:

- 1) America, our institutions, hegemonic culture - are abusive and hold power

OVER³⁶

AND

- 2) we have agency; we have efficacy; we have power TO

³⁶ See: Morley, 1998

In the context of love:

- 1) Colonization, “rational” thought, and white supremacy not only disempower us, but inundate us with distorted, harmful teachings of love, making it extremely challenging to stay connected to our embodied loving selves³⁷.

AND

- 2) Love is a choice; love is intentional; love is an embodied practice; love is a learned behavior; we are all born with the capacity to radically love ourselves intact³⁸.

So yes, love is a choice, but it is a hard-fought one.

Our personhood is political (Baszile, 2018; Harris-Perry, 2011; Morley, 1998). Our Blackness is political (Beal, 2008; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris-Perry, 2011; Petermon & Spencer, 2019). And thus, our revolution must be political (Robinson-Morris, 2018).

Harris-Perry (2011) asserts,

... the internal, psychological, emotional, and personal experiences of black women are inherently political. They are political because black women in America have always had to wrestle with **derogatory assumptions** about their character and identity. These assumptions **shape the social world** that black women **must accommodate or resist** in an effort to **preserve their authentic selves** and to **secure recognition** as citizens (p. 5).

As Black, AFAB, and otherwise marginalized bodies, our existence is inherently political as we are all at once:

³⁷ See: Baszile, 2018; Harris, 2018; hooks, 2001; Robinson, 2007; Robinson-Morris, 2018

³⁸ See: Baszile, 2018; Harris, 2018; hooks, 2001; Robinson, 2007; Robinson-Morris, 2018

- made and unmade;
- born, (re)born, and slaughtered;
- named, unnamed, and erased;
- recognized and (mis)recognized;
- made visible and invisibilized;
- socially constructed and deconstructed;
- socially conditioned and unconditioned;
- enslaved, made citizen, and denied citizenship;

At the site, on the site, and within the site of our Black bodies; by America's institutions, by America's socialization, by America's culture, through the means of colonization and white supremacist domination.

Our best tool of resistance is ourselves.

I have always believed that the most powerful albeit difficult pedagogical work I can do - in, through, and against academia [domination]- *is to be myself*, my ever-evolving, always-becoming, certainly resisting Black woman self (Baszile, 2018, p. 266).

Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal, and institutional, which brought that anger into being (Lorde, 1997, p. 280).

... when a Black, queer, thick artist woman intentionally takes up space, it creates a new world (brown, 2017, p. 30).

We have the power to make change within ourselves (brown, 2017), at the small scale, and to do so is hard-work (Baszile, 2018), a process of intentional self-recovery (hooks, 2001), and a process of (re)conceptualizing, (re)defining and (re)imagining what is possible. Learning to love is a nebulous, fluid process, with no real beginning, middle or end. To love is to heal. Like love, like life, like the seasons, healing is a never ending,

recurrent process. When we honor our trauma, when we listen to our pain, when we acknowledge abuse, when we recognize systems of domination, the site of acknowledgement, our bodies, is where healing occurs (brown, 2017). And it is through love that we will have justice (hooks, 2001); it is through love that we will have healing. brown reassures, “when we are engaged in acts of love, we humans are at our best and most resilient. . . . [with love] we would understand that the strength of our movement is in the strength of our relationships” (brown, 2017, pp. 9-10). With this thesis, with these words, with this final chapter, with my body on these pages, I honor the intrinsic energy of the earth, of my ancestors, of my spirit which is manifested and sustained through my embodied existence. I choose to honor the pain, the grief, the celebration, the uncertainty, and the innocence of (re)birth. Birth is painful. Yet, I am so grateful to be born again and again.

And here is one of my stories of (re)birth.

Loving my way to Building Trust

In less than 10 months, I almost quit three times. I got so close to walking away, giving no notice, packing up my car and leaving. I probably would have if home was closer, if I wasn't pursuing a degree, if money wasn't an issue, if, if, if... month 9 I got closer to quitting than ever before. I decided to buy a last minute \$500 plane ticket home instead. I took two weeks off work. I charged my credit card and said to myself, “this is so I don't quit my job, so I don't leave everything behind”. Throughout those 10 months, I spent a lot of time denying, minimizing, and justifying the abuse I was experiencing. The cognitive dissonance is how I kept myself safe until I had the means to leave the abusive relationship, until it was safe for me to leave. Just when I thought I couldn't take

any more, I found just enough support to endure a little bit longer. Two years. That's all you need to complete your master's degree. I wasn't sure if I was going to make it out alive.

