Through the Back Door: Unsettling and Witnessing the Transgenerational Trauma Paradigm with African American Women

Asia Tonja Marie Amos

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The title “Through the Back Door” was chosen to illustrate an anecdote delivered by Kimberlé Crenshaw for the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day Commemoration Event at Vanderbilt University in 2017. During this event, Kimberlé Crenshaw recounted a story of being invited to a club for members only while studying law at Harvard University. She was invited to this event as a guest by a friend who identified as an African American man. They decided to attend the event out of curiosity and to learn about the social environment of the predominantly White American and male identified organization. When she and her friend arrived at the club, he was invited inside, and she was told to enter through the back door of the building. Although she and her friend both identified as African American, because she was a woman, she was not allowed to enter through the front door. She told this story to illustrate intersectionality and its implications for the lived experiences of African American women’s lives.
Dedication

I dedicate this to every Black girl who searched books, memories, relationships, and homes to find herself.
Acknowledgements

I want to acknowledge the Spirits which held every part of this process together. I also want to acknowledge my incredible matriarchy who across generations continue to dream radically beautiful lives for our descendants. To my mother, Rheadawn Brown, my maternal grandmother Mable Vaden, my paternal grandmother Gladys Bean, and my great grandmother Annie May McGhee--this dissertation is for you. I also want to state a special acknowledgment to my late Aunty Liquita McGhee, the first pleasure activist in my life. Everything you taught me lives through me and will continue. I am grateful to call you ancestor.
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to disrupt and challenge how research and representation of transgenerational trauma in the field of psychology perpetuates the elision and erasure of African American women's experiences. In social sciences and the medical field, African American women are often described within trauma studies as either silent sufferers of substance abuse and interpersonal violence or perpetrators of lateral violence, child abuse/neglect, etc., which dislocates their personhood and complex nuances of their experiences (e.g. Broussard, 2013; Ponton III, 2018; Ricks, 2018).

This study critiques, decolonizes, and de-pathologizes transgenerational trauma transmission (TTT) by using Black feminist intersectional and endarkened feminist theory with narrative and autobiographical methods to de-center W.E.I.R.D (Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010)) epistemologies in psychology. By exploring how transgenerational trauma is named, narrated, and theorized from the perspectives of both the researcher and participants across culture, society, and systems, this project gives TTT “a new language” where African American women “narrate cultural histories not only premised on trauma but also creation, renewal, and mutual recognition” (Walker, 2012, p. 154).

As a part of the study, five participants were interviewed about their experiences of transgenerational trauma. The representation of this project includes interpretive narratives which were co-created with the participants. This project also discusses the implications of studying TTT within African American communities using Transgenerational Trauma Alchemy as a psychospiritual framework and Womanist Psychology.

Keywords: African American, women, trauma, Black feminist, qualitative, narrative
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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Resistance is the secret of joy.” - Alice Walker

Statement of the Problem: The Pathologizing Power of Psychology

Western Eurocentric paradigms of mental health treatment have incredible power over marginalized communities as a result of imperialism and colonialism. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) defines colonialism as one expression of European imperialism which began approximately in the 15th century. She constructs the broad and sweeping impacts of European imperialism as: “(1) imperialism as economic expansion; (2) imperialism as subjugation of ‘others’; (3) imperialism as an idea or spirit with many forms of realization; and (4) imperialism as a discursive field of knowledge,” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 22). In this dissertation, I am discussing imperialism, and specifically, Psychology as a colonial agent with the power to subjugate others through the theorization, research, and treatment of mental health. Specifically, this project seeks to witness and unsettle the colonial impact of mental health in the psychological study and treatment of transgenerational trauma and African American women.

Among these powers of colonialism in mental health is the ability to pathologize socio-cultural behaviors of minoritized people (Maxwell, 2014), produce research which victimizes and/or silences its participants (Pillow, 2019; Tuck, 2009) and impact policy change which negatively effects marginalized communities (Hoffart & Jones, 2018; Menzies, 2010). In particular, the study of trauma in Psychology exemplifies this pathologizing power in its long and complicated history (APA, 2022). The field of Psychology has been at the forefront of treatment in trauma related symptoms while simultaneously labeling the experiences of minoritized communities with diagnoses and disorders which may not be appropriate or consented to. Furthermore, as the mental health care field legitimates trauma, it influences
policies which define what is considered effective and valid treatment for trauma related
symptoms, which oftentimes effectively reinforce colonialist and paternalist notions on
minoritized communities (Graff, 2014; Maxwell, 2014). For example, transgenerational trauma,
or the concept that trauma can be experienced as a historical event (i.e. genocide, slavery, etc.)
which produces symptoms transmitted across generations, is legitimized by the mental healthcare
field for Indigenous, First Nations, and Aboriginal communities in Canada (Maxwell, 2014).
However, the mental healthcare field greatly influences what is considered treatment for
transgenerational trauma related symptoms (i.e. substance abuse, depression, etc.) and how that
treatment is accessed.

Thus, Indigenous, First Nations, and Aboriginal communities consistently struggle for the
legitimation of Native healing practices and self-governing (Fast & Collin-Vézina, 2010; Marsh
et al., 2016; Maxwell, 2014). Instead of these communities receiving support from governments
to reclaim their healing practices and self-governing, the cycle of colonization continues, where
grassroots movements are displaced, and bureaucratized mental health facilities are provided
funding to treat transgenerational trauma in lieu of providing funding, resources, and support to
communities themselves so that they are able to heal through their own cultural practices
(Maxwell, 2014).

Historically, the power of the mental health field has been used to validate the mental
inferiority, subjugation, and marginalization of numerous communities who do not fit the
prototypical male, heterosexual, cisgender client of European descent (Adams, Dobles, Gómez,
Kurtiş, & Molina, 2015; David, & Okazaki, 2006). Moreover, the White cis-heteropatriarchal
structure of mental health care treatment and research continues to perpetuate the elision and
erasure of racial, systemic, and transgenerational trauma for marginalized communities (Craps,
2013; Graff, 2014). Consequently, though the mental health field is working diligently toward inclusivity, multiculturalism, and social justice, the profession must reckon with its history of colonial practices and power as a colonial agent (Lavallee & Poole, 2010; Maldonado-Torres, 2017; Riggs & Walker, 2006). Adams et al. (2006) state:

The bulk of work in mainstream Psychology still reflects and promotes the interests of a privileged minority of people in Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic (a.k.a. WEIRD; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) settings. Moreover, even when genuinely concerned researchers do look outside WEIRD settings and direct attention to experience of people in the “Majority World” (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1996), they tend to do so in light of concepts, methods, and beliefs about normality that are rooted in the WEIRD realities that inform scientific and epistemic imagination. (p. 214)

Thus, the colonization of mental health manifests across multiple processes: (a) what is validated as research and knowledge, (b) how research is conducted, and which paradigms are legitimized, (c) how diagnoses are formulated and decided, and (d) how clinical work is practiced. In trauma studies, post-colonial and decolonial thinkers are addressing the colonization of the mental health field by acknowledging the erasure of other communities’ experiences in the European canon of trauma/transgenerational trauma studies (Andermahr, 2016; Pillow, 2019). First, critical and postcolonial scholars critique the failure of historic conceptualizations of transgenerational trauma to include genocide, slavery, and institutionalized forms of oppression (Craps, 2013; Pillow, 2019). Second, critical and postcolonial scholars argue trauma studies must better contextualize its work within the historical, social, and political dynamics of different communities.
As a result of these issues in trauma research there is increased risk of perpetuating erasure and harm within the communities they are hoping to better understand (Andermahr, 2016; Craps, 2013; Pillow, 2019). Clark (2016) argues trauma theory and studies are deeply entangled with colonialism, often failing to name systemic violence while misrecognizing and exacerbating psychological symptoms of communities. Consequently, the study of trauma and transgenerational trauma emerged from a long history of “epistemic violence” where multiple and different forms of trauma were not recognized, validated, or supported in research and practice (Pillow, 2019). Fortunately, trauma studies are now responding to this theoretical erasure by theoretically and methodologically diversifying research on intergenerational trauma, transgenerational trauma, historical trauma, and soul wounds.

**Transgenerational Trauma and African American Women**

The transgenerational trauma paradigm emerged from the public circulation of narratives written by Holocaust survivors and their descendants (Epstein, 1979; Maxwell, 2014). The Holocaust narratives “provided a frame of reference for extremes of violence and suffering...” (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009, p.13) but they also provided an intimate view into the lives of survivors and their families. Over time, intergenerational trauma and transgenerational trauma narratives increased in visibility as grassroots organizations and communities receive more attention for historical injustices and resources for community-based healing (Barlow, 2018; Marsh et al., 2016). In addition, growing research on epigenetics and trauma contribute greatly to developing literature, funding, and interest in intergenerational studies (e.g. Blackman, 2016; Conching & Thayer, 2019; Lehrner & Yehuda, 2018; and Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018).
Defining Historical, Intergenerational, and Transgenerational Trauma

As a result of increased attention and visibility of transgenerational trauma narratives, the social sciences are expanding their definition and exploration of intergenerational trauma (Hoffart & Jones, 2018; Maxwell, 2014). Defining terms such as historical trauma, trans/multi/cross/inter-generational trauma, and soul wound are often used interchangeably in the literature to describe the phenomena of cumulative harm that occurs and continuously manifests in individuals, families, and communities who have experienced extreme violence, marginalization, colonization, and attempted eradication (Braveheart, 1998; Hoffart & Jones, 2018; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004).

These terms attempt to describe what Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski (2004) and Neal (1998) denote as historic trauma transmission (HTT), a collective memory, story, or representation of events which, blurred and boundary-less, is transmitted from generation to generation biologically (epigenetics and hereditary predispositions to PTSD) socially (through intimate/lateral violence, parenting behaviors), culturally (storytelling, culturally-sanctioned behaviors, and micro-practices), and psychologically (long-term collective memory processes). As this emotional and psychological trauma goes untreated in one generation, the effects accumulate, become internalized in families and communities, and “...ingrained in the social relations, practices, and institutions surrounding them” (Kirmayer, Brass, & Tait, 2000, p. 611).

The Complexities of the Transgenerational Trauma Paradigm

For the purposes of this study, I use Maxwell’s (2014) term transgenerational trauma, as it specifically elucidates how trauma can originate from a specific historical event (e.g. slavery, the Holocaust, genocide, etc.) and be transmitted through generations, and be experienced/perpetuated across new systems of violence (e.g. mass incarceration, police
brutality, etc.) (Maxwell, 2014). I employ the term transgenerational trauma to frame the impacts of historical traumas such as slavery and the impacts of evolving systemic traumas within the African American community. Although the transgenerational trauma paradigm is helpful in conceptualizing experiences of trauma across individuals, families, communities, and systems, it is also complex and imperfect. As transgenerational trauma is legitimized within Psychology and other mental health fields, it is simultaneously engulfed by the power of mental health and Psychology to other and subjugate communities of color (Walker, 2012; Yakushko, Hoffman, Morgan Consoli, & Lee, 2016).

Consequently, embracing a concept as nuanced as transgenerational trauma is complicated. In one case, the transgenerational trauma paradigm acknowledges and validates the horrific injustices endured by many minoritized communities. In another case, the study of transgenerational trauma, which normally focuses on the behavioral and social transmissions of trauma, potentially re-pathologizes marginalized communities, producing “damage-centered” research and narratives (Tuck, 2009; Walker, 2012; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). Psychological studies on the transmission of transgenerational trauma in African American women (though few and far between) often focus on the African American family as a unit (see, for example, Apprey, 1999; Blakey, 2013; Fletchmen, 2011; Gump, 2000; Miller, 2018; St. Vil, Stil Vil, & Fairfax, 2019). Studies in related social science and medical fields focus on transgenerational trauma in African American communities as primarily associated with social/behavioral concerns and physical health outcomes (Graff, 2014; Holloran, 2019; Pina, 2016). African-Americans are depicted as having, “… inherited an extensive list of dysfunctional attitudes, habits, and behaviors from the era of enslavement” (Holloran, 2019, p. 50) which, reinforced by prejudice and disproportionate poverty, are thought to produce intergenerational

This view of transgenerational trauma further victimizes and pathologizes how African American communities learned to survive years of oppressive traumatic experiences. In fact, by solely focusing on select, deficit-informed social outcomes of transgenerational trauma transmission, such studies place an inherently colonized template of what “healthy” and “normative” psychological functioning should be under circumstances too egregious and varied to normalize. As a result, the conceptualization and treatment of transgenerational trauma in African American people appear as de-contextualized studies of social/behavioral factors and psychological outcomes such as PTSD, anger, aggression, distrust, and internalized oppression (Bryant-Davis, Adams, Alejandre, & Gray, 2017).

In summary, the result of decontextualized research is harmful when it does not couch behavioral and psychological outcomes within the sociohistorical conditions of public lynching, police brutality, race-motivated violence, social disenfranchisement, and forced migration continuously experienced by numerous African American communities. Therefore, reckoning with transgenerational trauma in a manner which properly contextualizes the participants’ varied representations and resiliencies can be difficult without othering and erasing sociocultural and historical truths. Still, it is researchers’ and scholars’ responsibility to respond to these community’s erasure and victimization with theories and methods which refuse damage-centered research and allow communities to name their experiences (Pillow, 2019; Tuck, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2014).
*Unsettling Possibilities in Problematizing Transgenerational Trauma*

In this project, I problematize the transgenerational trauma paradigm theoretically, methodologically, and representationally hopefully unsettling how transgenerational trauma is researched within the African American community. First, I use Kimberlé Crenshaw’s Black intersectional feminist framework and Cynthia Dillard’s Endarkened feminism as theoretical angles with which to problematize the study of transgenerational trauma with African American women. Crenshaw’s (1989; 1991) canonical application of intersectionality theory combines critical legal and critical race standpoint to critique and analyze how structural racism and sexism exist and thrive in institutions, society, politics, and culture (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). I apply Crenshaw’s (1989;1991) definition of intersectionality theory similarly to other social sciences (see Cole, 2009; Else-Quest & Shibley Hyde, 2016; Grzanka, Moradi, & Santos, 2017; Rosenfield, 2012; Seng et al., 2012) as a theoretical and analytical tool to better understand transgenerational trauma transmission within the participant’s sociocultural historical contexts.

With this in mind, I weave Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski’s (2004) theory of HTT, and Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory to frame the social, cultural, and systemic/political contexts of transgenerational trauma transmission. I explore social trauma transmission by looking at how transgenerational trauma, through cultural dispossession and colonization, affects gender roles, family units, interpersonal relationships, non-traditional coping mechanisms, and values of the community. I follow cultural trauma transmission by looking at religious transformations, cultural practices, cultural destruction and hybridization, (i.e., rituals, ceremonies, community practices), and cultural images/narratives affected by colonization and cultural dispossession. I engage with systemic/political trauma transmission by examining the
impact of institutionalized forms of oppression such as slavery, Jim Crow, red lining, police brutality, and mass incarceration.

Second, I trouble the transgenerational trauma paradigm by applying Endarkened feminist epistemology which is rooted within Black feminist thought from a cultural standpoint (Dillard, 2000; 2016). Endarkened feminist epistemology teaches, “reciprocity and relationship between the researcher teacher,” “research as responsibility,” “consciousness in the realm of the spirit in one’s work” and “rendering visible the work and outcomes of inquiry as sacred work” (Dillard, 2016, p. 407). By including this theoretical perspective, I unsettle the pathologization, subjugation, and othering in transgenerational trauma research with the intent to foreground spirituality, relationship, and community in this study.

In summary my response to the history of marginalization and pathologization in trauma studies and transgenerational trauma research is to trouble and unsettle the transgenerational trauma paradigm through a critical, spiritual, and relational approach. I argue investigations of transgenerational trauma transmission in African American women will greatly benefit from both an intersectional and endarkened feminist approach. Such studies will generate possibilities to critique the pathologizing of trauma in Psychology and broaden the conceptualization of transgenerational trauma as it is named and experienced by African American women.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

In this intersectional endarkened feminist study, I interviewed 5 African American women who live across or were raised in the Mid-South region of the United States to understand how the participants name, experience, and navigate the transmission of transgenerational trauma interpersonally, intrapersonally, socially, culturally, and systemically. The research puzzle guiding this study include:
1) How is transgenerational trauma transmission understood, narrated, and named by African American women?
   
   (a) What are the experiences of cultural transmissions of transgenerational trauma?
   (b) What are the experiences of social transmissions of transgenerational trauma?
   (c) What are the experiences of systemic/structural transmissions of transgenerational trauma?

2) What are the rituals, practices and ways of navigating the transmission of transgenerational trauma?

The purpose of this study is to disrupt and challenge how transgenerational trauma is researched and represented in Psychology with African American women. It aims to decolonize and de-pathologize transgenerational trauma transmission by using Black feminist intersectional and endarkened feminist methods to de-center whiteness and W.E.I.R.D. epistemologies in Psychology. By exploring how transgenerational trauma is named, narrated, and theorized from the perspectives of both the researcher and participants across culture, society, and systems, this project gives transgenerational trauma “a new language” where African American women “narrate cultural histories not only premised on trauma but also creation, renewal, and mutual recognition” (Walker, 2012, p. 154).

**Significance of Study**

This research study expands the growing literature on liberational, cultural, and feminist praxis in Psychology specifically related to how transgenerational trauma is understood, legitimated, and treated for African American women. In particular, this study unsettles the transgenerational trauma paradigm in Psychology by applying Kimberlé Crenshaw’s Black
feminist intersectional framework to problematize and analyze how African American women experience trauma socially, culturally, and politically. In addition to this theory, I use Cynthia Dillard’s (2000) Endarkened Feminist Epistemology (EFE) to unsettle and investigate how African American women experience transgenerational trauma from within their individual/collective cultural memory, and how they heal/resist through relationship, micro-practices, and rituals.

These theories not only de-center W.E.I.R.D. epistemologies, but also center Africanness/Blackness and womanness. These theories are for Black women and are also produced by Black women, which is critical to my process of unsettling what theories and experiences are legitimated in the study of Psychology, feminism, and transgenerational trauma. By combining Black feminist intersectionality and Endarkened Feminist Epistemology in a psychological study of transgenerational trauma, I am living intersectionality as a critical, reflexive, interdisciplinary praxis and making a unique contribution to the literature in Psychology, feminism, and African American studies.

Although the growing literature in transgenerational trauma paradigms is historically centered around Holocaust survivors and indigenous, First Nations, and Aboriginal peoples, African Americans have a rich and complex history which can also benefit from a critical transgenerational trauma perspective (Walker, 2012; Graff, 2014; Holloran, 2019). Maxwell (2014) states historical trauma is a social construct which allows people with specific interests to obtain the resources available to them in “particular social locations and at a particular historical moment,” (p. 412), and as such, “the global ascent of trauma discourse” provides communities with transgenerational trauma a means to use their trauma as a tool for justice. African American communities experience transgenerational trauma from historical events such as slavery and
through the interconnected effects of racism, sexism, classism, etc. which culminate through experiences such as de facto segregation via gentrification, mass incarceration, police brutality, and medical mental health discrimination (Alexander, 2012; Aymer, 2016; Bryant-Davis et al., 2017). Williams-Washington and Mills (2018) state:

African Americans have endured immeasurable race-related traumatic events on a national scale, such as the Rosewood massacre of 1923, the government-sponsored Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment from 1932 to 1972, the Los Angeles riots of 1992, and more recently, overrepresentation in the school-to-prison pipeline and incidents of police brutality (Howard, 2016; Lynch, 2016). In a society that understands grief when the deceased is of close relation, there is little recognition and acceptance for the traumatic sufferings of African Americans and their need to mourn their history (Brave Heart & DeBryun, 1998).

Therefore, though there is potential for revictimization through the transgenerational trauma perspective, this framework may also provide African American communities the opportunity to turn toward their trauma and reclaim their power, healing, and narratives. Social movements such as “Me Too,” “Black Lives Matter,” and “Walk for Our Lives” are some of the few current representations of reclaiming power, healing, and narrative from and through trauma. Specifically, in African American communities, Community Healing Networks (CHN) and Emotional Emancipation Circles (EECS) are becoming more prevalent as discourse concerning the effects of transgenerational trauma/trauma and well-being increase in visibility (Barlow, 2018). The prevalence of these movements and growth of community healing networks via social media indicate trauma discourse and storytelling are moving to the forefront of mainstream tools for healing and change within minoritized communities. Therefore, it is
 hopefully more possible for African American people to organize and problematize their transgenerational narratives of trauma for social justice and resources for healing.

**Personal and Theoretical Contexts**

My mother told me I was born into this world with an old spirit, and she called me her “Old lady baby.” From an early age I was interested in family stories and particularly in the family’s pain. I was precocious. I was long, gangly, and dark—the kind of child who does not ask to be noticed in my family and who notices everything. I knew my great uncle would pinch some of the grandchildren at the family gatherings and this upset my mother. He would pinch me, roughly, on my arm, squeezing the skin until I exclaimed. He did not, however, pinch my sister. I learned at his funeral, he did more hurtful things than pinch some of the children in the family, and I struggled then and now to understand how we still kept a place for him at the dinner table all these years.

I knew when we went to Winchester, TN to visit my maternal family’s home, we never stayed longer than a day, and there was always a lot of laughing…and crying. Growing up, I had what my mother called “an achy body”. My joints hurt, my muscles ached, and my mother would say they were simply “growing pains.” I think I was tapped into something spiritual and material—a transgenerational truth living in my bones. I didn’t understand then what feeling this pain—emotionally, physically and psychically—would do for me, but I learned this pain has a place, and being gifted to feel it means I am gifted to heal it. I learned to breathe deeply, sit in silence, stretch my spine regularly, journal, and pray to my ancestors. I felt tension leave my shoulders, pain leave my womb, and realized the more I released my psychic pain, the better my body felt.
I grew up in the Mid-South in a metropolitan suburb 20 miles from Nashville, TN. My parents divorced when I was 8, and I began journaling to cope with my feelings of sadness, anger, and frustration. I still journal. Growing up I asked my paternal grandmother what she remembered about the plantation in Franklin, TN. She always described the length of her aunt’s hair—her aunt’s skin tone. These were important factors in our culture because it let us know which generations the slave master touched. These were explicitly discussed, as a part of my education as a Black girl in America. I clearly remember as a pre-teen being told to sit down, made to watch the movie Roots, and learn how Black bodies are harmed and how we manage to hold on to one another. Yet, there were things we failed to discuss (how we both resented our memory’s masters yet still prized some of the things they owned or taught us to value, like lighter skin or loosely curled hair).

There were things we failed to explain in detail, perhaps because we didn’t understand them ourselves, and there were large parts of my understanding that were incomplete for a very long time. I was Black, female, and lower-middle class, but I went to a very affluent all-girls private school where I was one of four African/Black people in my graduating class of 96. I went to a private, liberal, primarily White university for my bachelors and master's degrees. There is a certain type of violence that’s experienced when a gangly, Black, female body learns how to perform and perform well for her scholarships and her education. She grows very bright, and she learns very well how to hide it.

The oppressions and privileges of race, class, and sex were inescapable for me—are inescapable for me. I learned education meant working twice as hard as White people—one part of the work included being able to understand how they saw me, and the second part included being able to change my behavior for their comfort. This was not a vicarious lesson—this lesson
was verbally preached to me by my mother and reinforced through the various institutions I attended. I distinctly remember being told at benefactor’s dinners how well I articulate and my mother’s smile when they praised me for my careful speech and decorum—“like the Obamas,” they said. Each time a family member died I learned another story our family refused to tell. I learned there were certain things I could and couldn’t do with my body, because it was female and Black. I learned how to be hyper vigilant around men, both White and Black, but for different reasons. I learned my hyper vigilance from my mom, and she learned from her mom, and she learned from her mom.

As a fifth year late doctoral candidate studying Counseling Psychology at the University of Memphis, I am privileged in ways some of my ancestors could not fathom, but likely hoped.

I am positioned perfectly and imperfectly, through my knowledge, experiences, and respect for the African American community to witness and conduct research alongside the lived experiences of transgenerational trauma transmission and African American women. Being in academia, a canonical W.E.I.R.D. institution, I am vulnerable to colonizing beliefs about theory, research, and representation. Thus, I lean on my literary and spiritual ancestors to guide me in challenging my own thought process in approaching and working through this study. As an African American woman from the South, I am both the researcher and researched. From this position, I approached the research process with respect for the people who chose to participate and an acknowledgment of the power differences inherent in research. Furthermore, I set intentions to return always to my responsibility to African American women as a community, albeit diverse and ever changing. My goal in researching alongside participants who share similar identities is to facilitate research of care and co-creation.
**The Second Context**

I applied Kimberlé Crenshaw’s Black feminist intersectionality theory and Endarkened feminism as my theoretical framework for this study. Specifically, I used Crenshaw’s (1989; 1991) intersectionality theory as a theoretical and analytical tool to critique and contextualize how African American women experience the transmission of transgenerational trauma. Intersectionality is an ideal theory for conceptualizing and troubling transgenerational trauma transmission with African American women. The theory works simultaneously on the individual and systemic levels as an analysis of how the interaction of identities across race, sex, etc. produce events of marginalization and/or privilege at the intersection of various systems (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Specifically, intersectionality has and is used to problematize and analyze structural racism and sexism through institutions, politics, and cultural representations (Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw 1989; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). Consequently, intersectionality provides a critical method of analysis for conceptualizing the varied experiences of transgenerational trauma in African American women. First, by using intersectionality as a method and praxis, I intentionally attend to the common mistakes of trauma research which lead to reductive cultural studies in Psychology (e.g., Lavallee & Poole, 2010; Maldonado-Torress, 2017; Riggs & Walker, 2006; Yashuko, et al., 2016). Second, by using intersectionality I tease out the nuances of cultural, social/structural, and systemic trauma transmission with respect to the “spatial, temporal, and symbolic relationship” of African American women to their trauma narrative. Third, I connect these transmissions to the events of violence, trauma, oppression, and marginalization which are perpetuated in social systems from historical and ongoing events.
In addition to Black intersectional feminist theory, I use Endarkened feminist epistemology (EFE) to infuse the spiritual, sacred, and personal into this study. Endarkened feminist epistemology is, “located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, nation, and other identities and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African heritage women,” (Dillard 2016, p. 407). This theory also specifically focuses on cultural memory and the reclamation of storytelling as a process of naming, understanding, and navigating collective trauma (Dillard, 20120). Together, intersectionality and endarkened feminism provide a new perspective of transgenerational trauma which unsettles the research and representation of this experience through an individual/personal outlook and structural standpoint.

Outline

In Chapter 2, I begin with an extensive review of Black feminist intersectionality theory and endarkened feminist theory. I focus on the main tenets of Black feminist intersectionality theory and endarkened feminism, drawing upon what each theory adds to this study and what each theory lacks. With this literature review I provide readers with a guide from which to better understand how I unsettle transgenerational trauma theory. Furthermore, I ask readers to use this review to conceptualize my own story of transgenerational trauma which I retell after the literature review. In Chapter 3, I explain my methodology, outlining how I use intersectionality and endarkened feminism to reclaim narrative inquiry as a transnational feminist practice. I then, describe my research puzzle, questions, theoretical framework and methods. I specifically detail how I use intersectionality and endarkened feminism to guide my methods of interviewing and journaling. Following this, I discuss the site of research, participant selection process, and attend
to positionality and ethics. Finally, I provide a description of my analysis/interpretation and representation of this study.
Chapter 2: Intersectionality, Endarkened Feminism, and Transgenerational Trauma

“For each of us women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing, our true spirit rises.” -Audre Lorde

In the following chapter, I expound on Black intersectional feminism, endarkened feminism, and transgenerational trauma theory. First, I provide the theoretical timeline, main tenets, and limitations of each theory. Second, I propose how these theories complement one another to build a perspective that problematizes transgenerational trauma theory and unsettles W.E.I.R.D. practices (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) in Psychology with African American communities. Finally, at the end of the chapter, I follow the literature review with an autoethnographic narrative as an intentional application of endarkened feminist practices such as “remembrance” (i.e., cultural memory and storytelling) in endarkened feminism and “epistemic witnessing” (Dillard, 2012; Pillow, 2019). Doing so allows the author and reader to experience alongside one another the congruencies and incongruencies of living theory. In addition, this practice acknowledges the historical erasure, silencing, pathologizing, and violence in academic theory, methodology, and research against communities, scholars, and others who occupy liminal, marginal, and othered spaces. Engaging in remembrance and witnessing in the literature review disrupts the linear colonial prescriptive format of dissertations and invites an ethical and necessary refusal to W.E.I.R.D. practices (Kurtis & Adams, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2014).

Intersectional Feminism: A Method, Praxis, Analysis

Since its inception in the late 1980s, intersectionality traversed disciplines, discourses, and geopolitical terrains. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) define intersectionality as a term

Kimberlé Crenshaw’s coinage of intersectionality emerged as a direct theoretical and methodological response to the mutual exclusivity of antiracism and feminist efforts which often resulted in the theoretical erasure of Black women’s experiences. Intersectionality as a form of social and critical analysis in academia was just beginning in the 1980s alongside perspectives from various social movements around the world who were naming the invisibility of women who occupied “multiple systems of subordination” (Bilge, 2013; Nash, 2008). The coinage and use of intersectionality as theory, method, and analysis, though contested and at times, tense, gained popularity in academia, politics, and social movements. In some ways, it has been applied to fulfill its goals as a “method of the oppressed,” and in other ways it has become another of the “master’s tools”—put into action as a depoliticized buzzword (Bilge, 2013; Hill-Collins, 2015; Nash, 2008).

Cho et al. (2013) and Hill-Collins (2015) address the evolution of intersectionality from its initial use in analyzing antidiscrimination policy to its current applications across fields of study. Currently, intersectionality is employed with great versatility: as a framework to investigate “intersectional dynamics” across fields, as a debate about the nuances and limitations of its theoretical and methodological paradigm, and as social and political interventions (Cho et al., 2013). Although Cho et al. (2013) believe each application of intersectionality is integral to its evolution and potential to bring radical change, they ascertain intersectionality has always
been intentioned as a praxis—an analysis and intervention targeted to create justice, movement, and change for those combatting multiplied oppressions.

**Intersectionality and Critical Legal Studies/Critical Race Theory**

Crenshaw (1989) first applied intersectionality within critical legal studies/critical race theory. Law schools were undergoing their own social movement in the 1980s and 1990s which led to internal diversification in race and gender and laid the groundwork for critical legal studies. As the legal academy was transforming, the student bodies, too, were catalyzing legal reform through critiques of antidiscrimination law and the legal academy itself (Cho et al., 2013). As such, Cho et al. (2013) posit it is important scholars and activist turn inward and apply a critical gaze to the institutions employing intersectionality, as genuine critical and radical works may isolate scholars within structures not ready to change. Crenshaw’s 1989 article, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Class: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” exemplifies the application of intersectionality as a critical and radical work of its time.

In this piece, Crenshaw (1989) argues Black women are consistently subjected to a “single-axis framework”, meaning Black women are often seen through one identity axis (i.e., gender or race but rarely gender and race) in antidiscrimination law and social movements. Due to this single-axis framework, Black women were only protected under law and addressed in social movements through the concerns and experiences of either their gender (relative to the experiences of White women) or their race (relative to the experiences of Black men). Although one might think a single-axis framework of legal analysis implied a simplicity in antidiscrimination law proceedings in the case of Black women, instead, it often resulted in convoluted and confusing proceedings that consistently worked in the favor of the courts.
In such cases where Black women attempted to sue the courts for either gender discrimination, racial discrimination or both, their representatives were often denied the use of statistics on institutional practices and policies (i.e., hiring practices, seniority policies, payment, etc.) that would strengthen the plaintiff’s case (Crenshaw, 1989). Some of these denials were based on conjectures that Black women could not represent Black men due to gender differences, and therefore could not use data concerning all Black people, and that Black women could not represent White women due to racial differences, and therefore could not use data concerning all women. In turn, when some cases arose where Black women wanted to solely represent the concerns of Black women courts responded Black women were not a special group under Title VII antidiscrimination law, and therefore, did not afford special protection. Therefore, their cases were viewed as either race discrimination or gender discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989).

Crenshaw (1989) illustrates the complexities and ineffectiveness of the judicial system in conceptualizing the gendered and racial experiences of Black women by analyzing three separate cases: In the DeGraffenreid v General Motors case, Black female employees of General Motors sued the company for discrimination, because the company did not hire Black women prior to 1964 and fired its Black female employees after 1970 during a recession. The plaintiffs attempted to sue the company on behalf of discrimination against Black women, however, the court stated that the plaintiffs had to choose race discrimination or sex discrimination as their suit—they could not choose both (Crenshaw, 1989).

Crenshaw (1989) provides more evidence for the obscurations of Black women in race and sex antidiscrimination law, analyzing multiple cases to highlight how the normative view of antidiscrimination law privileges White women and “the most privileged Blacks”—which are usually men (p. 151). The centrality of Black males in race antidiscrimination law creates
another issue for Black women, as Black women may feel forced to choose between representing their intersectional identities, which precludes them from representing Black men, or choose to only represent the single-axis of their race to ensure the inclusivity of Black men, thus, denying their full identities as both raced and gendered persons in the court of law (Crenshaw, 1989). To highlight this, Crenshaw (1989) analyzes the case Payne v Travenol where two Black women filed a suit alleging race discrimination against a pharmaceutical company. The suit was intended to represent all Black employees at the company; however, the courts stated that Black women were not allowed to represent Black men, because their sex may uniquely disadvantage them (Crenshaw, 1989).

*Moore v Hughes Helicopter* symbolizes how some courts maintain too narrow of a view of antidiscrimination law, and thus, fail to address the compounded discrimination that Black women can face through both their racial and gender identities. In *Moore v Hughes Helicopter* the plaintiffs attempt to sue Hughes for racial and sex discrimination in providing supervisory jobs to Black women. The plaintiffs provided evidence of a large disparity in supervisory jobs occupied by women and men, and less of a disparity between Black men and White men. The court stated that because the plaintiff identified as a Black woman, she could not use statistics that included White women, and subsequently narrowed the relevant statistical pool she could use to only Black women. Crenshaw (1989) argues that in sex discrimination law, White women do not have to classify themselves as “White women”—they are simply women and consequently seen as normative and representative of all women. Yet, Black women, whose experiences are deemed “other” from the norm, cannot be representative of the female sex.

Throughout this text, Crenshaw (1989) dissects case law, and connects how social movements, in hand with politics, perpetuate the marginalization of Black women. She
ascertains merely including Black women in the analysis of antiracist policy or feminist policy will not rectify the erasure of Black women’s experiences (p.156). Both the civil rights movement and women’s movements have been guilty of being “single-issue” social movements, overlooking important aspects of the interactions of gender and race (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 159). She writes, for there to be liberation of all community members, antiracism movements must also analyze sexism and patriarchy in the Black community as normalized hierarchies of power and domination. Feminist movements must reflect on its universalist notions of gender and reconstruct how race and other identities affect women across the world.

For Black women to be fully apart of and participants in these movements of liberation, each movement has to distance itself from its original single-issue stance and reckon with the complexities of its internal power hierarchies and the necessity in dismantling them (Crenshaw, 1989). Conclusively, for each movement to critically engage with intersectionality and the experiences of Black women, they must listen, learn, and work through the sameness and differences of its members in relation to the power(s) they intend to fight.

**Structures, Politics, and Representation in Intersectionality**

As the application of intersectionality vastly differs depending on the field of study, I focus directly on Crenshaw’s (1991) use of systemic (structural), political, and representational intersectionality to investigate and problematize the transgenerational trauma paradigm. By working with Crenshaw’s canonical application of intersectionality, I avoid some of the major critiques of its application across the social sciences such as, but not limited to being definitionally vague (Hill-Collins, 2015; Nash, 2008), colorblind and/or genderblind (Carbado, 2013), geopolitically fixed (Lewis, 2013; Patil, 2013; Puar, 2012; Tomlinson, 2013) and depoliticized (Bilge, 2013).
Historically, feminist theory, in its effort to analyze ideologies of gender oppression, has failed to recognize how racism and “sex-based norms” operate differently across history, cultures, and contexts for women (Patil, 2013; Tomilson, 2013). Crenshaw (1989; 2012) states it is necessary to look at the interaction of race and gender in the experiences of Black women, to peer into the “intersectional experience” of these women to understand the unique “intersectional subordination” of Black women structurally, politically, and culturally (p. 1427). In her article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color” Crenshaw (1991) demonstrates how intersectionality can be applied to uncover important manifestations of oppression at the intersections of gender and race that are normally obscured within a unilateral framework of analysis. As an example, Crenshaw (1991) analyzes the structural, political, and representational dynamics at the intersectionality of gender, race, and class, across domestic violence and rape. Crenshaw defines structural intersectionality as, “the ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes our actual experience of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different than that of white women,” (p. 1245).