At the beginning of month 10 I attended the conference *Collective Thriving*. This conference was my saving grace, my hail mary, my ticket out. This conference was my final moment of rupture. I had experienced smaller moments of rupture leading up to this, but this rupture, this break, this tear in the veil, was too large to be easily repaired with a few slights of hand. The conference was full of strong Black women and women of color. Ijeoma Oluo spoke. Her speech changed my life. Her words reached into the essence of my being. They lit up all the dark spaces. Her words softly caressed my bruised and battered skin. Her cadence, an x-ray, showing me all my broken bones. Her speech found the extinguished light in me and reignited it. A small ember caught, as close to being blown out as it was close to igniting a raging fire. Her message settled my confusion. She helped me return to my body, return to what I know. And with her words, and with the rest of the sessions at the conference, I repeatedly heard, you are not alone, you are right, your black body matters, Black liberation IS the center of the movement, you are not here to save white people, anything that doesn't center Black liberation is colonization, is supremacy, period.

whew.

i breathed a sigh of relief

i knew it

i am not crazy

i knew it

I excitedly scheduled a meeting with person in power number 5 after the conference. I came ready with ideas for how to infuse her message into our work. He appeared to listen attentively. When I finished speaking, he looked at me in a way I had come to understand as patronizing and uttered, “well what she said was great, but it really seems like an idealistic way of doing things”.

my heart sank. my stomach dropped.

This is the gaslighting I had been dealing with for 10 months. A person in power, a person who wears all the flags and displays a resume full of wokeness telling me, unabashedly, that a liberation that centers Black voices is idealistic.

Except this time, I knew better. This time I trusted myself. This time I had the support around me and the light within me to honor the voice in my head that screamed, “NO YOU'RE WRONG”. to not quiet or shh or second guess myself. This time I thought, welp. I know I can't count on you. I now know you aren't with it. I now know you are only willing to go sooo far when it comes to Black Lives Matter. and in that moment, I left the relationship. done. over. canceled. I no longer trust you. I no longer believe you. the words you say have no meaning to me. I now see you for what you are. a wolf in sheep's clothing. a white man in brown skin, colonized, assimilated, in the sunken

place, yes master. I can no longer drink from your well, I am not interested in getting trapped in the sunken place, I don't want to serve your master.

I (re)started therapy July 2020, seven months after I chose to trust myself again. A year and a half after I began my latest abusive relationship. It was our first full session, my second time meeting her. I was sitting on the patio outside. I don't quite remember how the session began, but I'd imagine Veronica asked me about my week or how I was doing. And I can guess that I responded glibly and with irritation about work and racism. Veronica looked at me, in the calm and sure way I now recognize as an indicator that she is about to come for my life, and she asked, "do you trust yourself"? This was her first question to me. The first thing she said. I balked. I remember having a visceral reaction, sitting back in my chair. I sat there stunned. Most of that session we sat in silence, as I processed her question. I was truly shocked. dumbfounded. No. We were here to talk about everyone else. All the awful things they did to me. How it wasn't fair. How the anger simmered constantly just below the surface. How I needed to quit my job, how I needed to move, how white people suck and how everyone else was to blame for my problems.

I spent 45 minutes thinking to myself, murmuring to myself, "well yes, well no, kind of, sometimes..."

do you trust yourself?

Well of course I do. No, I absolutely do not. Well, I used to...? How can this be true?

This isn't the Sarah I know. This isn't the Sarah everyone else knows. Sarah? Confident,

bold, unapologetic Sarah? Of course, she trusts herself. I ended the session saying something along the lines of, “I don’t think I do”. Veronica patiently sat with me that session. She didn’t say much. She didn’t need to. At the end of our session, with kind and knowing eyes, she responded, “okay, think about what it would mean if you did”.

well fuck.

this was going to be hard.

Loving my way to Leave my Abuser

Black folx are in an abusive relationship with America. I am in an abusive relationship with America. Who is America? Have you not figured it out by now?

America is you.

America is me.

America is the whiteness that buries 215 indigenous children to hide the secrets of their abuse: rape, neglect, stolen language, stolen culture, murder (Coletta, 2021).

America is the transphobia that violently murdered Jaida Peterson, a Black trans woman, one of the 14 *reported* murders in the first 94 days of 2021 (Roberts, 2021).

America is the sexism that pays Black women .36 cents less to the dollar and maintains 53.5% of Black women living in poverty (Guerra, 2013).

America is the capitalism that exploits Black labor and incarcerates Black women at a rate of three times their white counterparts (Guerra, 2013).

America is the cis heteronormativity that made it that much more challenging to find statistics and data about queer and trans Black bodies.

America is our education system which fails to recognize Blackness and black history in the classroom.

America is our education system which teaches children to follow rules, obey authority, and regurgitate information instead of teaching critical thought, authentic being, and empowered truth.

America is our workforce that demands perfectionism and tireless earning at the cost of our well-being, our spirits, our families and our communities.

America is the media that villainizes Black men, hyper-sexualizes Black women, relegates Asian and Pacific Islanders, reduces Latinx individuals to the help, erases folx with disabilities and tokenizes the gay friend.

America is the standard white. cis. straight. thin. abled-bodied. wealthy. And anything that falls short of that standard is incompetent, illogical, wrong, ugly, bad, shameful, and your fault.

America is your friend who insecurely murmurs, “Omg, I can’t stop eating. I can’t have any more sweets”.

America is your coworkers who applaud someone else for repeating what you just said.

America is your mom who makes you wait to buzz your hair until after the wedding.

America is your grandma who utters disgust at the gay couple holding hands in the grocery store aisle.

America is the abuser.

The abuser that intimidates. shames. isolates. exploits. manipulates. degrades.

America wants power. America wants control.

And so, America abuses.

America transcribes a docile, downtrodden, dehumanized body.

America disguises your truth. America steals your spirit. America disconnects you from yourself through deception, manipulation and violence.

America is an abuser. a trickster. a con-artist. your own worst enemy. and your best friend.

Remember?

America is you.

America is me.

The academy, America one in the same, like any institution, reproduces the dynamics of power and control wielded against Black bodies, against bodies marked as other (Allen, 1998; Baszile, 2018; Griffin, 2012). Baszile (2018) asserts,

... part of the work of the university has been to produce knowledge that disciplines people into the logic of white supremacist capitalist imperialist patriarchy. This power/knowledge dynamic depends on the university's ability to obfuscate a simple truth: All knowledge comes from raced and gendered bodies that exist in particular places, across particular moments in time, and in relation to particular others in particular ways. It is the refusal of this truth and the claim to universal knowledge for the common good that works to make academia an inhospitable place for those of us whose knowing suggests otherwise. It is within this enterprise of knowledge production that Black women (and others) are often "presumed incompetent" (p. 265).

In other words, the academy and other institutions of power work very hard to define a universal truth which denies the embodied truth of Black folx ways of being. By marking Black bodies as illogical, Black folx struggle to construct an identity of Black self-love. Baszile (2018) recognizes this struggle as, "Black alienation" (p. 270). Utilizing a pedagogical approach, she establishes the following strategies to navigate Black alienation and pursue Black self-love:

1. Identify and deconstruct the master narratives and the myths about blackness and black students they [the master narratives] reinforce;
2. Engage in reading and discussing literary counter stories [counternarratives] paired with countertheories of Black lives;
3. Encourage the students to explore and write their own counter stories as a strategy for healing and transformation (p. 270).

Baszile established these strategies in the context of pedagogy and Black students' experiences navigating higher education institutions. However, these principles transcend the context of higher education. In the following sections I will apply Basziles' strategies

to the broader context of navigating America. bell hooks' love ethic, as well as additional perspectives on love, healing and liberation will bolster Baszile's strategies to establish a revolutionary, loving pathway that centers Black AFAB folx and our healing journey.