To support this definition, Crenshaw (1991) provides an example of how racism and patriarchy affect women of color’s experiences of domestic violence and how institutions act as barriers, illegitimate their concerns, and/or neglect to provide the resources essential to their wellbeing, because the system is structurally designed to meet the needs of White women. She surmises, many organizations such as women’s shelters and rape crisis centers design their programs based on the funding they receive, which often allocate funds catered to the needs of the dominant identity category in the populations'. Due to this, the services, resources, and information for women who experience domestic violence, rape, or assault are not designed to
meet the needs of women who encounter multiple marginalization, whether economically, systemically, or socially.

Crenshaw (1991) analyzes political intersectionality as women of colors’ experiences when the identities they occupy “pursue conflicting political agendas” (i.e., feminist organizing and anti-racist organizing) (p. 1252). To illustrate this, Crenshaw (1991) details her experience in searching for statistics for her article. She states she was unable to receive statistics of domestic violence interventions by racial group from the LAPD, because the LAPD feared publicizing such statistics would cause activists to interpret domestic violence as a “minority problem” and thus not take action (p. 1253). On the one hand, this example portrays how race, gender, and class are intersectional and political, as not releasing such statistics precludes investigation, intervention, and/or assistance for women experiencing interpersonal violence and effectively “silences intracommunity violence” (p. 1256). On the other hand, it also seemingly protects marginalized communities and, specifically, men of marginalized identities from being scapegoated as perpetrators of violence.

Last, Crenshaw (1991) discusses representational intersectionality, which she defines as the “cultural construction of women of color” (p.1245) through the production of images, narratives, and stereotypes based on race and gender. Specifically, she discusses how representations of Black women often coincide with devaluing Black women and the erasure of their “intersectional interests” (p. 1283). She provides examples of the “2 Live Crew” rap group controversy where misogynistic lyrics directed at the bodies of Black women were used in an “obscenity judgment” against the rap group’s album titled, Nasty. Though the hypersexualized representation of Black women’s bodies was evident throughout the lyrics, media converged on how the misogynist lyrics could fuel violence against White women, specifically stating
examples from the Central Park jogger assault as evidence of the “Black male rapist” archetype (p. 1290). Thus, due to representational intersectionality, Black women are constructed as the devalued, hypersexual, and/or less important body, historically more masculinized, and paradoxically rife for victimhood, but not saviorhood. To further complicate matters, Black women who were urged (or felt compelled) to speak against the misogyny of 2 Live Crew were vulnerable to having their experiences used as arguments against rap/hip-hop culture and to further the narrative of the racist Black male rapist cultural image.

Conclusively, Crenshaw (1991) discusses the necessity of using an intersectional analysis to tease apart the impacts of structural, political, and representational marginalization on Black women. She elaborates the significance in exercising intersectional analysis in institutions, policies, and cultural narratives or we risk of subverting the unique positions and varied needs of Black women. Through her intersectional analysis she reminds us:

Intersectionality also points to the relationships between established hierarchies that structure the relative vulnerability of subjects to the public and private exercises of social power...there are many ways surveillance and punishment are intersectionally scripted, including the ways in which race, gender, or class hierarchies structure the backdrop against which punitive politics interact...beyond these structural and institutional intersections that contribute to the risk and consequence of punishment for women of color are discursive intersections that effectively marginalize if not wholly erase, the significance of their vulnerability. (Crenshaw, 2012, p. 1427)

**Critiques and Limitations of Intersectionality**

Since the inception of intersectionality, Crenshaw has further developed her work (see Crenshaw, 2013; 2019; 2020). Furthermore, multiple social sciences such as the field of
Psychology have adapted intersectionality theoretically, methodologically, and analytically (see Cole, 2009; Cole & Stewart, 2001; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016; Grzanka, Santos, & Moradi, 2017; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017; Rosenthal, 2016; Shin et al., 2017). Intersectionality, similar to other theories, is subject to critique across disciplines. Some theorists (Nash, 2008; Patil, 2013) critique intersectionality’s limits in transnational application, while other theorists (Carastathis, 2008; McCall, 2005) state its rigid focus on identity and systems iterate the same monolithic identity categories it attempts to critique. Patil (2013) notes “transnational power structures that shape academic knowledge production and distribution” greatly impact intersectionality theory’s translation across local and global dynamics (p. 853). She adds, intersectionality theory in itself is useful in problematizing the nuances of identity on a transnational scale; however, the application of intersectionality theory across disciplines often fail to address the impact of imperialism and paternalism on Global South identity dynamics, thus “domesticating” intersectionality (p.854).

Therefore, Patil (2013) conjects, although intersectionality is a powerful theoretical tool, it does not provide a “sufficiently [deep] historical and transnational” analysis of identity (p.857). Nash (2019) challenges what she sees as “intersectional originalism” (p.62), or the concept intersectionality theory must be read and applied similarly to Crenshaw’s analysis of African American women’s judicial contexts. Instead, she believes this perpetuates “territorialism” which limits the possibilities of intersectionality to create “new intimacies between bodies of thought and material bodies” primarily among Black/African American women and women of color (p.110).

Cho et al. (2013) argue that intersectionality is intended to frame conflicting, and overlapping dynamics, and uses of intersectionality which are not categorically, temporally, and
spatially located fail to apply intersectionality accurately. Puar (2012), in her analysis of
intersectionality and assemblage, reiterates this, stating Crenshaw intends intersectionality to be
classification as an event:

...intersectionality is a more porous paradigm than the standardization of method inherent
to a discipline has allowed it to be; the institutionalization of women’s studies in the
United States has led to demands for a subject’s (subject X, in fact) and a method. (p.61)
However, she states, intersectionality is still situated within the notion that “human” is the fixed
identity which she argues is a limitation of the theory. Indeed, Cho et al. (2013) assert one can
navigate the vulnerabilities of intersectionality in their discipline by attending to the discrete
implicit power dynamics which already exist within that discipline, which, left uninterrogated,
are likely to create an intersectional analysis that reifies the system in place.

In addressing the application of intersectionality to other marginalized populations, Cho
et al. (2013) and Crenshaw (2012) assert the importance readers historicize intersectionality
theory for understanding and use of its possibilities. The authors state, yes, intersectionality is
based on the experiences of Black women, however, this does not make the theory less
applicable to other groups or Black women its only participants. That is to say, it is more
important that intersectionality is analyzed in terms of “…what [it] does rather than what [it] is,”
(Cho et al., 2013, p. 795). Just as intersectionality was initially applied to critical legal studies
and the experience of Black women in the 1980s, it should continue to be applied across contexts
as a way of thinking about “…sameness and difference and its relation to power” (Cho et al.,
2013, p. 795).

For the purposes of this project, I directly address two critiques of intersectionality: the
notion intersectionality reproduces the single-axis identity framework it attempts to deconstruct,
and the concept intersectionality is not successfully applied transnationally. Intersectionality’s foundation in Black feminism and critical legal/critical race studies aligns with both my participant selection of African American women and my conceptualization of transgenerational trauma as systemic (structural), political, and representational events. Although intersectionality can be misapplied by treating the categorical identities of “Black” and “female” as separate single-axis static subjects outside of their particular history and contexts, I argue I can apply intersectionality as it is intended in Crenshaw’s (1989; 1991) texts—as a porous paradigm, where transgenerational trauma is conceptualized as a historical event (e.g., slavery) and/or series of events (e.g., mass incarceration, misogyny in media, police brutality) where structures, hierarchies, and violence work across macro, meso, and micro systems.

To address the risks of analyzing experiences of transgenerational trauma as a single-axis framework, I combine intersectionality with endarkened feminist theory, which uses transnational feminist and Black feminist methods to focus inward and across differing paradigms of culture and memory. Doing so supports my intention in theorizing African American women’s experiences of transgenerational trauma more wholistically and responsibly. Ultimately, the combination of these theories create space for participants to theorize and disrupt transgenerational trauma theory in Psychology and resist erasure within single axis movements. By working from Crenshaw’s (1989; 1991) Black intersectional feminism, I return to “…an approach to both feminist advocacy and academic inquiry, [where] intersectionality welcomed the margins to the table of theory making by reconciling the split between theory and experience—or, more precisely, by suggesting that experience could be the ground of theory making” (Lewis, 2013, p. 873).
Another critique of intersectionality I wish to acknowledge are its limitations in transnational application. Authors such as Patil (2013), Lewis (2013), and Carbado (2013) delineate critiques and possibilities concerning the application of intersectionality across geopolitical terrains. Specifically, Patil (2013) questions the ability of scholars who use intersectionality to “situate the object of their research in geopolitical space” (p. 853). For example, Patil (2013) explains patriarchy is a Western construct which assumes specific gender binaries and allocations of power. Thus, scholars who apply intersectionality transnationally, without interrogating how power, race, class, and gender are operating in each context, fail to “recognize cross-border dynamics” (p. 854).

Although all of the participants are residents currently living in or were raised in the Mid-South region of the United States, I argue there are numerous cross-border dynamics which exist across the towns, neighborhoods, blocks, and cities. As someone who was raised in Nashville, TN and lived in Memphis, TN for four years, I can attest to the significant differences between my experiences as an African American woman situated in the historical, geographical, and political contexts of Nashville and Memphis. Therefore, it is essential I am diligent and conscientious of the varied domestic and cross-border dynamics the participants face. Combining endarkened feminism, which focuses on how we name and story our experiences, with Crenshaw’s Black feminist intersectionality, aids my understanding of “domestic dynamics” and cross-border dynamics in transgenerational trauma transmission (Patil, 2013, p. 854).

**Endarkened Feminism: “Learning to (Re)member the Things We’ve Learned to Forget”**

In Dillard’s (2000) article, she explains the origins of endarkened feminist epistemology and the significance of creating and locating “endarkened” epistemological understandings
which challenge colonialist constructions of knowledge, language, and meaning making. She defines endarkened feminism as an approach to:

...articulate how reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African American women. (p. 662)

Here, Dillard takes a decolonial approach to enlightenment, troubling the paradigm by acknowledging the Western, Eurocentric, male-dominated constructs inherent in the term “enlightenment” itself. In my use of decolonial, I apply Tuhiwai’s Smith’s (2012) definition where, “decolonization...does not mean and has not been a total rejection of all theory or research or Western knowledge. Rather, it is about centering our concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes” (p.41). Dillard’s endarkened feminism combines the critical and decolonial as she considers how the goals, practice, and purpose of educational research are unproblematized, and thus continue committing epistemic violence (Pillow, 2019) through theoretical erasure, colonialist methodologies, and misguided research. She calls for the necessity of epistemologies which respond to the shift of perceiving identities as biologically constructed to engaging with identity as social constructs. Dillard (2000) answers this call by “endarkening” epistemology through her use of African-centered theories and methodologies to unveil the power dynamics in cultural ideologies and “…expose what we know the world to be as Black women, how we know racism and sexism and identity politics influence and shape the contexts of our lives, in contrast with being told how they operate from perspectives outside ourselves” (p. 678).
In research, endarkened feminist epistemology is a form of resistance to and transformation of these power dynamics acting on behalf of and with communities to create social and political change as the purpose of research. Dillard (2000) anchors endarkened feminist epistemology in what she names a new research metaphor which resists the traditional positivist “research recipe” in education and social sciences. She explains, in the traditional “research as recipe” metaphor, the published article represents a finished product of objective knowledge where the researcher is the ‘knower’ and the researched is the ‘known’--a relationship which necessitates detachment (Dillard, 2000, p. 664). She offers endarkened feminism as an alternative to this metaphor, stating her epistemology “...articulates how reality is known when based in the historical roots of global Black feminist thought and when understood within the context of reciprocity and relationship” (Okaplaoka & Dillard, 2011, p. 65).

For Dillard, research as responsibility is more than metaphor, and as such requires each researcher to be held accountable and obligated to the communities engaged in the work. She posits, due to racism and sexism, Black female researchers, in particular, are positioned as both researcher and researched in public and private (Dillard, 2000; 2018). Moreover, as Black female scholars engage in their own inquiry, they are simultaneously under study within systems of patriarchy and White supremacy. As a result, Dillard (2000) states Black female researchers must remain steadfast in research as responsibility, meaning, we are “answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry” (p. 619). Research as responsibility implies reclaiming the personal and social roots of Black women’s work and resituating research in its cultural and historical contexts. It implores the reader to broaden their perspective to embrace multiple ways of meaning making and conducting research alongside the
researcher. It asks readers to be with the researcher as they interrogate how knowledge is produced in their work, the political contexts of their work, and the ethics of their work.

In addition to research as responsibility there are several assumptions of endarkened feminist epistemology across research method, analysis, and representation. Dillard (2000; 2018) draws upon African American and feminist literature, specifically applying Hill Collin’s (1990) core theories of Black feminism, Palmer’s (1983) elements on spirituality in education, and Harding’s (1987) work on feminist Psychology. The assumptions are: (a) the researcher is responsible to the members of the community and the well-being of the community. The self-definition of researcher implies participation and responsibility to the community from which the definition arises; (b) Research is a purposeful act which is both intellectual and spiritual; (c) The individual only comes into being through the context of community. Dialogue serves as a conduit of being and becoming within community; (d) Meaning making is created through the concrete experiences of daily life; (e) Knowledge and research are historically, temporally, and globally located. Approaching them otherwise minimizes their cultural and empirical significance. (f) Power dynamic manifest as interrelated systems of racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, etc. These power dynamics structure identity relations within research (Dillard, 2000; 2016; 2018).

These assumptions illustrate how endarkened feminist inquiry is sacred work, where responsibility to one’s community manifest as spiritual, social, and creative acts of transformation. Okpalaoka and Dillard (2011) and Dillard (2016) state honoring wisdom of Black women’s diaspora, meaning making, and spirituality is fundamental to Black and endarkened feminisms. Thus, “rendering visible” Black women’s knowledge, lived experiences, and work is sacred (Dillard, 2016, p. 407). Dillard (2012) defines spirituality in endarkened
feminism as the consciousness of the spirit as a transformative power in research and work. She defines sacred as the honor with which one carries out this work. In endarkened feminisms there are multiple ways one can access and render visible the wisdom of Black women’s knowledge. For the purposes of this dissertation, I focus on three specific components of endarkened feminism which work towards (re)centering the wisdom and visibility of Black women’s stories: the significance of naming, remembrance and cultural memory, and connecting to spirit and community through ritual and tradition (Dillard 2011; 2012).

**Naming**

Okpalaoka and Dillard (2011) write Black women have a long history existing as “data” in research where their lives, narratives, and bodies are treated as silenced objects. They assert that in order to (re)center the wisdom of African ancestral women in research we must first name our experiences as ourselves for ourselves, reclaiming history, purpose, and language in research. Dillard (2012) explains how the proliferation of Black woman-centered literature in the 1970s and 1980s, along with the Black feminist and African feminist movements, exemplified the power of naming. For the first time in many African, African American, and Black women’s lives, they were able to access their experiences, language, history, and culture in text which provided nuanced, tense, and varied representations of Black womanhood.

Dillard (2000; 2012) asserts it is time for Black female scholars, as complicit in and objects of academia, to (re)center Black womanhood through naming in our work and deconstruct the power of theories, “universal” laws, and methodologies used to perpetuate the subjugation of marginalized people. In doing so, researchers relocate and (re)center power from within endarkened epistemologies and methodologies where Black female scholars may risk naming the structural, political, and cultural circumstances of Black women. This process is
spiritual, sacred, and complicated. It asks scholars to acknowledge their histories and
complicities in systemic structures locally and transnationally.

In regard to the study of transgenerational trauma transmission, it is important the
researcher and participants grapple with naming—explicitly how the participants language their
experience of transgenerational trauma within their cultural and historical contexts. Delving into
how participants name what Psychology theorizes as transgenerational trauma makes space for
resistance and problematizing the theory. Additionally, it resituates the power with the
participants and helps the researcher better join with participants in their wisdom and
understanding of the phenomena. Naming transgenerational trauma from an endarkened feminist
perspective implies wrestling with the tensions of epistemic violence and damage-centered
research. Through endarkened epistemology, naming facilitates dialogue between decolonizing
theory and (re)centering responsibility to community empowerment, representation, and
systemic change. Another important aspect of endarkened feminism which (re)centers Black
feminist wisdom is learning to remember through cultural memory.

**Remembrance and Cultural Memories**

Walker (2012) asserts themes of passivity, victimhood, and death are reified over
narrative themes that demonstrate the agency, personhood, and critical consciousness of the
narrators in post slavery narratives. As the representation of transgenerational trauma is
controlled and mediated through various political structures and institutions, it creates reductive
and falsified (re)presentations no longer owned or told by the communities it represents (Paris,
2019; Tuck & Yang, 2014; Tuck, 2009). Therefore, an essential part of conceptualizing and
healing transgenerational trauma for a community is reimagining how transgenerational trauma
is remembered and retold (Walker, 2012; Wesley-Esquimaux, 2004).
Dillard (2012) proposes learning to remember can be an intricate intimate act of decolonization. She explains, many teachers and scholars have been “seduced into forgetting” (p. 27) difficult and painful memories which speak to and about our embodiment of multiple marginalized identities.

Learning to (re)member is about recognizing and examining our seductions: Those irresistible moments when we have been enticed away from ourselves, led away from our duties, and have accepted others’ principles or notions of identity and proper conduct as our own. (Dillard, 2012, p. 15)

Remembering is therefore a radical act, which accesses the wisdom and ways of one’s ancestors and allows that knowledge to enter and speak through one’s life and work. Remembering acknowledges the dispossession and cultural, spiritual, and material fragmentation of the African ancestral people through the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Remembering allows one to respond to this fragmentation, live between the tensions of African heritage and the diaspora, and theorize as bodies, minds, and spirits to produce questions and tools beyond W.E.I.R.D. epistemologies (Dillard, 2011; 2012).

The process of remembering may involve “…wandering into unfamiliar or always familiar contexts, making conscious choices to use or not use languages and cultural wisdom, or strategically choosing to cover or uncover” (Dillard, 2012, p. 4). Engaging with cultural memories is part of learning to remember. It entails a connective and collective process for those in the African diaspora where remembering cultural memories is movement toward “(re)membering” one’s spiritual identities (Dillard, 2012). There are three components of cultural memories: (a) they acknowledge the thread between the diaspora and Africa as “a heritage homeplace”; (b) they may be good, bad, or make one ache to find meaning and purpose
in the world; and (c) they have the power to change our culture and epistemology in the present (Dillard, 2012, p. 11).

Cultural memories are inspirational, intimate, and transformative. They are also difficult sites of vulnerability and reckoning they “may take us to places that we’ve not ‘traveled’ and sometimes to where we do not want to go,” (Dillard, 2012, p. 26. They can be used as sites of cultural production and resistance to systemic oppressions and seductions to forgetting. As such, cultural memories and remembrances involve developing a deeper consciousness and awareness where one can honor what has been forgotten, choose what’s worth remembering, and decide “what they want those rememberings to do,” (Dillard, 2012, p. 25). Working alongside participants as they access cultural memories and deciding, together, what we want those remembrances to do is an act of unsettling the transgenerational trauma paradigm. By refusing the “seductions of forgetting” (Dillard, 2012, p.27) and retelling remembrances of transgenerational trauma we can rework reductive, pathologizing, victimizing narratives into connective transformative pieces. One way of doing this within an endarkened feminist framework is through transforming systemic oppressions through remembering and accessing African culture and tradition.

**Ritual and Tradition**

In endarkened feminism, rituals and tradition are important components of remembering and cultural memory. Dillard (2012) states her conceptualization of ritual is more complex than some contemporary forms which perceive activities such as prayer and offerings to the ancestors as rituals. Instead, from Dillard’s explication of African perspectives, ritual means engaging in daily life with a deep recognition of an affirming spiritual connection to one’s ancestors and legacy of African ascendant people. Rituals are the connection between doing and being.
Meditation, prayers, offerings, communing during meals, and reciprocal sacrifice are some examples of traditional and ritual ways of expressing spirituality. However, the act of ritual and tradition alone is not enough—to fully take part in the ritual, one must consciously honor African ancestral knowledge, culture, and spirituality parallel to the act.

Rememberings can become rituals through stories, crossing generations, borders, and time to connect people to the sacredness of life, nature, and African lineage. Exploring which rituals and traditions are connected, disconnected, hybridized, and adopted through storytelling, reveals powerful forms of resistance and healing alongside the difficulty participants experience. Rituals and traditions both elucidate important information about the historical and cultural contexts of African ascendant people and reflect individual and collective movements within communities.

**Combining Intersectionality and Endarkened Feminism**

Combining Kimberlé Crenshaw’s Black intersectional feminism and Cynthia Dillard’s endarkened feminist theory supports a conceptualization of transgenerational trauma and the experiences of African American women in ways which honor the complexity and diversity of their stories. Intersectionality provides the theoretical and analytical structure for how I understand the cultural, social, and systemic transmissions of transgenerational trauma. This perspective broadens my scope and asks the question “what institutional, political, and social structures are contextualizing this experience?” Endarkened feminism supports this query, adding, “what cultural practices through naming, memory, storytelling, and ritual are working with, against, and within the transmission of transgenerational trauma?” Albeit complex, combining intersectionality and endarkened feminism to unsettle the transgenerational paradigm
ensures I continue questioning the structures, the storying, and my own reflexivity throughout
the research process.

Together, these theories complement each other’s vulnerabilities—one providing a
critical standpoint to deconstruct experiences of multiple marginalization and the other providing
a cultural standpoint from which to deconstruct and (re)center the experiences of multiple
marginalization. Endarkened feminism is situated in transnational feminism, specifically
building upon the lineage and tensions of Black feminist epistemology in the North Africa and
Africa. Its vastness complements intersectionality’s contested limitation in being based in a
specific theorization of African American women’s experiences with the United States judicial
system. Intersectionality’s dense history, versatility, and broad application complement the
potential limitation of endarkened feminism, which is a relatively new theory grounded in
African-centered and diasporic knowledge and primarily applied to educational studies.

Through this work, I believe intersectionality and endarkened feminism can better engage
and expand “...theoretically, politically, creatively, and affectively new -- intimacies between
[these] bodies of thought...” (Nash, 2019 p.110). Intersectionality theory contextualizes
transgenerational trauma theory within the social, cultural, and systemic/political realities of
African American women. Endarkened feminist theory provides an approach to situate the
intrapersonal, interpersonal, and collective experiences of transgenerational trauma for African
American women. Importantly, incorporating these theories responds to the epistemic violence
and theoretical oppression enacted by Psychology, White Western feminism, and trauma theory
studies while contributing valuable, novel perspectives.
Transgenerational Trauma Theory and Psychology

As mentioned in Chapter 1, trauma theory and transgenerational trauma have a long history beginning with the study of narratives written by Holocaust survivors and their descendants. A large surge in studies and treatment on post-traumatic stress and grief began in response to devastating events such as the Holocaust, World War II, and natural disasters (Ringell, 2012). Works like Sigmund Freud’s (1920) Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Viktor Frankl’s (1946) Man’s Search for Meaning contributed to some of the first psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic theorizations of trauma and post-traumatic stress. Caruth’s (1996) Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, History, and Narrative and Felman and Laub’s (1992) Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Testimony, and History further developed trauma theory by combining Psychology, literature, and philosophy to analyze the complexities of reading, teaching, and witnessing trauma.

Since the 1940s trauma theory has been a part of each major theoretical movement in Psychology with the most recent movement in the 21st century focusing on the transmission of cultural, historic, and inter/transgenerational trauma (Ringell, 2012; Ruglass & Kendall-Tacket, 2014; Wiechelt & Gryczynski, 2012). Arguably, the discourse on inter/transgenerational trauma has emerged from two older discourses. One discourse focuses on the proponents of Native healing in indigenous and Aboriginal communities in areas such as Canada, The United States of America, New Zealand, and Australia. The second discourse focuses on the colonization and pathologizing of indigenous families by professional bodies such as the mental health care field which often legitimate assimilation, interventions, and policy change which victimize communities and target children (Marsh, et al., 2016; Maxwell, 2014).
These discourses have since merged into multiple bodies of interdisciplinary literature which discuss the wide range of experiences of historical trauma and the mechanisms of its transmission biologically, socially, culturally, and psychologically (Maxwell, 2014; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004). Studies define transgenerational trauma transmission as: (a) biological mechanisms (through epigenetics and hereditary vulnerabilities to mental health disorders), (b) cultural narratives, cultural practices, and sanctioned behaviors (c) social processes (through parenting practices, intimate partner/lateral violence, social behaviors, and abuse), and (d) psychological “memory processes,” (Marsh et al., 2016; Maxwell, 2014, p. 408; Wesley-Equimaux & Smolewki, 2004). The transmission of transgenerational trauma and how or which mechanisms are the most pressing, depends on the identities, biopsychosocial concerns, and geopolitical contexts of the communities. Therefore, to fully understand which mechanisms of transgenerational trauma transmission should be prioritized largely depends on the biopsychosocial needs and historical contexts of African American communities.

**Transgenerational Trauma Theory and African American Communities**

Despite continuous multigenerational experiences of trauma which meet the criteria for transgenerational trauma, African American communities, except for some studies on post slavery trauma and narratives, have primarily been ignored in inter/transgenerational trauma studies until the last decade, (Williams-Washington & Mills, 2017). Walker (2012) explains African American communities were not often in control of their post slavery narratives, and British literature, Abolitionist literature, and popular media often projected damage-centered reductive images which appealed to the White public at the time. Specifically, cultural images such as the mixed-race mistress (Jezebel), the runaway slave, the lazy, slack-jawed slave, the “Uncle Tom” master-loving slave, the rape victim, and the motherly, sexless, house slave...
(Mammy) were all constructed for the consumption of the White public/media and control of African American people (Walker 2012; Wood, 2003). Abolitionist literature often pathologized the plantation setting to spur its political aims, while British literature often pathologized the Middle Passage (the transatlantic slave trade passage where people were transported from the West Coast of Africa to the West Indies and Americas) to detract from its involvement in slavery and overemphasize the wrongdoings of the Americans (Walker, 2012).

These projections have a lasting impact on African American communities as these representations continue to circulate in contemporary media and current studies of transgenerational trauma transmission (Crenshaw 1991; Walker, 2012). As researchers continue to name communities’ experiences of transgenerational trauma in pathologizing outcomes such as increased substance abuse, lateral violence/child abuse, and at-risk physical and sexual behaviors they perpetuate the lack of agency, personhood, and complexity in the misuse of post-slavery narratives and projection of reductive cultural images of African American communities. Walker (2012) responds, similarly to Tuck (2009), Dillard (2012), and Pillow (2019) that the answer to this issue is to embrace an ethical remembrance of transgenerational trauma and post-slavery narratives—one where we witness the complexity of these events and (re) center the power within communities to theorize for themselves.

**Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome**

As the Diagnostic Statistical Manual V (DSM-V) has evolved, its definition of PTSD has become more flexible and inclusive of various traumatic experiences. However, race-based trauma is not uniquely considered in the DSM-V, and transgenerational trauma is not mentioned in the DSM-V at all (Coleman, 2016; Williams-Washington & Mills, 2017). Due to this, trauma studies in African American communities often fail to account for psychological symptoms
related to race-related violence, discrimination, and ongoing systemic oppressions. Furthermore, in studies regarding African American women, studies do not contextualize historical experiences and narratives of race and gender-based violence, sexual assault, and policing (Bryant-Davis, et al., 2017).


…a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today. Added to this condition is a belief (real or imagined) that the benefits of the society in which they live are not accessible to them. (p. 105)

This diagnostic term is a bilateral process—one that centers the individual manifestations of trauma but acknowledges the historical trauma and continued systemic oppression. DeGruy (2017) outlines how transgenerational trauma can simultaneously produce symptoms of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem on an individual level which produce collective patterns of behavior such as “vacant esteem, ever-present anger, and racialist socialization,” (p. 105). If such a paradigm was adopted, mental health fields such as Psychology would be pushed to shift the individualistic paradigm of mental health care to one which equally prioritizes treatment of the individual and community. Yet, if this framework was adopted without research which
deconstructs the transgenerational trauma paradigm and (re) centers collective agency, it could potentially re-pathologize and victimize those it’s intended to help.

In attempting to reclaim cultural images, post slavery narratives, and transgenerational trauma studies within African American communities we are pushed into a liminal space. In this space, we have the opportunity to rethink transgenerational trauma and construct the theory in a manner which acknowledges and repudiates damage-centered work. If we attempt to erase slavery from our cultural memory, the larger narrative of Black slavery, created for political, social, and psychological reasons, will continue to perpetuate and be “filtered through our bodies” (p. 159). If we focus only on the rebellious, novel, counter-narratives of slavery, we miss the alternative stories which exist between these polarities.

**Unsettling Transgenerational Trauma Transmission in African American Communities**

Walker (2012) calls for the decolonization of trauma for post-slavery Black communities. The author proposes we must contend with the trauma of slavery’s memory and the trauma of slavery’s legacy not only as counter or subversive to grand narratives, but also as intentional deconstructions of the White superiority and Eurocentrism inherent in psychoanalytic frameworks of cultural trauma. In doing so, remembrance of collective trauma itself becomes an act of decolonization (Dillard, 2012). No longer are we engaged with singular, polarized images of slavery, slaves, our grandmothers, fathers, or ourselves. Instead, we are engaged in an “ethical remembrance” which “recoils from the desire to legitimate one’s own projections and releases memory from its epistemological prison” (Walker, 2012, p. 164; Pillow, 2019).

Conclusively, to answer this call for an ethical remembrance, reclamation, and reconstruction of transgenerational trauma theory, I use Black feminist intersectionality to theorize transgenerational trauma transmission as events which act and reenact structurally,
politically, and culturally across identities. In addition, I theorize the transmission of transgenerational trauma interpersonally/intrapersonally through endarkened feminism, as processes of naming, cultural memory, and storytelling. Specifically, I focus on the raced and gendered experiences of African American women, as their unique experiences of trauma transmission are often elided and/or subsumed by dominant narratives which often focus on the family unit. Due to this, African American women are positioned within trauma studies as either silent sufferers of substance abuse and interpersonal violence or perpetrators of lateral violence, child abuse/neglect, etc., missing the complex nuances of their resiliencies and survivances (e.g., Broussard, P. A., 2013; Ponton III, 2018; Ricks, 2018). Through Black feminist epistemology, I theorize and analyze transgenerational trauma transmission with African American women applying novel theories in feminism, Psychology, and transgenerational trauma theory, to provide a unique contribution to the literature.

**Monsters in the Margins: A Witnessing of Transgenerational Trauma**

“*The relationship between mother and daughter stands in the center of what I fear most in our culture. Heal that wound and we change the world*” (Morales, 2002, p. 59).

In accordance with intersectionality, endarkened feminism, and narrative inquiry, I provide my own story of transgenerational trauma transmission through a combination of vignettes, journal entries, and poetry which expose my positionality. Moreover, I juxtapose the literature review with narrative to coincide with decolonial/transnational feminist praxis of engaging in practices which reduce the power difference between the researcher and the researched and blurs the boundaries between the personal and professional (Anzaldúa, 2007; Dillard, 2012; Pillow, 2019; Wesley-Esquimaux, 2004).
Through this design, I adopt a “decolonial attitude,” theorizing from my embodied experience as Black and woman (Maldonado-Torres, 2017; Pillow, 2019). I trouble the concept of object and subject in research by becoming my own subject and yet, resist historical damage-centered representations of transgenerational trauma by engaging in an “ethical remembrance” which resists plundering my family’s and community’s trauma and seeks instead to challenge the structures where it resides (Maldonado-Torres, 2017; Tuck, 2009; Walker, 2012). Within this story, I exist in the liminality of my identities and in the borderlands of my dissertation, as researcher and researched, subject and object, artist and intellectual (Anzaldúa, 1987).

I resist through remembrance, teetering truths with Truths and refusing Facts with facts even as perspiration wells, my body signaling its anxiety, beading in the in-between of my laptop keys and fingertips. This story is told through narration, poetry, and journal entries, which I created from memories, cultural narratives and representations, and conversations with my ancestors, grandparents, sister, and mother. I retell this story in non-chronological order, infusing what I’ve learned of my ancestors’ love, hopes, and desires, with our suffering, disrupting linear, neat, and damage-centered transgenerational trauma narratives from within. I leave it to readers to witness my testimony and problematize living theory alongside me.

Hope

June 7th, 2019

Today I’m supposed to write something—write a lot of somethings that are important. Today I’m supposed to crack wide open and let go and let it all hang out. That part doesn’t seem as hard as the putting it all back together again, gathering my insides and stuffing myself until my insides are my outsides and I’m all inside out.
On the way here, to the retreat, I called my grandmother. I am asking for permission to do this work—the work that is her work, my work, her mother’s work, our ancestors’ work.

I want her to trust me to take care of our stories. I want her to tell me it will be okay.

She tells me not to forget about hope—that after all of this mess, we are still here.

And we are.

**Witnessing**

Waves like little mountains. The sharp saltiness of air and the bitter chill. The angriness of the sun. Some oceans, look like wet heavens, look like the teardrops of angels, turn into clouds when you stare at them. Some oceans, are graveyards, burial grounds, sacrifice, and savior. Reefs, oranges and yellows, like the beads of home, get stained with blood, hold pieces of bodies dismembered by devils. Hold pieces of bodies that jumped. Pieces of bodies that were already dead. Hold bodies thrown overboard, who were still movin’ but had no souls left-undead, unhuman, human. This is where my body was made and unmade. This is where my flesh turned inside out was worth gold and worth nothing at all. Sharks changed centuries of hunting patterns to pay homage to our bones.²

Deracinated. Poison spread my legs, branches made webs ‘cross my back. Debility became being.³ And the sun was angry, the salt-water, blessed my breath, and the waves were the

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² From Rediker, M. (2008). *The Slave Ship: A human history.* Penguin Books. London: England. This book details the unique and disturbing facets of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and Middle Passage from its beginning on the West coast of Africa to its many ports throughout the Americas and West Indies. I grew up watching the movie Roots, learning about slavery and the heinous conditions of the slave ships. I read this book in undergraduate school, in my first African American Diaspora course, and its impact was profound in painting a more vivid picture of the slave trade. The author described with images and language how surreal and yet real the slave ships, slavery, human ports, and plantations were. I realized somewhere in my education about slavery it was almost normalized that people were packed like chattel and shipped across the world to spend the rest of their lives in perpetual servitude. This book helped me reconceptualize slavery. It was not a single event which occurred in this vacuum in the past, but rather a massive intentional manifestation of White supremacy, colonialism, and patriarchy which changed ecology, epistemology, and etiology in vast ways. This book and this course were the beginning of an undoing—an undoing of internalized racism, self-hatred, and shame. An undoing of a deep miseducation which is still ongoing.

³ From Puar, J. (2017). *The Right to maim: Debility, capacity, disability.* Durham University Press: Durham, NC. This book challenged my notions of disability and debility. The author uses powerful examples of state policies and practices in Israel which facilitate the injury and control of Palestinian citizens. The examples forced me to reframe how I’ve thought of being African-American in the United States and my knowledge of narratives about the black body as being disposable, difficult to eradicate, and capable of enduring great harm and
bass of body’s decay. It was then I became black and it was then I became other and it was then I fell in with “slow death” and pale fleshed men, and fabrics that looked like blood. “A boundary event.” Cruelty’s undead dance. I am a perpetual refugee in “double exile.” Not even a body is a home. Too many ancestors live there. I’m listening, constantly, for a thing that sounds like mine, for a people who move like me. But so much illness has made its way up my spine, I don’t trust my tongue to tell me the truth.

“I wanted a map, not to know where things were, but to know where I am.” 5 Ante-, the Latin root for ancestor, means “before” or “to go”. But when brother was buried in the sea, sister was sold, and mother died of crying there was no “before” there was nowhere to go. And so, they stayed with me, in this body, asking to go home, but I can’t find it. Whispering of grains and bowls, and grasslands, but I hear only moans like dark pits and stones, I smell only rotting flesh, and taste iron.

One day, she said, “I found god. It was an accident really. Wiry hair, resilient like bush and when wet, coiling like snakes. Its face the absence of light, the Presence of being. Some thing birthed from my chest, unfamiliar to me since the sea.” She grinned toothily, “I found god in myself & I loved her/i loved her fiercely.” 6

strife. Images of whippings, lynching, and medical experimentation, floated in my mind as I wondered what happens when you uproot a people and create controlling narratives of their intelligence and humanity. Images of police brutality, young women being ripped from their desks in school, women bleeding on medical beds as gynecological equipment prototypes were tested on their bodies circled in my brain, as I wondered how sick do you have to make a people to control them.

4 From Minh-ha, T. (2011). Elsewhere, within here: Immigration, refugeeism, and the boundary event. Routledge: New York, NY. Min-ha describes boundary event as both material and immaterial processes which happen at real and imagined borders within biopsychosocial, historical, and political contexts. Here, I enter into my remembrance of the trans-Atlantic slave trade as a boundary event—the slave in America as a perpetual refugee, who after being sold, and “freed” is always lost, looking for a home that no longer exist. I conjure the taste of the sea, the sound of the waves, and my back pain, and my grandmother’s back pain, and her grandmother’s back pain to describe how boundary events stay with us, how being stacked in ships, bent over fields, cooking for families that are not ours and caring for children who do not call us by our names lives in the body.