Identifying and Deconstructing Master Narratives with Love

The first strategy is to identify and deconstruct master narratives about blackness. I utilize the term master narrative to refer to the dominant and overarching story we are told as Black people and about Black people by white supremacist ideology. Master narrative encapsulates the cultural, social, and political implications of a colonized, racist, sexist, classist, oppressive system. Deconstructing master narratives is the work I described in my fourth chapter. Similarly in navigating an abusive relationship the first step is to recognize the abuse. In the fourth chapter, I utilized the Cycle of Violence and the relationship abuse paradigm to identify and deconstruct the harmful conditions that abuse inscribed onto my Black body. These master narratives construct the process that is Black alienation, and Black alienation is what prevents us from recognizing our humanity and participating in Black self-love. Baszile emphasizes that Black alienation is,

not a discrete experience, but an ongoing process inextricably linked to and played out through academia's proper pedagogical practices, which not only reproduce false images and beliefs about Black inferiority, but which insist, as a requirement of success, that Black students accept such images and ideas about themselves (p. 271).

Black alienation can be likened to the effects of gaslighting and cognitive dissonance. Black students and Black folx internalize these ideas of inferiority and incompetence which in turn affect how they see themselves and navigate the world. Sure, it is easy enough to say that one mindlessly accepts these ideas of inferiority, however, the real struggle lies in when Black students or Black folx lack support when they refuse to

accept this inferiority. The consequence of this is self-abuse - as I illustrated in the fourth chapter we internalize these messages, we struggle to see the crooked room, because we have no accurate representation, because we have no accurate recognition, because we have no one to validate our existence, our thoughts, and our experiences and so we doubt ourselves, we question ourselves and we silence ourselves. Self-abuse, Black alienation, gaslighting, white supremacist conditioning “they [white folx, folx with privileged identities] don’t have to silence you [black folx] because you are willing to do it for them” (p. 272). And so, we must identify and deconstruct these master narratives, so that we can recognize them and understand how they are affecting our personhood.

As I demonstrated through my own personal experiences of abuse, master narratives have profound effects on our subconscious minds, influencing our feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (Baszile, 2018). We must deconstruct these narratives to uncover the ideologies that inscribe our Black bodies, so that we can participate in loving our Black bodies. Counter storytelling is an embodied practice which inherently deconstructs the master narratives that have been inscribed upon our bodies (Baszile, 2018; Deitering, et al., 2017; Waite, 2009). Baszile (2018) emphasizes that identities are socially and narratively constructed, meaning they are influenced by the stories we are told, the stories we tell, and the stories we are not told at the intersection of the invention, negotiation and deconstruction of our identities. Master narratives misrecognize us, misrepresent us, and reproduce oppression through marking us as inferior against whiteness, cisness, straightness, and able-bodiedness, etc. However, counter stories (counternarratives) told and retold by Black bodies and folx with marginalized identities are a means of resistance, healing and transformation for those of us who are able to (re)inscribe the

worth of our bodies. In other words, counter storytelling is the process in which we get to tell our own story, from our own perspective, with our own definitions. This is how we dissipate the fog. This is how we lower the veil. This is how we return to ourselves. And this is how we love. This is how we cherish our blackness. This is how we celebrate our embodied authenticity. This is how we pursue liberation. hooks offers a counternarrative of love which negates master narratives and (re)defines love. hooks' definition of love is grounded in the nurturance of oneself and others, meaning self-recovery and self-actualization through care, commitment and trust is how we love. Given hooks' definition of love, Afrikan, Afrikan descendants, Black AFAB folx, Black witches, Black women, Black activists, Black scholars, however we choose to self-define and self-identify, have a long history of resisting colonial oppression with a spirit of love (Atta, 2018; Baszile, 2018; Beal, 2008; Collins, 1986; Griffin, 2012; Harris, 2018; Harris-Perry, 2011; Lorde, 1997; Petermon & Spencer, 2019). And love? Love is how we can choose to make peace with our abusers.³⁹

Witnessing Counter stories to Embrace Black Self-Love

The second strategy Baszile (2018) identifies is to engage with counter stories and countertheories through reading and discussion about Black lives. Baszile asserts that Black students need counter spaces to interact with counter stories, countertheories, and other Black students. These spaces provide room for Black students to wrestle with Black alienation, to speak truth to their experiences too often dismissed by their white counterparts, and to receive recognition, validation and affirmation. We need these