5 Ewing, E. L. (n.d.). Electric Arches. United States: Haymarket Books. This quote describe how I often experience the boundary event of my family’s transgenerational trauma. An eternal seeking and searching. Always looking for a map in new ideas, ideals, and ivory towers. I’m constantly undoing and redoing something, whether it’s my feminism, spirituality, or blackness. I’m regularly rereading what I wrote yesterday and feeling more lost and wondering how I ever felt found. This quote represents my release of a romantic return to a Pan-African motherland that would hold me and feel familiar. This quote represents being lost.

6 From Shange, N. (2010). For Colored Girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enfuf. United States: Scribner. Here, I am having a conversation with one of Shange’s characters in the play. I envision Shange as a literary ancestor, speaking to me through her characters. As I read this play in 2016, I remembered my mother’s voice in my head saying she never did like this play and didn’t understand why Black women had to be portrayed as being so unhappy. Reading that play, I felt anything but unhappy even as the characters expressed great sorrow. There was a deep intimate witnessing among the characters, the author, the audience, and it felt to me an incredibly authentic portrayal of Black womanhood. At the time I was readying to divorce my husband, which took more courage and acceptance and love than I’d ever had for myself. And I thought, if I could look at myself one day, really look in the mirror and mean these words, then I will have healed something hurt in me. And so, I taped the quote on my vision board, and I imagined the character in the play sharing this wisdom until I could say these words honestly to myself.
On the maternal side, Great-grandma, when grieving the death of another of her children, would sit on a stump behind her home. My grandmother would watch, as she cried. Grandma told me, later, with cups of tea and wet tissues between us, when great-grandmother cried, no sound uttered. We’d learned that long ago. I watched my grandmother talk of my great-grandmother. Tears made their way across the bridge of her nose, down butter-brown skin. She tore into her cuticles with her teeth, like those sharks, that changed their passage for us. Blood bubbled up. We’d learned that too. Better us, than them do it. My tears never left the sweet pink of my eye. “The heart of a woman falls back with the night, And enters some alien cage in its plight, And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.”

My hands looked like hers, granny. Our knuckles large, our nail beds wide and square. A callous on my right index finger. They popped and they pranced across my laptop—liminal litanies feeding my funding. Granny, who remembered the plantation in Franklin, TN thought I could do anything—loved the private White universities I attended—told everyone I was going to be a doctor, M.D. Granny, whose love was about survival, would flay you as soon as it would soothe—loved me. In her face, lived lineages. Matriarchs so strong no man would dare hit them, force them, spew bile at them the way they had us—lovers, masters, sons, and friends. “I write myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become.” In my musings we sit in circles, we cook, we are mean, and we favor our own company.

All those chains around that throat. What was once bejeweled becomes beleaguered. Systems of silencing lounging in the larynx, an epiglottis gagging, and esophagus that’s scorching itself with acid, so it won’t be tempted to speak. This is what lives in me! So when I say something, know that it is radical. When I say some thing Know that it is smart. The intelligence of the body with breath of blessed salt shall not be sigh-lanced—even when my lips are closed this body is no absence of sound. “I can voice my ideas without hesitation or fear because I am speaking, finally, about myself.”

7 From Johnson, G. D. C. (2018). The heart of a woman, and other poems. (n.p.): Creative Media Partners, LLC. I cannot describe my great-grandmother’s heart, my grandmother’s heart, my mother’s heart, my heart. So poetry must do it for me. Too many stories and memories to tell about the alien cage of our hearts and the breaking that happens there. For my great-grandmother this cage was sharecropping, and racism, and poverty, and grief. For my grandmother this cage was the Nation of Islam, men, and love. For my mother this cage is career and fear. And for me, this cage is academia, the possibility of freedom and the perils of self-doubt.

8 From Anzaldúa, G. (1987). Borderlands/La Frontera: The new mestiza. United States: Aunt Lute Books. Sometimes, to save ourselves, we create stories. Anzaldúa, an artist, intellectual, and storyteller understood there is no difference between fiction and fact. When I was younger, I created grand stories about who the people who loved me really were when they were free to love. My paternal grandmother was fierce, a survivor and warrior, and I often wanted to be the myth she created of me. She wanted me to be independent, strong, to never sign myself over to a man for a piece of paper. She was so upset with me when I did this exact thing, we didn’t speak for weeks. She’s passed now, and I still write myths for her, myths for us, myths about the people we could have been.

9 From Jordan, J. (2002). Some of us did not die: New and selected essays. United States: Basic Books. June Jordan was one of the first authors I read when I encountered Black feminism. This portion of the narrative
It is not that they made me 3/5 of a person, it’s that the animals loved me the same. It’s not that they wrote it down on some paper, ‘cause I saw the way they looked at me. Even through the bright strands of hair and eyes like agate, I knew. Suffering. It’s not that I could not love. I dared to try, and each ancestor tried a little more. It’s not that I’m angry. I just remember the sun that day when the girl I shared shackles with was dead beside me, how vacant her eyes were when I placed my palm on her chest, how the ocean rose and kissed her when Osun said goodbye and Yemaya held her head. “For each of us women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises.”

No one could un-make me, because I’d been through many be-comings and un-becomings. I am not afraid.

When my EYE opened, I watched the gap between my thigh close. Nothing better than my own flesh, than my own hope, than me, and my ancestors rubbing, side by side, onward. “Show me someone not full of herself, and I’ll show you a hungry person.”

After he put her out on the porch that last time, and told her to think about what she’d done, she went inward. Rested, with the mosquitoes and the sounds of the highway. Inward, so the glow of the light poles disappeared. And she heard the story of grandmother escaping in the night, five children in tow, with her brother who had a shotgun with a bullet for her husband. Remembered what Granny said about great great aunt, who she never met, but had hair like wheat and skin too fair. Went inward, to the sound of fire spitting, and scent of cooking yam in memories so long ago she did not know them. Opened her eyes and stared at the door closed to her home. Sighed. Gathered herself and chose herself. Thought, like pools or skies or darkness or lies, like longing, or regret there’s no sorry for where I’m at. Recounted, “No woman who chooses to be self-loving ever regrets her choice.”

embraces how alive and empowered I felt when reading her work. Her words were a mirror to a collective power and way of being I had never heard of or thought possible. After years of feeling anxious and afraid to speak in classrooms and among peers—after years of training and socialization in private White spaces to measure every word and measure it exactly, I felt, I had something I wanted to say, and I didn’t care how it sounded. This expression was not always possible, but at least I wanted to speak the truth and with her words inside me felt unafraid to do so.

10 From Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. New York: Crossing Press. This quote illustrates a continuation of my awakening to Black feminism. Audre Lorde’s work made me feel bold and fearless. I could challenge every notion which said I was less because I was Black and lesser because I was a Black woman. I could care for the earth, for my sisters, for my deities. I could go forth.

11 From Giovanni, N. (1996). *The selected poems of Nikki Giovanni*. New York: HarperCollins. I’ve been hungry for a long time. Hungry for love, acceptance, self-worth. Unconsciously aching for thigh gaps one moment and feeling full. I’ve believed these things were found in external relationships and accomplishments for as long as I’ve been hungry. This poem, called me out, called all of us out—my mother and sister and friends. Some big part of healing must be, finally feeling full in oneself. When I reference my EYE opening, I’m referring to my third eye, to trusting intuition, spirit, and my gut to tell me what makes me feel full and what really needs to be shed. Turns out, it’s not the flesh on my inner thigh, but rather, the insidious roots of positivism, White supremacy, and patriarchy—it’s the systems and institutions of my miseducation, which taught me not to trust myself, to deny my truths. It’s no wonder the spirit stays hungry when that’s the point of capitalism, the point of patriarchy and White supremacy—to eradicate self-sustainability and the joy of feeling full.

Bladders. Incontinent at 28. Mother had a sling put in—no a mesh, after our births. Pear shaped muscles with long memories, the pulsating pelvis, prolonged. Grandma doesn’t talk about her body, but mother remembers her bathing in bleach. Unclean. Soiled. Cystic. Mythic “Leaky containers”--disassembled.13

I tell my therapist. I’m terrified of having children, a girl, yes, a daughter. “Your daughter’s face is a small riot, her hands are a civil war, a refugee camp behind each ear, a body littered with ugly things.” My mother is looking at me. I am 10, and my father has left the home. His laugh never returns. “Your daughter is ugly. She knows loss intimately, carries whole cities in her belly.” I am 16. Through the smoothness of his cheeks he confesses, “but I like somebody else too.” I am 20, I have not eaten in days. My mother takes pictures of me with her phone, ahhing at my hip bones’ protrusion—wishing for love’s emaciation. I am angry. I look through her. “You are her mother. Why did you not warn her, hold her like a rotting boat and tell her that men will not love her if she is covered in continents, if her teeth are small colonies, if her stomach is an island and her thighs are borders?” I am 24. The ink does not dry on the divorce papers before I am in his arms. “What man wants to lie down and watch the world burn in his bedroom?” I tell my therapist I am terrified of having children, a girl, yes, a daughter. She looks at me. “But God, doesn’t she wear the world well?” 14

One day, I’m light. Moving, hips, until the poison dances its way down my legs, dribbling back to the earth, welcomed home with delight. One day, I’m night. Moon, shadows dancing on my clavicles, crystals clanging under my feet. Earth. Happy to hear the vibration of the prodigal one come home. Ancestors sing, “didn’t ya know, didn’t ya know, tried to move but

Black women turn toward love. I situate this quote within my personal experience of consistently choosing self-love in the face of abusive, toxic partners who understand the oppression experienced because of their blackness but have no intention of relinquishing the privileges of patriarchy assigned to their male gender and sex. This is an example of how literary and literal ancestors empower healing and self-love as stories of courage and pain travel across generations.

13 From Ahmed, S. (2017). Living a feminist life. United Kingdom: Duke University Press. In this section, I bring the narrative back to the body. I remind readers bodies have long memories, and cells can hold trauma just like our stories. Specifically, I focus on the bladder, as narratives about the bladder, related to birth and aging have traveled in my family. I also focus on the bladder, because it is one of the few parts of my family’s female anatomy, we have narratives about. It fascinates me, the stories we don’t tell. Stories about pleasure, clitoris’, wombs without babies—these are stories we don’t tell. And alongside these silences there is an unsaid fear, fear of odor, fear of leaking, fear of desire, fear of birthing, fear of unbirthing. Fears I too carry and feel afraid to tell.

14 All selected quotes from Shire, W. (2011). Teaching my mother how to give birth (Mouthmark). United Kingdom: Mouthmark series. In this section I used quotes from Warsan Shire’s poems to weave together how reflections, images, and ideas of daughters create and maintain powerful controlling narratives. I use my own memory of a conversation with a former therapist to reflect how I’ve experienced the role of being a daughter as hard and healing work. Furthermore, it alludes to my own internalized trauma, as I’ve allowed my wounds to determine my ability to be a mother to a daughter. Yet, I express hope of healing, and refusal of this transgenerational pattern, as I am having this conversation with a therapist in this portion of the narrative, intentionally seeking healing through therapy. I juxtapose this point with the final quote from the poem which addresses how well this daughter wears the truths her community in her being.
I lost my way, didn’t ya know didn’t ya know, stopped to watch my emotions sway..."15 One day, I’m moaning. Womb chanting, om planting. Ancestors singing, “didn’t ya know, didn’t ya know...Love is life, and life is free take a ride of life with me free your mind and find your way there will be a brighter day.” “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.”16

My knees are burning, my right foot numb, I’ve gone to space, the spinning wheels of life iridescent. My ancestors convene in the tallness of my spine. The absence of light, the absence of sound, the fullness of presence. In the chill of my inbreath, the longing of the body, filling the belly with the mud of my foremothers. In the exhalation, the spark of creation, the fire of womb-an. “Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of the slave.”17

**Remembrances**

Poem: (re)memberance

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I’m learning to remember

The things I (had) forgot

Pressing on (my)bruises

Endarkened (purple) spots

15 From Badu, E., Yancey, J., & Clendennin. (2000). Didn’t cha know [Recorded by Badu, E.]. On Mama’s Gun [UK Maxi CD Single]. Los Angeles, CA: Motown Records. This song represents joy, laughter, and connection. My mother would often play this song loudly in the house, singing along as she cooked or cleaned. My sister and I would join in, singing, laughing, loving one another. We’d dance. This song made us feel uplifted. I marveled at music like this, sung by a Black woman who wore her hair wrapped in tall turbans, a woman who unapologetically sung about love, healing, and making her own choices. This song made me feel spiritual and black and unapologetically alive.

16 From Walker, A. (1983). In search of our mothers’ gardens : womanist prose. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Amidst the attempts to heal by talking with ancestors, reading, and writing representations of self that feel free, I am loving and learning to love better all the time. I once thought my grandmothers and great-grandmother had to be trapped, if not in their minds then by the systems which oppressed them. I realize now that they’ve always been free, multifaceted, fearless, to move with such grace, to have the courage to be mean and survive, to still sing and dance, and create with their loved ones. I feel grateful, endlessly, for their presence in my life. I draw upon their strength every day, and pray to do some work which gives back. Walker’s definition of womanism reminds me of my promise to love and to do some work which loves back.

17 From “Our Grandmother’s Poem” in Angelou, M. (1978). And still I rise. United States: Random House. I end here, using Maya Angelou’s poem to reconnect the bliss of meditation, stillness and the opportunity to be in relationship with being to the hope my ancestors have and instill within me. I believe we found our freedom in our stillness within, and practicing meditation is my way of accessing this stillness and freedom to be.
I’m gathering the languages
And speaking in many tongues
Loosing (all) my spirit(s)
My fingers (finally) unwrung
I’m hurrying to hear Her
My ancestors’ (trembling) call
Stretching (insides) wide open
Embracing (the pain of) it All
I’m awakening my lightening
In darkness’ (supple) flesh
Becoming (un)done; (ripening)
In memory’s (gossamer) caress

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As illustrated in my poem above, I want my remembrances to move us toward an ontological and epistemological space which respects the spiritual and material, the collective and subjective, and integrates an African ancestral knowledge of personhood with the complex and hybridized state I occupy. I want my remembrances to reach back, to the trauma, through the damage, while reaching back through the desire, to the healing. My goal then, in reaching back to my own cultural memories and grappling with my own cultural trauma, is to refuse, disrupt, exist within and outside--to “create culture” (Dillard, 2012, p. 27), with readers and participants by theorizing from our mind, body, and spirit to trouble what we know as narratives of cultural trauma. Throughout this chapter, I asked readers to engage with me in “epistemic witnessing”
(Pillow, 2016; 2019) where we acknowledge the “theoretical debt” “research debt” and “research inheritance” in Psychology, feminism, and trauma theory.

Through this process, we take responsibility for engagement in “theoretical oppression” through research practices by turning toward, illuminating, and applying Black woman-centered theory and narratives for the benefit of Black women and contribution to feminist, psychological, and transgenerational trauma theory (Pillow, 2019). And by doing so, we not only witness the erasures, elisions, and silences, but also the refusals and survivances of work in the present-past-futures of our fields.
Chapter 3: Methodology

“Research is formalized curiosity. It is the poking and prying with a purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein” - Zora Neale Hurston

In chapters 1 and 2, I discuss how I apply intersectionality and endarkened feminism to unsettle the transgenerational trauma paradigm with African American women. In particular, I address how African American women are uniquely positioned in the academy and community as both the researcher and researched which both empowers and complicates their relationship to the inter/intrapersonal, social, cultural, and systemic/political transmission of transgenerational trauma in the African American community. In this chapter, I discuss the design and implementation of this study, connecting Black feminist epistemology with narrative inquiry methodology and methods. Following this, I review the site selection, participants, and ethical considerations of the study. Lastly, I discuss the analysis and representation of the study.

Purpose Statement, Research Questions, and the Research Puzzle

African American women experience epistemic violence, theoretical oppression, and historic erasure across disciplines. As a result, they are often precariously positioned as both the researcher and researched, and as scholars/researchers, often seduced by W.E.I.R.D. institutions to engage in the theories, practices, and methodologies which historically elide or silence them. In the study of transgenerational trauma transmission, African American communities experience victimization, pathologizing, and misrecognition. Furthermore, African American women are rarely the focus of trauma studies except within the context of the family unit. This study seeks to acknowledge the epistemic violence and theoretical erasure of African American women in feminism, trauma studies, and Psychology, by framing this study in the Black feminist
epistemologies of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s Black intersectional feminist theory and Cynthia Dillard’s endarkened feminism. Moreover, this study refuses the historically damage-centered framework of post slavery narratives and transgenerational trauma studies, by (re)centering the participant’s understanding of their experience through exploratory narrative inquiry.

In this study, I applied Black intersectional feminist theory and endarkened feminist theory and narrative inquiry to explore how African American women understand, name, and story their experiences of inter/intrapersonal, social, cultural, and systemic/political transgenerational trauma. I adapted Clandinin’s (2013) model of narrative inquiry as my methodology which examines people's experiences of phenomena and how they story their lives through co-composed narratives with the researcher. In Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) approach to narrative inquiry, research questions are designed as research puzzles. Within this puzzle, “re-search” questions honor the exploratory nature of the study and thus, remain open to the lived experiences of the phenomena for the participants and researcher (p. 124).

The research puzzle guiding this study contextualized the continuous and transactional experiences of narrating living stories of transgenerational trauma transmission. Furthermore, this research puzzle followed the re-narrating, re-searching, and re-formulating of transgenerational trauma transmission (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Huber, 2010). The exploratory, open-ended, and narrative-oriented framework of this methodology aligns with my use of Black feminist intersectionality theory and endarkened feminist theory. Within this research puzzle rests the question, what more do we need to know about African American women’s stories of transgenerational trauma such that we can unsettle the transgenerational trauma paradigm and reckon with the erasure of African American women in trauma studies?
In this intersectional endarkened feminist study, I interviewed 5 African American women who live in or were raised in the Mid-South region of the United States. My goal was to conceptualize how the participants name, experience, and navigate transgenerational trauma transmission interpersonally, intrapersonally, socially, culturally, and systemically/politically. Simultaneously, my goal was to unsettle the transgenerational trauma paradigm by using theories grounded in Black feminist epistemology and resisting damage-centered frameworks of trauma analysis and representation. The questions of this study include:

1. How is transgenerational trauma transmission understood, narrated, and named by African American women?
   a. What are the experiences of cultural transmissions of transgenerational trauma?
   b. What are the experiences of social transmissions of transgenerational trauma?
   c. What are the experiences of systemic/structural/political transmissions of transgenerational trauma?