³⁹ This peace is for us, our own wellbeing. Remember that we are America; we are our own abusers; and to make peace does not justify, dismiss, or excuse the abuse.

spaces. We need these stories. We need to see people that look like us and to hear stories that sound like ours. I desperately needed validation. I desperately needed recognition. The environment I was in, the state I was in, the workplace I was in, the university I attended, and the people I had access to, did not lend itself to accurately recognize the truth of my Black, queer, trans, fat, AFAB body. However, the Collective Thriving conference offered me two days FULL of recognition and validation: recognition so sweet, so soothing, so refreshing, like an iced cold sweet tea on a hot August midwestern day. The first workshop I attended was titled Reclaiming Ancestral Wisdom in Movement Work. The panelists spoke about connecting to their ancestors and how that connection inspired the direction and intention of their activism. The panelist featured:

- a queer Black feminist, a Pilipina, Indian immigrant, woman,
- a Native, AFAB sexual violence activist,
- a Mexican AFAB, anti-oppression activist,
- a transnational Black feminist,
- a Mexican AFAB, social justice advocate,
- as well as a Black AFAB spirit worker.⁴⁰

I was awe-struck by the beautiful Black and brown bodies holding reverent space before me. I felt a sense of connectedness and home through hearing them speak truth to power

⁴⁰ These identities are based on the biographies provided by the conference. These identities are in no way all-encompassing of their individual experiences. I name these identities to highlight that these panelists, in their very essence, resisted and negated master narratives of whiteness, colonialism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity.

and show up with decolonized authenticity. I was inspired to hear how the different panelists had traced their family lineage and felt connected to the magic and wisdom of their ancestors; truly connecting to the history of our liberation struggle. I distinctly remember feeling inspired, yet deeply saddened because I did not know my own family background, I did not know my ancestry, and I did not know how to access such information. Determined to pursue solace outside the limits of this moment, this conference, I approached a few of the panelists and asked them how someone could connect to their ancestors. One of the panelists, a queer Black feminist who identifies as an artist, healer, writer and organizer, said to me, with kindness and passion that resonated through my being, “you might not know your ancestors, but they know you”. She told me to set out a candle and a glass of water with the intention of inviting my ancestors into my life. I remember leaving feeling in awe of the women I spoke to and a bit skeptical that I could access such divinity.

Creating my own Counter story - I am Love

The third strategy Baszile (2018) outlines is to write your own counternarrative. The counternarrative I choose to write is,

I am worthy.

After the conference I began reconnecting with my spiritual self. I set out water and lit candles. I dug my feet in the grass and soaked up the sunshine. I learned that over half of my DNA matches the DNA of plants, so I ate more vegetables and satiated myself with water, honoring the homeostasis my body craves. One weekend in the summer, I unplugged, stayed in a camper, read, wrote, drove through the hills and marveled at the serenity of trees growing out of the mountainside. It was there in the quiet that I

(re)discovered my gender identity and (re)connected with so many other forgotten parts of myself. I felt a deep sense of connection to the land and the earth, surrounded by nature. I found peace in the quiet away from the conditions of colonization, and I found love in every moment I took for myself.

Our spirits demand recognition. Our bodies demand recognition. We deserve recognition. As Baszile (2018) emphasizes, the real struggle with embodying radical Black self-love lies in the lack of support Black folx experience when they demonstrate a love for themselves. I didn't have physical support in my environment, and so I needed to find it internally. About a year after the conference, I was assigned to read bell hooks (2001), *All About Love*, for class. It turns out this book was everything I didn't know I was looking for. And it is through hooks' love ethic that I was able to find additional grounding. My feelings, my experiences, the way I saw the world, affirmed on each page. I was finally able to see myself in the pages.

Today, a year and a half later, candles and mason jars full of water sit on every windowsill in my home. I enjoy lighting my candles, freshening the water, and greeting my ancestors with a "good morning". I still experience reverence and shock when I can feel their energy, when I feel rooted to the earth, and when I feel present, body, mind and energy aligned. This is magic. This is embodied knowledge. This is spirituality. And this is healing. Richardson (2018) rejects colonized methods of healing which saturate our culture and fail to meet the needs of Black bodies. She offers a Black feminist ethos rooted in spirituality and healing which explicates itself beyond the Western colonial definitions of religion, psychology and psychiatry. Richardson contends, "healing is an act of resistance to oppression that can produce counter knowledge, celebrate the spirit,

and foster community through affirmation and sharing, particularly as it pertains to African women” (p. 283). Whiteness, colonization, abusive America, has kept me from remembering this knowledge, from honoring my ancestors, from knowing them, from believing I could know them. Even still, they know me. And for that I am forever grateful. Harris (2018) reminds me, “the colonization of our bodies is so thick and it’s so ingrained that we have to be vigilant in pushing that yoke off of us by speaking who we are and what we want into existence” (p. 249). And I am so thankful for Lakeesha J. Harris. I am so thankful for Jennifer L. Richardson. I am so thankful for the Black women at the Collective Thriving conference. I am so thankful for bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Rachel Griffin. And I am so thankful to my ancestors, to all the Black women, Black AFAB folx, who have come before me, and to all the Black AFAB folx who will come after me. It is with their strength, their guidance, their words, and their resistance that I am able to reignite the power in me to push off the yoke of colonization and honor who I am.

and who I am is worthy.

This is the end of this journey. In the following chapter I will conclude my thesis. This chapter will offer final thoughts and reflections on the production of this project.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Do you remember when we talked about the universe completing itself? I said it made me feel sad because I was afraid of when I would have such a moment again. Today I know differently. Today the universe is complete. Today my universe is complete. The waves, make the ocean, make the water, make the sky, make the ground, make the grass, until it all comes back to be. The infinite wisdom of the universe: what can be, what will be, what is, and what has been. The infinite wisdom that anything to the contrary just is not. The infinite wisdom that you will always get back to what is. And the infinite wisdom that what it is, is always meant to be. Nothing is wasted. What is true has always been true and what will be, will come.

What the fuck. I just finished chapter five of my thesis. I felt a vibration run through my body. I've been working on this project since Fall of 2019. I didn't know it would be my thesis at that point. I've been working on it as my thesis since February of 2020. But this project is more than my thesis. It is more than this writing. The reality is, I have been working on this project since I came out of the womb, defiant and screaming. The project is me. I am the project. Recording this thesis has been hard, enduring work. Every chapter, every paragraph, every sentence, every word, pulling from my flesh, pulling from my blood, pulling from my bones, my body, my spirit, myself, laid bare in each articulation.

The conclusion is supposed to be a summary, an ending, a location to capture the learnings and goings. The academy demands it, and my body recoils. It feels wrong to try

and summarize such a process. It feels wrong to say, “*this is what I learned*”. How do you capture the process of (re)covering your soul? How do you summarize what it was like to cut open your blistering wounds to spill the pus, blood and fluid all over these pages for everyone to see? for the academy to reprimand? for white readers to shed their tears and sing their congrats? and just that easily my defenses come up. and just that easily I forget my worth. This conclusion is about **me**. It is about my worth. It is for me and my communal siblings. I record this process, this journey, this unveiling, my body, my struggle, my triumph as to provide **another** counter story, **another** Black narrative, **another** Black truth-teller, **another** queer body for myself and my siblings to look to for recognition, for validation, for sustenance.

Concluding Chapter Two

Each chapter of my thesis presented its own challenges. Accordingly, I learned hard-earned truths. In *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, I learned about my history. I came face to face with the depths of just how much colonization had stolen from me. As I detailed the history and scope of violence enacted upon our Black bodies, I was often overcome with debilitating grief. While writing this chapter I had to take many breaks, I had to rant to many friends, and I sat with my ancestors grieving the transgenerational losses of our people. In this chapter, I also found joy and triumph in researching Black feminist spirit-workers. I found inspiration, comfort and peace in their radical demandings for me to reconnect with my Black witch spirit. This thesis afforded me with the opportunity to read SO many Black authors. I am proud and honored to display a reference list FULL of my Black siblings’ work. Writing this thesis and writing this chapter, was also an act of recognizing myself. As I walked through my history and the

relationship abuse paradigm, I put myself and my experiences in social, cultural and political context. As I wrote myself alongside the experiences of my Black siblings, I felt empowered and validated to put truth to power, to record what is so often denied. The literature review provided me an opportunity to see myself in scholarship, to write myself *into* scholarship, which was the biggest fuck you to the academy who has spent a lifetime writing me out. And through writing myself into scholarship, I found my way to writing myself *into* liberation.