2. What are the rituals, practices, and ways of navigating the transmission of transgenerational trauma?

This research puzzle is framed through Black intersectional feminism and endarkened feminism which is examined in the following section and serve as a basis for my choice of methodology, methods, analysis, interpretation, and representation.

Theoretical Framework

By combining Black intersectional feminism and endarkened feminism I both unsettled traditional theorizations of transgenerational trauma and explored novel ways of engaging with this phenomenon. My research puzzle attended to how African American women are socially raced and gendered through identity politics and how their race and gender interact with
institutions, social forces, and cultural nuances to create, narrate, and iterate transgenerational trauma. I used intersectionality and endarkened feminism as a spiritual and critical praxis to investigate the interactions of African American women through the multiplicity of their identities and challenge the dominant narrative of historical trauma and its continuous social and structural manifestations. In using intersectionality and endarkened feminism as my macro theories, I formulated a research puzzle which acknowledges and questions: how we (participant and researcher/co-participant) experience our Blackness and womanness, how these identities shape the stories we tell and how we tell them, how these stories are connected to our lives (past/or present) and how we make meaning of trauma, history, Blackness and womanness.

Rationale

In Eve Tuck’s (2009) “Suspending Damage: An Open letter to communities” (academic and non-academic) she asks us to peer into the deleterious effects of “damage-centered research” and the long-term impacts of considering ourselves (i.e., the minoritized, marginalized, victimized, and brutalized communities) as “broken” (p. 409). Social science research is often guilty of employing what Tuck (2009) calls “theory of change,” where research “…establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation” (p. 413). Situating theories of change in social science to achieve reparation means damage-centered research is significant in holding oppressive powers/systems responsible, and we, the researchers, educators, and members of these minoritized communities, must struggle along the line of placing responsibility onto oppressive powers and finding other ways to operate within this paradigm. Tuck (2009) states:

In damage-centered research, one of the major activities is to document pain or loss in an individual, community, or tribe. Though connected to deficit models—frameworks that emphasize what a particular student, family, or community is lacking to explain
underachievement or failure—damage-centered research is distinct in being more socially and historically situated. It looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy. Common sense tells us this a good thing, but the danger in damage-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community. (p. 413)

Tuck (2009) offers desire-based research frameworks as the antidote to damage and theories of change in social research, stating, “…desire-based research frameworks are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (p. 416). Desire-based research originates from Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) conceptualization of desire, which they suggest is composed over time through our experiences, where piece by piece desire becomes an integrated, dynamic, assemblage whole. Within this framework, desire is both the gnawing need and learning to want--to need. It is not the replacement for damage. Instead, it is the insertion, the interruption, the disruption of the dualistic framework of damage which often leads to frameworks which categorize in binaries of reproduction or resistance (Tuck, 2009). Desire-based research opens liminal spaces between the binary framework, allowing people to be seen in their complexity.

Desire, because it is an assemblage of experiences, ideas, and ideologies, both subversive and dominant, necessarily complicates our understanding of human agency, complicity, and resistance (Tuck, 2009 p. 420). In sum, desire is used to depathologize research and “by contrast, can yield analyses that upend commonly held assumptions of responsibility, cohesiveness, ignorance, and paralysis within dispossessed and disenfranchised communities,” (Tuck, 2009, p.417). Applied to an indigenous, intersectional feminist, and endarkened
framework, desire-based research implies understanding the assemblage of collective experiences, ideas, ideologies, complicities, and resistance. For each collective remembrance and experience, more space is created for both damage and desire where complex personhood is acknowledged and accepted.

I chose narrative inquiry as the methodology for this study, because it complements desire-based frameworks of remembering, narrating, and storying collective experiences and resistances, fitting with my goal to both investigate experiences of transgenerational trauma transmission while simultaneously unsettling dominant methods for researching this phenomenon. Clanindin and Rosiek (2007) use narrative inquiry to respond to temporality, sociality, and place which methodologically aligns with my emphasis on situating transgenerational trauma transmission within the historic, social, cultural, and political spaces of the participants. Furthermore, narrative inquiry allows the collective telling, co-composing, and living of storied experiences (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Through narrative inquiry, the researcher and participants are embodied, where internal voices are as significant as external structures, and there is room to challenge constructions of identity and experience (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Huber, in press).

Due to the rich cultural tradition of storytelling throughout the African diaspora, it was essential the methodology for this study respected both storytelling and the relational experience of storytelling (Toliver, 2022). Additionally, narrative inquiry aligns important pillar of Dillard’s (2000) endarkened feminist epistemology which states researchers must first be responsible to their community. Furthermore, it is necessary the methodology allows space to question power, constructions of identity, and constructions of knowing. In narrative inquiry, stories, in their constructions, reconstructions and living, are continuous, non-linear, and relational as we always
begin “in the midst” and end in the “midst” of our own experiences (Clandinin, 2013, p. 43). Therefore, narrative inquiry fits the theoretical perspectives of this study and my ontological perspective.

**Narrative Inquiry**

Storytelling is a practice as ancient as the existence of human beings, yet narrative inquiry is considered a relatively new qualitative methodology (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). Clandinin and Connelly (1990) define narrative inquiry as a method and phenomena that “names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and... names the patterns of inquiry for its study” (p. 2). In narrative inquiry, individuals and collectives/universals inherently live storied lives and tell stories of their lives in and through their transactions, relationships, and experiences. The purpose of narrative researchers is to tell these stories alongside people by collecting, describing, and writing about their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

**Defining Elements: Sociality, Temporality, Place**

In Clandinin and Connelly’s (1990) iteration of narrative inquiry, experience is conceptualized as a continuous, interactive, three-dimensional narrative inquiry space where temporality, place, and sociality are investigated. This philosophical understanding of experience emerges from a Deweyean philosophical perspective where experience is synonymous with education (Hutchinson, 2015; Jia, 2005). Learning or education occurs through experience and narrative of the experience which is temporal. Thus, narrative inquirers attend to the past, present, and future of our participants, ourselves, and events, places, and things (Clandinin & Huber, in press; Clandinin, 2013). In addition to this, narrative inquirers attend to sociality, which includes the personal and social experiences of the participant and researcher. The
personal conditions of the participant may include their feelings, thoughts, moral judgements, reactions, hopes, etc..., and the social experiences may include institutional, cultural, and linguistic nuances and narratives. Lastly, narrative inquirers position the participants’ experiences within “place” or where the narrative inquiry physically takes place alongside the participant (Clandinin & Huber, in press; Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Raskin, 2007).

**Black Feminist Epistemology and Narrative Inquiry**

From a Black epistemological perspective, qualitative inquiry, “offers the opportunity to expose and challenge the complex relationship between science and domination; Black women’s history of subjectification and objectification; metanarratives; and everyday folklore and myths (Payne, 1984) produced and proliferated by dominant institutions in reproducing social inequality,” (Evans-Winters, 2018, p. 19). Moreover, it engages the “dialogical voice” (Evans-Winters, p.22) where the cultural standpoint of the researcher and participants is evident across the writing, conversation, and listening throughout the research process. Applying Black feminist epistemology to narrative inquiry turns the living, telling, retelling, and reliving of stories into a critical and cathartic practice which honors the cultural process of storytelling and challenges dominant narratives for justice (Evans-Winters, 2018). Narrative inquiry’s investigation into the internal and external world of the participant through cultural, social, and institutional narratives creates space for both personal narratives and folk narratives of transgenerational trauma. Narratives—the act of storytelling—is particularly integral to this study, as the collective narratives become personalized through the retelling, and what appears as “just vehicles for cultural representation” emerge as “cultural work” and “resources for political and social ends,” (Narayan & George, 2012, p. 514).
**Justification and Researcher Accountability**

Employing narrative inquiry in the study of African American women and the transmission of transgenerational trauma through a Black feminist epistemological framework carries personal, practical, and social responsibilities. Clandinin (2013) states narrative inquiry is fueled by its justifications, which may be personal—from our life experiences, practical—from the effects and change we hope to see, and social—from the professional, contextual, and justice-oriented outcomes. Narrative inquiry holds the researcher accountable to these justifications in various ways. First, the narrative researcher undergoes their own autobiographical narrative inquiry before (see chapter 2), during, and after each inquiry, “because narrative inquiry is an ongoing reflexive, and reflective methodology” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 55).

Thus, who I am as a researcher, my identities, my constructions, and my story both frame and become a part of the inquiry. Second, researchers enter the lives of the participants and learn their living stories, perhaps, before going to the beginning of their stories. This “entering into the midst” of the participant’s lives and stories provides context, and temporality (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Huber, (in press), Clandinin, 2006). As the researcher, I am grateful to learn and be a part of their process. Being in the field as a narrative researcher implies, I’m living the story, responsible to the story, and responsible to the narrators.

Together, the participant and I enter an “intersubjective flow” where mutuality, education, and experience “unfold as brief informal exchanges embedded in long conversations, the routines of daily life, and the deepening bonds of collaborative friendships,” (Narayan & George, 2012, p. 520). I am thinking, reflecting, and reliving my own narrative of transgenerational trauma transmission alongside the participants. I am also listening, reflecting, and living their stories of transgenerational trauma transmission. Alongside each other, the
participants and I are co-composing, re-living, re-telling, re-storying the phenomena of transgenerational trauma transmission “to produce emotionally stimulating texts alongside culturally affirming texts that serve to affirm our humanity,” (Evans-Winters, 2018, p.70).

Site of Research

It is common for narrative inquiry to take place in the settings participants live their stories. However, due to the impact of the global pandemic on public health and safety, it was necessary to offer both in person and virtual methods for the interview (World Health Organization, 2020). All the participants chose to be interviewed via video. Despite my initial disappointments at this reality, I choose to see the virtual format of this narrative process as another layer of storytelling—we are storying transgenerational trauma transmission during a global pandemic. Each interview, though hosted through virtual methods, was layered and rich. I chose to interview African American women who either lived or were raised in the Mid-South region of the United States--areas rife with living stories. It is in the Mid-South, among the glasses of sweet tea and opulent green trees, I first sat down with my grandmothers and conducted my own narrative inquiry into our lives of transgenerational trauma. It is in the Mid-South, among the glasses of sweet tea and lush green trees, activists organized sit-ins and boycotts in Nashville diners...it is among these trees, and the sluicing of condensation on a glass of sweet tea, Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis. The reverberations of structural oppression—the stories of cultural and social trauma, are alive and well in these cities. I live the social, systemic, and cultural transmissions of trauma in Memphis and Nashville, TN, and thus, I feel better suited to listen, navigate, and co-compose narratives with participants living in these locations.
The intimacy of the field was of particular importance to this study. It was essential the researcher and participants have a relationship with the site or field itself as we co-constructed narratives of the social, systemic, ecological, and cultural nuances of the space. In addition, it is necessary that the researcher and participants developed a relationship which facilitated enough comfort for the sharing of these complex narratives and the difficult emotions and moments which arose. To address the relational ambiguity and delicate power dynamics of this research project, I drew upon feminist, anthropological, and ethnographic literature which I expound upon in the ethics section of this chapter.

Participants

As I am studying the interconnection between identity and experiences of transgenerational trauma transmission of African American women, my sample was intentionally small and homogenous, and reflected an a priori method to provide data relevant to the study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). I used snowball sampling and convenience sampling to recruit 5 participants for this study. The participants were selected based on a specific criterion: African American women or nonbinary femmes and were born and/or raised in the Mid-South region of the United States. Sample selection criteria was: a) must identify as African American, b) must identify as cisgender, transgender, or nonbinary woman, c) must have knowledge of family history and family trauma, e) must be born or raised in the Mid-South region of the United States and d) must enjoy storytelling.

Sample Size

I chose a small sample size based on a few factors. First, due to the sensitivity and uniqueness of the topic people who met the full criteria and were willing to share their stories for the study qualify as a “hard-to-reach community” (Valerio et al., 2016, p. 2). It is important to
acknowledge the history of colonization, experimentation, abuse, and misuse/misrepresentation in the medical/mental health field and the African American community and how this impacts trust between the African American community and academic research community (French et al., 2020). Therefore, it was important the researcher be able to use convenience and snowball sampling to recruit participants who may already have an established bond with the researcher or with someone in relation with the researcher. These methods for sampling are also proven to be effective for recruiting participants from historically marginalized communities (Valerio et al., 2017). Convenience sampling allowed the researcher to recruit participants who meet the full selection criteria and who were born and raised in the Mid-South of the United States. Snowball sampling, which is often used in mixed method approaches to research allowed the researcher to build networks in the local community. Consequently, there was the risk of dual relationships between the participants and the researcher which was addressed during informed consent.

Risk

Although there are no physical, social, or legal risks, the researcher acknowledges potential risk of dual relationships and the sensitivity of this topic. Therefore, the researcher took measures to mitigate risk to the participants. The researcher did not accept participants she had a primary relationship with such as family, friends, or students for the research study. She addressed any potential conflicts regarding the research relationship during the informed consent with participants such as maintaining all communication about the research project through end-to-end encrypted formats such as Google Voice and Microsoft 365. Participants were also given space to discuss any questions or concerns they had regarding dual relationships, confidentiality, and the researcher participant relationship during informed consent.
Additionally, the researcher developed a risk procedure in the Institutional Review Boards to address the possibility of participants experiencing psychological discomfort during the interview. Participants were notified prior to each interview and during the informed consent that they had the right to cease participation at any time during the interview. Participants were also informed they were allowed to withdraw their interview from the study up to one week following the interview date. The researcher followed the American Psychological Association (APA) emotional crisis risk suggestions in the event that a participant experienced emotional and/or psychological distress. The researcher also developed a list of mental health providers who specialized in trauma-informed therapy throughout Memphis and Nashville TN to provide to participants, as needed. Participants were informed of this resource prior to the interview.

**Consent**

It was important to me that participants felt their consent could be extended or rescinded at any point during the interview process. Prior to the informed consent process, the researcher called each participant to discuss the interview process and go over the informed consent. The informed consent was sent to the participants, and a second meeting was scheduled to discuss any questions or concerns participants had about the document prior to signing it. Prior to each interview, participants were reminded of their consent to the process and the right to rescind their consent at any time.

**Compensation**

The participants did not receive compensation for this study. Instead, the participants received an appreciation gift upon completion of the first interview. This appreciation gift consisted of two book which are integral to the development of the study and the literature of transgenerational trauma for African American women. The books are: *Homecoming: Overcome*
Fear and Trauma to Reclaim Your Whole Authentic Self by Dr. Thema Bryant-Davis and Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde. Participants were asked if they would like to opt-in to receive an appreciation gift and to indicate where they would like to receive the gift.

Confidentiality and Privacy

Confidentiality and privacy were primary considerations throughout the study. I identified multiple points at which to protect client’s information and maintain confidentiality of their identity and stories. Initial contact with potential participants was conducted through end-to-end encrypted text messages, phone calls, and emails. Once participants consented to the study their information was saved under a pseudonym chosen by the participant during the first interview. The physical copies of the informed consent documents and interview notes were saved in a lockbox. The audio recordings of the interviews were saved on an encrypted password protected portable device under the order the participant was interviewed and their pseudonym. The transcriptions, analysis documents, and interpretive narratives were saved to One Drive (for business) in Microsoft 365 for accessibility and copied on an encrypted password protected portable drive. Participants were made aware of the protections in place to maintain their confidentiality.

Insider Positionality

Since beginning this dissertation, my positionality has shifted across geopolitical spaces and time. Therefore, I hold the position of who I was when I began this process and who I am now. My identities as an African American woman position me as an insider within the shared identities among the participants. However, my role as researcher maintains my positionality as an outsider. Therefore, I occupy roles across a spectrum of insider/outsider status or insider/outsider moments of similarities and differences between me and the research
participants. Tshuma (2021) states “insider status” (p.219) influences the process of research from conceptualization to representation. Tensions can arise regarding “issues of objectivity versus bias, detachment versus emotional closeness, culture shock versus familiarity, negotiation of access versus belonging, and the impact these issues have on the reliability or validity of insider versus outsider research” (Tshuma, 2021, p. 220). This positionality also lends itself to insider status vulnerability as the reflexive process potentially exposes the “researcher’s language and theory, culture and experiences, positionality and bias” (p. 221).

The tensions of navigating insider positionality arose multiple times throughout the research process. I used my commitment to research as a responsibility to African American women to soothe the tensions between my role as an outsider and researcher. I also followed the principles of Black feminist qualitative inquiry of intellectual activism and cultural preservation to manage my own vulnerabilities and “move beyond being the keepers of secrets to being [a] scholar-activist who chooses to use our secrets to instigate social and community transformation” (Evans-Winters, 2019, p.71). I recognize the inherent vulnerability in exposing the position from which I am co-creating this research. Still, I understand insider positionality as an important place to conduct this research within considering the socio historical contexts of research on African American women’s experiences as subjects as opposed to research with African American women as people. My insider positionality and experience as researcher and researched allow a unique perspective and connection to this work which has historically been elided in academic spaces. Therefore, I choose to work with my insider positionality and vulnerability alongside participants as an act of resistance to Western Eurocentric paradigms of research. I navigate this experience through spiritual practices such as mediation, prayer, ritual, consultation with peers and my committee and using the reflexivity journal.
**Positionality Statement**

I am rewriting my positionality statement, responding from my location as a predoctoral psychology intern on internship in Durham, North Carolina to my location when I first wrote this statement, two Springs ago in Memphis, TN as a 4th year doctoral student. I wrote, “I know how I define Blackness or Africanness”. When, in fact, I don’t. I’m not even sure how I defined Blackness or Africanness then, but I guarantee my definition is not the same. I wrote, “I know how I define womanness,” which in fact, I don’t. I know now how to better unsettle and challenge my beliefs around gender identity and expression and what being a woman means to me. I think I’ve only gotten better at questioning. These definitions change every day, depending on how I feel, what I see in the news, on my social media, who I converse with, where my body is located, how my spirit is moving. What I do not know is how other African American women define their Africanness, their womanness. What I want to know is how do they define these things, and if the moments which created these definitions were sometimes as painful and as liberating as it has been for me. In this study, I want to be an “epistemic witness” (Pillow, 2019, p. 119). I leave this verb “to want” in the present tense, as I am still an epistemic witness to my collaboration with the participants.

Epistemic witnessing pushes the notion of what witnessing means, and how we, as researchers, show up in the lives of our participants. In this inquiry, I was intentional in showing up with the participants. My intentionality was rooted in ritual which included a prayer to my ancestors to guide me throughout the interview, meditation, and/or deep breathing prior to the interview and journaling post interview. I navigated multiple roles such as counseling student, observer, researcher, and participant alongside my identities as feminist, woman, Black, daughter, friend, etc. These roles and identities often collided throughout the interview and
showed up in places where I chose to ask more questions, remained silent, or thought “okay, this is enough information for that question.” In my reflexivity journals between interviews, I exercised my “decolonial attitude” using different articles on reflexivity to act as my guide through stretching my witnessing (Pillow, 2019, p.119).

Decolonizing my attitude meant taking a microscope to my understanding of knowledge, knowledge production, and history. I challenge(d) how colonialism, imperialism, White-supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism influence the paradigms I orient to and thus the research I co-create. This process is an ongoing unsettling and witnessing where there is no finite arrival. Research witnessing “adds additional layers to witnessing relationships” as the researcher gathers testimony “and/or witnesses affects and effects of words, actions, policies whether in the present or in archival past” (Pillow, 2019, p. 122). Thus, as a researcher I too am exposed in the process of decolonization and often feel I am crouched in “the liminal space between vulnerability and resistance,” in search of an authentic and meaningful embodiment (Evans-Winters, 2018, p.70).

As I reflect on what authenticity means to me as a researcher and co-creator in this study, I think of my self-witnessing. I desired self-witnessing in this work as I witnessed with the participants. This meant embracing my misgivings and failures and accepting the ambiguity of my body and their bodies. It meant, releasing my relationship with toxic productivity and honoring what I told the participants in the consent process. I promised to honor their experiences, check-in between interviews, and hold space. So, I learned across our socioeconomic status, skin tones, hair textures, languaging and “daily racialized and colonial experiences” (Pillow, 2019, p. 122). I learned relationship, embodiment, feeling and sensing into their stories and being transparent about where I am in their stories and my hopes for what our
stories can do. I hoped to increase trustworthiness by taking ownership of my subjectivities and opening myself to critique from participants and audiences.

Methods

For the purposes of this study, I explored my research puzzle through an investigation of the lived, storied experiences of the participants. When I chose the methods most appropriate for the project, I questioned which field texts (data) addressed how I was “thinking about the chosen puzzle” (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 27). As narrative inquiry and Black feminist epistemologies are concerned with demarginalizing experiences, feminist interview methods are a good extension of the theoretical framework and methodology in this study. Although interviews provide a specific context for the transmission of stories, they are a sufficient conduit for looking with and into the personal, social/cultural, and institutional narratives that flow within a community. Furthermore, collecting narratives about stories offers “a chance to learn how the stories work interpersonally and psychologically” (Narayan & George, 2012, p. 518).

Interviews

Semi-structured and unstructured interviewing are staples of feminist research methods for multiple reasons. First, there is more freedom in the interaction between the participant and researcher, as semi-structured and unstructured interviews allow conversation and relation to happen in the field. Second, “interviewing offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 19). Third, both the interviewer and interviewee are embodied in feminist interviews, meaning, nonverbal communication is noted and critical and the “lived experience through the body” as a place of “knowledge production” is taken seriously (Ellingson, 2012, p. 528; Reinharz, 1992).
Throughout the interview process I noted facial expressions, silences, intonations, and body language in the interview notes, which was critical to practicing embodied interviewing. I also noted my reactions, emotions, and sensations as much as I could follow them alongside the interviewee. Alongside noting how our bodies communicated throughout the interview, I also used semi-structured interview techniques and open-ended questions to facilitate the natural flow of storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). African American communities encounter continuous deficit-centered and reductive narratives that perpetuate disembodying and victimizing representations in society and trauma studies. Therefore, reclaiming narrative and storytelling through techniques which facilitate embodiment is significant. Consequently, embodied storytelling as counternarrative can provide a sense of agency, connection to culture, and catharsis (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Much can be inferred from tone or voice, eye contact, body positioning, and the pace of one’s breath. In feminist interviewing and narrative inquiry, these subtleties are data, as our constructions influence what we infer about bodies, and how we make meaning of these inferences can change as the relationship between researcher and participant unfolds (Del Busso, 2007).

The embodiment of my identities as feminist, African American, queer, woman, etc. and how these identities interact with those of the research participants is a part of this undertaking. Therefore, it was important to explore how my and the participant’s physical, psychological, and spiritual bodies interacted throughout the interview process. The complexities of this interaction impacted how the researcher and participant experienced connection during the interview and throughout the research relationship. As a part of this reflexive practice, I conducted autobiographical inquiries through journaling. These autobiographical inquiries are reflexive practice, data, and an illustration of how I, as the researcher, am traversing multiple selves (e.g.
researcher, student, partner, sister, daughter, friend) (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Clandinin & Huber, in press).

**Reflexivity Journals**

Janesick (1999) describes journaling as a comprehensive and critical method in qualitative research that can act as: a) a practice of refining the role of the researcher through reflection; b) a method for refining and understanding of the participant’s responses; c) a tool for communication and interaction between the researcher and participant; and d) an art of cultivating and strengthening one’s reflective patterns and understanding of self. The author suggests researchers use journaling as a method to gain clarity of their thought and psychological processes and as a form of member-checking themselves—as researchers are too part of their own study. Journaling is a particularly important method in this study, as it allowed me to explore my positionality within the research context (Del Busso, 2007). I journaled after each interview to process my reactions during the interview and to both reflect and reflex on my positionality with the research participant. I chose a title for each journal entry based on the major themes I noticed during the interview. I also read articles on reflexivity and included the literature in some of the journals to support critical thinking throughout the reflexive process. I continued to journal following the interviewing phase of the study to maintain my connection to participants and practice reflexivity.

**Analysis**

As narrative inquiry does not presume a method of analysis before data is collected, I did not discover my analysis until I gathered all the texts. During this gathering stage, I followed the process outlined in Clandinin (2013) where I: co-composed field texts with the participant, transcribed the interviews and gathered the remaining additional field texts, negotiated with the
participant and co-composed the interim texts, and lastly move toward creating the final research texts. This process was complex and included many unexpected turns, beginning with a global pandemic. Some of the complexity was also due to my mental health and capacity to maintain connections with participants while managing grief and burnout. Furthermore, applying for multiple grants to fund the arts-based representation of the narratives added a challenging layer to the work.

While co-composing interim texts, I emailed each participant to notify them I completed the transcriptions. It was communicated to the participants they did not have to review their transcripts or contribute to the project beyond their initial interviews if they chose not to. 2 participants of the 5 I interviewed agreed to review their transcripts. Following the completion of the interpretive narratives I contacted all 5 participants to assess if they would like to read the texts and provide feedback. Four of the participants agreed to read the texts and further our co-construction of the narratives.

Narrative inquiry relies upon different criteria than validity, reliability, and generalizability to determine the quality of analysis and representation (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Instead, it uses the richness of “narrative explanation” as a criterion of narrative quality which comprises the whole of “events as lived” and “events as told” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 7) within an invitational explanatory narrative. However, the ingredients of a “good” invitational and explanatory narrative are debatable across types of narrative inquiry and scholarship. Therefore, to determine the ingredients of a good invitational explanatory narrative I had to first determine the analysis that would yield these results. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state “…it is important to be conscious of the end as the inquiry begins” (p. 7) which reminded me
to return to the epistemological frameworks of this dissertation and reclaim a black feminist narrative interpretation of the texts.

Through gathering the transcriptions, interview notes, and journals I realized these stories would not tell themselves linearly or neatly—therefore, my analysis had to create space for the intricacies of storytelling, time/space-jumping, and (re)memory. I also thought through what I needed and hoped for throughout this dissertation process. Rituals, prayers, and the ideals of going back to something farther and larger held these texts together. I poured over the ingredients Evans-Winters (2018) uses in her exploration of Black feminism, qualitative inquiry, and narrative work for my analytical foundation.

She states, “Black feminist thought in qualitative analysis: (1) proffers a social critique of traditional research paradigms and tralatitious interpretations of social relationships; (2) fosters dialogue for understanding unmitigated power and privilege; and (3) strategically agitates the status quo,” (Evans-Winters, 2018, p.19). To add to this, Evans-Winters (2018) states qualitative research analysis can “show how data analysis can also be soul work to heal thyself and (un)willing participants,” (p.7); inscribe freedom in the data analysis process via “conversations with the ancestors, deliberations with elders, ritual and ceremony, rite of passages, youth-centered pedagogy, and even the rejection of Eurocentric western notions of time and space,” (p.9); and craft scholarship that is “culturally affirming and forthcoming as far as socio political intent,” (p.9). I borrow from her work these intentions in my data analysis process, weaving together the elements of Black narrative tradition and feminist epistemology to create rich interpretive narratives that explore some part of the whole.
Transcription

Analysis was an interpretive process that formally began with the transcription of the interviews and evolved across interpretation and representation. I listened to each of the interviews before transcription. Following this, I listened to the audio recorded interviews, slowing, pausing, circling back, and editing over weeks during the transcription process. The interviews were transcribed and discussed with participants in ongoing communications and member checking. Therefore, the transcriptions themselves are an ongoing process which are part of the “narrative record” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 5). Interpretation of the field texts was an iterative process that began the moment the participant and I made contact as we co-constructed our experience and storying, and contexts.

The process of transcribing interviews, translating one medium of data into another was tricky and fraught with concerns about how the “truth” of data is maintained in written format. During the transcribing and interpretation of the data, I continued to draw upon Black feminist epistemology weaving our dialogue alongside field observations of non-verbal information and my journals to produce the interpretive narratives. As I worked with the narratives, I embraced the “knowledge grounded in bodily sensations” and leaned into the messiness, unapologetic and subjective “complexities of knowledge production” (Ellingson, 2012, p. 530). This mosaic of complexities is composed of field observations, journals, and my current reactions to writing the interpretive narratives which are all woven into the narrative.

From Transcript to Interpretive Narrative/Endarkened Storywork

Evans-Winters (2019) writes about the elements of sympathy, empathy, and respect in Black feminist qualitative inquiry and storying. As these elements are important to me, I strove to engage in a methodology and analysis which carefully held “the liminal space between
vulnerability and resistance” (Evans-Winters, 2019, p. 70) where African American women often story and create. To do so, in my analysis I traveled between theories of endarkened feminism, Black intersectional feminist inquiry, and narrative inquiry. These travels resulted in interpretive narratives/endarkened storywork. I use the slash intentionally here, because interpretive narrative is placed within the framework of narrative inquiry, whereas endarkened storywork is situated within endarkened feminist epistemology (EFE) (Dillard, 2000), Indigenous Storywork (ISW) (Archibald, 2008), and Afrofuturism (Womack, 2013).

Formal analysis began with a review of endarkened feminist epistemology and an exploration of Endarkened Storywork. Toliver (2022) asserts EFE “requires us to return to our roots, to our communities, and to ourselves when we’ve been taught to leave our histories at the academic door of no return,” (Toliver, 2022, p. xvii.) Toliver believes this is no easy task within academia, and it requires a lot of unlearning and resistance to institutional seductions to story damage-centered narratives. Toliver (2022) expounds, EFE is a theoretical reclamation of culture, history, and spirituality in Black storytelling tradition which honors “alternative ways of thinking about, doing, and writing scholarship,” (p. Xv). In response to EFE’s call, Toliver (2022) offers Endarkened Storywork which creates space to honor the griots and histories of storytelling which preexisted academia and the many hybridizations of expression and storying across present and future possibilities.

Endarkened Storywork can take many forms across genre and ancestry which inspires me to find culturally responsive and creative formats to co-create interpretive texts which stay close to the heart, spirit, and body of these narratives. Although the questions in the interview were grounded in EFE, I wanted to ensure the analysis was also explicitly grounded in EFE. Therefore, I returned to the research puzzle to determine which questions I wanted to ask the
texts and how I wanted to ask them. I used endarkened feminist epistemology to formulate three specific questions to analyze the transcripts. 1. How is transgenerational trauma transmission (re)named in the texts? 2. How is transgenerational trauma transmission (re)membered in the texts? 3. How is transgenerational trauma transmission (re)storied in the texts? To further deconstruct the narratives through an endarkened feminist framework I re-read the transcripts with and transposed the portions of the transcript which responded to these questions to an analysis document. In this document, I used Dillard’s (2012) definitions of (re)naming, (re)memory/cultural memory, and (re)storying to analyze the text. Additionally, I expanded the (re)memory analysis to specifically analyze the structural, political, and representation components of intersectionality within the participant’s cultural memory.

As a part of the deconstruction of the transcript for analysis and reconstruction of the text into interpretive narrative, I read McCormack’s (2000) “From Interview Narrative to Interpretive Story: Part I-Viewing the Transcript through Multiple Lenses” and “From Interview Transcript to Interpretive Story: Part 2-Developing an Interpretive Story” to develop my analytical memo which guided my analysis. This process provided structure for the active listening of the interview, analysis of the interview and reflexivity journals, and interpretation of the interview. McCormack (2000) describes this process as “looking at interview transcripts through multiple lenses: active listening, narrative processes, language, context, and moments, then using the views highlighted by these lenses to write interpretive stories,” (p. 282). This process fit seamlessly with endarkened feminist analysis and includes two stages—using the multiple lens and developing the stories from the highlighted components produced from the lens (McCormack 2000).
In the first stage, I followed the active listening process outlined in McCormack's (2000) part 1 where I reconnected with the story, reconnected with the storyteller, and reflected on my positioning to the conversation. In the second step, I identified the “narrative processes of the storyteller” (McCormack, 2000, p.285) or the (re)storying which entailed exploring the mechanism of the storytelling (i.e., how did they tell the story, when did they tell it, with whom did they share it, what meaning did they create from it). In the third step, I focused on the languaging or (re)naming within the story (i.e., frequently used words, specialized vocabulary, phrasing, repetitions, pauses/silences, and perspectives of self and other). In the fourth step, I focused on the context and moments or the (re)memory (i.e., what were the experiences of structural (systemic)/political/sociocultural (representational) traumas). Lastly, in the second stage, I transferred the highlighted text from my analyses and reconstructed the interpretive narratives weaving my journals (which underwent the same analysis) and observation notes into the final narrative. By combining endarkened feminism and interpretive narrative as an analytical tool for the reconstruction of the stories I represented the co-created experience of transgenerational trauma transmission through (re)naming, (re)memory, and (re)storying as endarkened storywork.

**Representation**

I arrived at the current representation of interviews, notes, and journals by returning to the intentions of Black feminist epistemology in qualitative inquiry. I was faced with both a practical and ethical concern in my decision to use interpretive narrative as the representation of these stories. My hope was (and still is) to co-facilitate an arts-based representation of the co-constructed narratives where the participants determine how their stories are shared with our communities. I applied for three separate grants to receive funding for this endeavor, however, I
have not yet been successful. In recent conversations with participants, we are exploring options for representation that are funded through the collectives of our communities. I still hold hope the participants and I will return to these narratives and create representation which reaches our intended audience—other African American women.

Due to the limitations of this dissertation, however, it was important I find a form of representation which portrayed the richness of the participants’ stories and met the deadlines of my academic institution. This decision, though practical, has ethical implications. Due to the deadlines of this dissertation, I had limited time to consult with the participants about the interpretive narratives. Therefore, participants were able to review the narratives 1 to 2 times, and plans were made for future reviews and creative outlets. At this time, participants were able to read the interpretive narratives once and provide suggestions and feedback before the narratives were included in chapter 4. To support the narratives, I used Black feminist epistemology, reflexivity, and embodiment to guide an ethical construction of the interpretive narratives.

Throughout the creation of the narratives, it was essential I recognize the history of “institutionalized voyeurism and exploitation” of African American women’s experiences (Evans-Winters, 2018, p.117) and resist the urge to reproduce representations focused solely on damage. I reminded myself the purpose of the interpretive texts is to uphold “narrative voice” (Evans-Winters, 2018, p. 23) through rich explanatory and invitational stories which “paint a picture of Black women’s perceptions of the social world order and how they might choose to respond to such (dis) order” (Evans-Winters, 2018, p. 23) across generations. I allowed literary ancestors such as Dillard (2000) guide me in staying rooted in research as responsibility. In each interpretive narrative I asked, who am I responsible to in this story and how can I be responsible
with this story? These questions kept me steadfast and honest to both the goal of these interpretive interpretations and to the ethical responsibility of misinterpretation and misrepresentation in my role as researcher/narrative inquirer/storyteller-listener/interpreter.

**Ethical Considerations**

Narrative inquiry is a powerful methodology which allows researchers and participants to engage, experience, and learn together. The power of this form of inquiry implies great care of the ethical considerations in this research. Clandinin (2006) states:

> For those of us wanting to learn to engage in narrative inquiry, we need to imagine ethics as being about negotiation, respect, mutuality, and openness to multiple voices. We need to learn how to make these stories of what it means to engage in narrative inquiry dependable and steady. We must do more than fill out required forms for institution research ethics boards. (p.52)

Narrative inquiry’s relational focus has potential ethical pitfalls. Whenever I think of this study and what it means to collect stories which entail sensitive topics, I think of my grandmothers and how they would never tell the stories they’ve told me to a “researcher”. I understand the ethical responsibilities of research as communal and relational, which means I apply the same care, attention, and respect to these stories as I do my own. Therefore, as a part of this study, I use autobiographical inquiry through journaling as a space to tell my own narrative of transgenerational trauma and engage in reflexivity. In an effort to show empathy, respect, and mutuality, I embark on my own journey of telling and re-telling my experiences, despite my confusion, misunderstandings, and the shaking of my internal world.

Relating to the participants was complex and the reality of the researcher role infused more distance than I desired. Yet, within the nuances of researcher-participant relationship, there
were also moments of woman to woman, person to person, and witness to testimony. I discussed my desires for the project, that the participants be a part of this project throughout the entire research process if they chose. They shared with me their desires for what they hoped this project would do—become an audiobook, a dance, a performance. I discussed with them, this part, the formal object of the academic institution, the dissertation and article side of representation. We agreed we wanted different, better, but there were things we did not anticipate.

One participant was surprised at how much she shared and the ensuing feelings of embarrassment and vulnerability with me. Another participant hoped we could sit in her home and drink tea, but our only option was zoom or a meeting room in the library. She did not return for her second interview, and I often wondered if how much space and place contributed to our disconnection. In undergoing this process, I didn’t know how exhausting it would feel to go on internship while transcribing narratives, to have life disrupted by grief/loss, and wrestle constantly with the absence of community during a persistent pandemic. Thus, ethical dilemmas felt present in the very nature of sharing stories across physical distance and confusing times. Especially, when a persistent pandemic impacted our sociocultural paradigm of relationship, closeness, and vulnerability.