Concluding Chapter Three

Chapter Three: Methodology, while the least fun to write, was an empowering chapter. Through writing the methodology chapter, I was additionally able to locate myself into scholarship. Utilizing Black Feminist Autoethnography was revolutionary and soothing for my being. I was honored and awe-struck to be able to write my words alongside inspirational truth-tellers such as Rachel Griffin, Gloria Anzaldúa, and so many others. After countless years in the academy, being told that there was a right (white) and wrong way to do scholarship, it was transformational to center myself in a methodology that recognized the essence of my being. The beginning of this writing was fraught with imposter syndrome, second guessing, and questioning the validity of my words. I felt an immense pressure to cite every sentence, to prove that I alone didn't make this up - to prove that what I had to say was legitimate and important. However, writing this thesis has been transformational for how I interact myself, how I interact with others, and how I interact with the world. As I digested scholarship from people who not only looked like me, but understood the complexities of my being, the writing came more easily. *Chapter*

Three allowed me to record the messy, fluid, Black-centered process that brought this thesis into being.

Concluding Chapter Four

Chapter Four: Confronting my Abusers, is the chapter that saved my life. Writing this chapter was painful, yet necessary, like excising a wound. I began this chapter with poetry. It felt necessary to begin this chapter without the constraints of the academy, without grammar, diction, and syntax dictating that my heart, body, soul, and all the emotions that accompany them, present themselves in a linear, restricted fashion. I worked diligently to hammer home the extensive, violent ways colonization continues to impact Black bodies not only at a societal level, but at an individual level, an individual level so personal and intimate, an individual's psyche, my psyche. When I began writing this chapter, I was angry. I was filled with rage. Anger was the energy that motivated me to record this story. Every sentence was an outpouring of my rage. I wanted to tell my truth, and I wanted any white person, really anyone, reading it to feel my righteous indignation. I had been living with this rage my entire life. I had been living with the shame and grief that accompany it. And now I finally had permission to let it go. And so, I unleashed my anger, each word, each sentence, a knife sharpened for every single person who dared to question my worth. With intention and guidance, my anger became a precise tool (Lorde, 1997), a weapon of destruction to use against the very thing that put it there in the first place (the academy, whiteness, America, colonization). The purpose of this chapter is resistance. I wrote this chapter to resist all the tomfoolery that keeps me from embodying the truth of my intrinsic worthiness and humanity. This chapter is my rallying cry. I wrote this for anyone else who bears the weight of hegemonic

expectations, for anyone who seeks to shrug them off and soar with their newfound buoyancy. *Chapter Four* is my truth. And I hope that my truth will offer solace, recognition and validation for my Black and brown siblings, for anyone intending to resist the yoke of colonization. Capitalization, sentence structure, grammar, spelling, simple sentences, compound sentences, where to place the god damn comma - these are the rules of the academy, these are the restraints of classism, these are the boxes that cannot properly hold the fluidity and expansiveness of my being. Where I can get away with it⁴¹ - I step outside of the boxes. I am telling a story. I am translating the truth of my body. Grammar cannot capture that. I did my very best to aesthetically capture the feeling and weight of my truth. I play with capitalization, bolding, italicizing and spacing to emphasize a point, to evoke a feeling, to communicate the spirit of what my body needed to share. By the time I finished writing this chapter I was no longer angry. I ended this chapter feeling proud. I ended this chapter feeling satisfied, the feeling of my rage unleashed, leaving me full and ready for something new.

Concluding Chapter Five

Chapter Five was the most challenging chapter to write. I put it off and I put it off. I even tried to get out of writing it. All of the other chapters I went back and forth writing, I didn't write them linearly. But this chapter, I felt like I couldn't write it until everything else was finished. I felt like I couldn't write it until I was healed, past tense, done. I was lost with where to begin and where to go. And honestly, I was intimidated. Who was I, Sarah Keeton, to write about healing, to write about love, to write about

⁴¹ much to my advisor's patient and gracious dismay

liberation? What could I possibly have to say about such a concept? I also didn't want to mess it up. This chapter, love, is the saving grace, the anecdote, the magic elixir, I didn't want to reduce it, to misrepresent it, to steer someone in the wrong direction when it came to healing from the abuse. I griped and moaned, my deadline looming. I had every excuse, it wasn't the right time, I didn't have the right energy, I wasn't in the headspace to write about love or healing. And so, I decided to start there. I began chapter five with the messiness, the insecurity, the ever-present voice in my head that whispers, "you are not good enough". As I acknowledged this voice, it got quieter, easier to maintain, I became able to move past it, to the truth it was yelling over. Again, acknowledgement is the first step. Nothing is accomplished by pretending something is not there, it only makes it bigger, louder, harder to deal with in the long run. Once again, I found solace, comfort and inspiration in writing this chapter. The research for this chapter led me to read radical works by unapologetic and embodied Black women. It was validating to read their words, to read their strategies for resistance, to recognize myself in them. As I interacted with bell hooks, Denize Baszile, and countless others, I felt a sense of profound consciousness. Their words and the research I read for this project rarely provided me with *new* information, but instead put words to my feelings, put concepts to my experiences, and put meaning to my knowledge. And it is with this profound consciousness that I (re)cognized that I could, that I can, and that I will always (re)turn to myself.

Concluding the Conclusion

And now we have **another** Black story. I share my truth to bolster the counternarrative, Black lives matter, Black stories matter, we matter. I share my truth so

that others can share theirs, so that others can come to understand they are valid all on their own. Typically, the conclusion ends with future directions. Where else does the research need to go? What is next? And to that I say, only time will tell. The question, “What is next?” demands a linear answer, and what is next is unknown, is fluid, is what has already been.

The what next is that we begin this process again, that I begin this process again.

We experience. We live. We thrive. We suffer abuse. We record. We recognize. We validate. We recover. We heal.

And

We experience. We live. We thrive. We suffer abuse. We record. We recognize.

We validate. We recover. We heal.

And

We experience. We live. We thrive. We suffer abuse. We record. We recognize. We validate. We recover. We heal.

Over and over again.

Autoethnography, Black Feminist Autoethnography, showed me another way, another way of being, of doing, of existing inside and outside of the academy.

And this process,

this autoethnography,

this project

is me

and

I am

this project.

This project is now a part of me; I will carry it with me wherever I may go. I will carry the legacy of recording myself and (re)discovering my worth. I wrote this thesis to record myself. I wrote this thesis to recognize myself. I wrote this thesis to love myself. I am the love of my life. I am my saving grace. I am an embodied being. I am worthy. And if I am all of those things, then so are you. If I am all of those things, then so are we. We're stronger together. And together we can resist anything to the contrary.

To anyone seeking to undertake a project such as this,

don't.

This project was grueling. This project was for the academy. This project was a means to an end, to get that shiny diploma.

AND

To anyone seeking to undertake a project such as this,

do.

This project was transformational. This project was for me. This project allowed me to (re)turn to myself. This project was for my queer, Black and brown and differently abled siblings. And this project was for you.

To anyone seeking to do and to anyone seeking to don't,

1. surround yourself with people who love you, who show you love, who take care of you
2. take care of yourself, drink water, take naps, masturbate, journal, cry, scream, have meaningless sex, have meaningful sex, eat ice cream, eat vegetables, re-

watch Desperate Housewives, go shopping, shower, brush your teeth, ask for help, over and over again

3. just do it, get out of your head, write messy, write without grammar, write stream of consciousness, stare at the blank page, text your advisor to whine and complain, bang your head on the table, just put your god damn fingers to the keyboard, re-read that article you are so sure is going to inspire you, walk in a circle around your home, grab some chocolate, TRUST YOURSELF, and just be.

Always try to remember,

it's not where you go, but how you go.

We are complex and embodied beings. We can hold contradicting truths. We can hold both and. And the truth is there is no leaving this relationship. There is no leaving this system of abuse.

AND

With love, with support, with mediation, with recognition we can take breaths, we can loosen the chains, and we can be liberated within ourselves.

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