**Relationality**

One of the primary ethical dilemmas of this study is relationality. I invite readers into an understanding of relationality which differs from the bioethical framework of positivist research in the social sciences. My conceptualization of relationality, grounded in the literature of researcher relationships in anthropological and ethnographic fieldwork, arises from the understanding that ethical dilemmas of relationality are inescapable and should be recognized “as an extension of the dilemmas confronted by being a human engaging with other humans” (Bell,
Second, I invite readers to engage with the concept of relational entanglement and dual roles between researcher and participants as natural to research which prioritizes responsibility to community and, therefore, responsibility to participants. Thus, the research process in terms of informed consent, data collection, and representation are impacted by relationality which require ethical consideration and proactivity.

To address relationality, I first raised awareness of the possibility of dual roles with research participants by asking participants what they envisioned and expected of the research relationship. As this project is rooted in Black feminist epistemology, I was transparent about my intentions to be responsible to the participants and our shared communities as African American women. Thus, the participants and I were aware of the possibility of long-term connection in our relationship, and I used reflection, reflexivity, and member checking to navigate the boundaries of the researcher participant relationship. Some assumptions of dual roles I considered with participants were participants may desire interaction outside of the researcher/participant relationship and/or research project; participants may want to follow-up after the interview and/or want participation in the representation of the data. These possibilities were presented to participants in the informed consent and in ongoing conversations. In doing so, I hoped to limit objectification and unforeseen invasions to privacy in the research project due to potential dual roles or relational entanglement. In addressing these factors proactively and transparently, I also intended to make space for rapport and responsibility in the researcher/participant relationship (Bell, 2019).

**Reflexivity**

One way I attended to ethical relationality in this research was by applying reciprocity and reflexivity as methodological tools (Huisman, 2008; Pillow, 2015). When I began this
research project, I had conflicting theoretical views of reflexivity. My plan was to use reflexivity as a tool of ongoing reflection and self-investigation with the expectation of reciprocity. I also intended to problematize my positionality as an effort to respond to ethical dilemmas and enact transparency. However, it was not until I was working with reflexivity by returning to different articles, journaling, and analyzing those journals, I began to understand the limitations of reflexivity and reciprocity as methodological tools. In this section, I hold both—the ideals of reciprocity and the complexities of reflexivity.

Reciprocity is grounded in the belief that researchers and participants have mutual shared power and research should be equally beneficial to researchers and participants. Researchers use reciprocity to challenge traditional practices in research which prioritize the needs of institutions, stakeholders, etc. over the needs of participants and communities. Reciprocity does not arise organically within the research relationship, rather it is an explicit practice of “doing research with instead of on” (Pillow, 2003, p. 179) and involves listening to participants, and equalizing data collection and representation processes. When I initiated the research process with participants, I discussed my values as a researcher and how I wanted us to collaborate on a narrative where they felt empowered to share what they thought would be helpful to other African American women.

I asked the participants what they would like for their stories to do, where they would like for them to go, and how they wanted to be represented. I asked these questions to meet the ethical ideal of mutuality in the research participant relationship. However, I was aware of the limitations in conducting relational research within the institutional requirements for a doctoral degree. I could not hold the interviews in a space which felt most comfortable to the participants and, contact, as I left Memphis and started internship, became sparser. So, I asked the questions,
I initiated the relationship, and still, I as the researcher who holds the participants consent to the research process have power and therefore benefits more than the participant at certain points in this process. As mentioned above, I am holding both—the ideal of reciprocity which continues to motivate me to maintain connection and communication with participants and apply for grant funding for this project alongside the reality of the inherently imbalanced researcher participant systems relationship. I balance the ethical nuances of this process by using reflexivity throughout the research project.

Reflexivity is the concept researchers should intentionally reflect about their subjectivity, by questioning and analyzing their positionality and power within the context of their research. For the purposes of this study, I used Pillow’s (2003; 2015) definition of reflexivity and Pillow’s (2015) explication of reflexivity as interpretation and genealogy to frame reflexivity in this study. Quoting Elizabeth Chiserti-Strater (1996), Pillow (2015) explains reflexivity requires an “other” and an explicit awareness of the process of self-inquiry and critique. She adds, reflexivity is “a process of critical reflection both on the kind of knowledge produced from research and how that knowledge is generated (p.130),” (p. 422). Pillow (2015) uses the term “the wake” as a metaphor for reflexivity, describing reflexivity as a “critical act of 'standing' in the present while critically reflecting on past experience; a temporal positionality; a critical and political location exposed in writing that reflects on the impact of experience with reflexivity as a way to unpack the teller's complicity in that experience," (p. 422). Below, I offer a few excerpts from my research journal to portray how I engaged with reflexivity throughout the research process.

June 25th, 2021

Journal Title: Catharsis, Interpretation, & Interruption

I title things because they give me direction, structure, and understanding. This is my first autobiographical/autoethnographical self-inquiry—my first reflexivity journal. After the
incredible amount of time it has taken to have this project approved through IRB, I found myself anxious and a little tired to begin. I have been anticipating the moment of "beginning" the work, of interviewing and connecting and dreaming for so long I felt my dissertation had finished itself before it begun. Meaning, I had so many ideas of what it could be, had done so much work convincing others of what it could be that by the time it came down to sit across from another person and share I felt well, lost.

Before the first interview I revisited Pillow's (2015) analysis of reflexivity. It was grounding. I have not lost the sense that this project is intended for my fellow community of African American women. And Pillow (2015) reminded me my participants and I and our assumed shared community via identity are not monoliths and maybe not connected but somehow connected through the concept of identity.

After re-reading Pillow and a few other scholars, I have to re-write my section on reflexivity, journaling, and ethics. I need to be more explicit about what I am doing and how and why. Catharsis. Pillow (2105) critiques reflexivity as catharsis which she defines as looking back on the self/selves in relation to [the other] in a manner that feels self-indulgent—sprial(ly). As someone who has journaled since the age of 8 I know the cathartic reflection/reflexivity well. I am not here to do that, (but what then am I here to do and why did I choose this—reflexivity as methodology again??) and it's happening.

I'm not sure I can escape catharsis or self-indulgence when so much of my existence necessitates the former and promotes the latter. The Doctoral journey, the study of the human experience is cathartic for me and well, a self-indulgent experience whether that experience be the egoic thrill of accolades or the egoic shrill of failure. I'm between both. My intention is to engage reflexivity as a methodological tool of critical self-reflection and self-reflexivity. I imagine some catharsis and self-indulgence will be a natural byproduct of this experience which may reflect who I am and how I am in this moment. I am trying to lean into the experience of reflexivity without over-editing and self-monitoring. I am under the watchful eye of the Royal Science/academy (Nordstrom, 2017) therefore, some monitoring and editing is always present in my Researcher self/selves. To borrow from for now, in Pillow (2015) my application of reflexivity requires, "critical awareness and attention to ontological, epistemological, and methodological constructs, discourses, and performances that occur across the research process," (p. 423).

Primarily I apply reflexivity as interpretation. I'm intentionally basing the dissertation on a critical ontology, intersectionality, and because of that using methodological which allow me to work through "suspicions" (Pillow, 2015, p 427) of research practice, self/ves, roles, methods, relationships, representations. It also allows me to assume there are known claims/truths that can be made about systemic issues such as race, class, gender, sex through experiences and stories and language. I use reflexivity to show that I am aware of my positions across power alongside the participants and us alongside the academy. I hope that this awareness helps create some understanding, reciprocity, and change. But I really don't know.

And this is how I also use reflexivity as genealogy which theoretically works better with a post-colonial feminist orientation—which is how I read endarkened feminism in some contexts. Because really reflexivity is uncomfortable, and reflexivity as genealogy means "interruptive of everything" though I don't know what that really means. I just know that if the witnessing is reflexivity as interpretation then the unsettling must be reflexivity as genealogy, and I am attempting to do both, which means I must attempt things I don't understand.
Perhaps this will make the research feel less congruent, more bumpy, but that is how it feels, and I think that's what I am trying to say and share—something honest about how it feels to do research (as an insider-outsider) with all the questions of how to be responsible to my community(ies) and get my degree and finish this thing. There's just tension. As I reflect on this process reflexively, I notice where I am positioned. Throughout this process my thoughts, feelings, and ideas have been filtered through bodies, committees, and institutions that have power over the ease, success, and trajectory of (this stage of my) career. Professors have read, marked, and approved/disproved everything I've written. Except in that private journaling space where I cathart—no one sees that (until now). At these points, I, identifying as a non-disabled, African American, cisgender, queer woman in my 3rd, 4th, and now 5th year of graduate school have not felt that powerful. Though I am, because maybe I can talk to communities they can't—have that edge on "access" to marginal spaces. It feels gross. It feels necessary.

Before I make it to the IRB the project is diluted. Academic. I wanted to step into people's homes (if they wanted me to) or invite them to mine. I felt, as an insider on some Black woman spaces that someone like my grandmother would not want to talk to a researcher, would not want someone to ask her questions about her life unless they had the integrity to step into her safe space and sit at her kitchen. I can see it, so much of her wisdom sprinkled in her cakes, coffee, and pies. As you take a slice, thinking of the awkwardness of this project, she'd be still, discerning you like she discerns her spices. I wanted to honor that.

But questions arose about safety. Whose? Mine? It was hard to fathom any space among Black women being unsafe or more uncomfortable for me than sitting in a classroom at the academy. But then a pandemic hit, and physical safety was no longer a question. What does being safe mean when the air between two people can kill you and the paradigm shift is large enough to make us all grapple on the edge of mental clarity.

After IRB I remind myself to do research that's responsible—that's it. And my responsibility is first to my integrity, my spirit of what feels right in this moment and then to the participants as a shared community. Third, to the royal academy, the people who get to say if my work for the past 5 years is worthwhile. I made the choice to use and cite African American women as the theoretical foundations of this study. I then chose, out of exhaustion and perhaps ease, to use narrative inquiry—a form of narrative inquiry that was not created by Black women, though I adapted it through the rich history of storytelling and witnessing to be a Black woman-centered methodology. Then I chose reflexivity as a methodological tool to enact transparency about how I am showing up in this project and process.

I can name my identities, talk about the power(less)ness I feel within the academy and the power(ful)ness I feel with the participants because I am an insider to the academy and some of them are not. Then, I am also witnessing the shared (power (ful)less (ness) of my shared identity with my participants as women, and African American though we may name narrate and experience those identities differently.

I know that my first recruitment calls felt awkward. I wanted to come off as comfortable though I was not. Words like "data" kept slipping from my lips. I recorrected to "story". Words like "interview" which, written down in the script make sense but said aloud do not feel like sharing or community, two things I want, at all. I tell the participants "you can stop at any time" "you don't have to answer anything you don't want to, because some things are sacred". I'm making assumptions and it feels as if I'm giving them permission to tell me "no" which again, the power, it's uncomfortable. Though I get the sense that they don't need me to give them anything, but that is likely my projection of what Black women are to me and who I am. Then I remember
I really wish people had not assumed I didn't need permission, because sometimes I'm afraid of hurting or disappointing them, and I do. I need permission to say no, even if I don't use it.

So after the first interview I'm in a space of catharsis, interpretation, and interruption. It went well, I think, I hope, and I am in a state of suspension, waiting for the next opportunity to witness. Participants have more power than we've assigned them. Then again, I am talking about them, but are they talking about me? And does taking the time to analyze something mean you have more or less power, or does it simply mean that in academia?

With this journal entry I am illustrating my work with reflexivity as an interpretive methodological tool. There are three components or ‘claims to knowledge’ when using reflexivity as interpretation (Pillow, 2015, p. 423). They are, “reflexive interpretation toward critical awareness and transformation; reflexive interpretation toward insights on power and privilege, and; reflexive interpretation toward understanding of researcher and subject self(ves),” (p.423) This method of reflexivity allows me to explore how I am complicit in systems of power and privilege across my researcher roles/selves. Additionally, this method explores researcher vulnerability which permits the questioning of my authority and authoring in the research relationship and process. Of course, engaging in this form of reflexivity also has its limitations. In the journal entry I ponder the idea of framing reflexivity as interpretation and genealogy. Some of my considerations of employing both forms of reflexivity is due to the limitations of reflexivity as interpretation.

One limitation of reflexivity as interpretation is it arises from an ontological standpoint which assumes there is a reality that can be known about the research and researcher-relationships (Pillow, 2015, p. 427). It also assumes that this reality can be changed by reflexivity. Another critique of reflexivity as interpretation, is the seduction of creating self-research which unfolds through miraculous “unveilings” that are somehow presented as helpful, beautiful, and true (Pillow, 2015, p. 424). Pillow (2015) and other scholars on reflexivity assert researchers must be reflexive about the limitations of reflexivity and the outcomes.
Pillow (2015) poses questions to help researchers conceptualize the “epistemological and ontological investments” (p.427) we are making and thus, what outcomes we hope to achieve through our research. I am onto epistemologically invested in exploring the phenomena of transgenerational trauma transmission through a critical perspective and unsettling the gaps and erasures of these experiences through theoretical and methodological reflexivity. Thus, I tease the edge of reflexivity as interpretation, which is critical, egalitarian –oriented, and explores biases, systems, etc. Simultaneously, I tease reflexivity as genealogy which, from an ontological standpoint, does not assume a reality can be known, “unsets all forms of knowing” and is focused on “affect, temporalities, and futurities,” (p. 427). I believe both types of reflexivity provide a vacillating frame with which to understand and interrogate researcher roles, research, and relationship itself.

**Representation**

Another ethical consideration is representation. Again, I think of my grandmothers. How would their idea of research re-present their stories? How would you hear the spunk in my grandmother’s words when she talked about the differences in skin color across the family members and how that came to be? How would you see the hunch in my grandmother’s shoulders as she talked about the children great grandma lost, because there was no colored hospital around for miles? But more importantly, how would you see them as people, African American women, yes, and complex with textured stories, but not crazy, not victims, and not survivors either? Consequently, how stories are gathered, why they are gathered, and how they are (re)presented are ethically equally important.

Though options for representing data are vast, I believe in order to be ethical, representation of these stories must include the embodiment of the participants and be accessible
to the participants. Representation should also comprise the experience of the researcher and participant which can be portrayed through autobiographical processes. This process acknowledges the power dynamic, illuminates the research process, and provides space for readers to notice the intentional of the representation. Being ethical means ensuring my research design is efficacious, my methods and representation portray a deep respect for the participants as persons. Conducting this study ethically entails I am sensitive to “boundaries and their power to marginalize” across the production, reproduction, and representation of this study (True, 2008). To demonstrate this sensitivity, during the informed consent I discussed many of the possibilities of researcher-participant relationships and explained the process of member-checking and involvement in the research process.

Member-checking with participants involved emailing them once interviews were transcribed and sending the transcriptions to those who wished to read them. Participants were also encouraged to make suggestions or comments to the participants regarding information they would like to include or exclude from the final representation of the transcripts. Participants were also contacted to review the interpretive narrative and co-create the final representation of their story in this text. Participants were also asked how they would like their stories to be represented in the second interview. I discussed my plans to receive grant funding and co-create arts-based representations of their narratives which could be used for a workshop for African American communities. Although interpretive story is the representation chosen for the dissertation, I continue to work with the participants to explore community oriented and arts-based representations of the narratives.
Conducting Rigorous Research

Due to the process and content of this research, it is important to ground the ethical standards in rigorous criteria. Qualitative researchers have developed their unique standards of rigor across disciplines. Scholars such as Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) assert qualitative researchers within the social sciences should measure rigor based on their confidence in the potential of the work to create policy and legislation or some form of social impact. Concepts such as validity, objectivity, and reliability as standards of ethics and rigor continue to evolve in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the 1990’s Lincoln and Guba (1986) proposed the use of criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as more appropriate frameworks for qualitative research. Credibility is a criterion which measures how well the study investigates the complexities of the phenomena within the context of its reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Reality, of course, is a complex concept in most qualitative studies due to the reliance on human beings as instruments of data collection and the onto-epistemological theories which ground the research. Within this, study credibility is established using multiple methods of data collection such as interviews, observation, and journals. Additionally, participants consented to a member checking process which two of the interviewees participated in. These strategies are meant to minimize misinterpretation of the participants’ experiences and establish trustworthiness in the researcher’s integrity. Reflexivity is also another strategy related to credibility by focusing on the researcher’s integrity and “articulate and clarify their assumptions, experiences, and worldview,” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 249).

Reliability is another important criterion of validity within quantitative research. In qualitative research Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to reliability as dependability, or the extent to
which the data collected is consistent with the results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An important method for establishing dependability is creating an audit trail. Throughout this study, I maintained procedural memos and analytical memos which track, in detail, my process of data collection, data management, and decision-making regarding analysis and representation. This process also includes changes made throughout analysis to ensure there is a transparent record of the research process.

Lastly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss the quality of transferability as a criterion of rigor in qualitative research. The process of qualitative research does not fit the concept of generalizability as a measure of external validity. Instead, the concept of transferability responds to multiple aspects of external validity—one question being does the study provide sufficient description such that one can transfer aspects of the research into a different study and two, can the readers extrapolate meaning from the content which applies to other topics, groups, or experiences? I engage with transferability by providing a detailed explanation of my methodology, methods, and analytical process in chapter four.

Summary

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of transgenerational trauma transmission in African American women. Alongside participants, I co-constructed narratives through interviews and autobiographical inquiry. Then, I created interpretive narratives as endarkened storywork for the readers to engage reflexively with these powerful stories about the cultural, social, and systemic/structural experiences of transgenerational trauma.
Chapter 4: Findings

“The ultimate intent is to show how data analysis can also be soul work that serves to heal thyself and (un)willing participants.” - Venus Evans-Winters

When the Research Puzzle Becomes a Mosaic

The findings of this dissertation represent the beautiful messy process of “playing with data in the dark” (Evans-Winters, 2019, p. 7). This study was purposed in unsettling and witnessing the cultural transmission of transgenerational trauma with African American women. I began the research with a research puzzle, however, as I searched for more pieces alongside participants, I realized the pieces were never meant to fit, and the assumptions of a research puzzle no longer fit the needs of the narratives. Instead, I arrive at a research mosaic of endarkened storywork, where each piece, patterned and disparate story exist as single entities and as a part of a larger myriad whole. Throughout this process, I excavated parts of myself that needed witnessing and learned from the authenticity and courage of each participant. They witnessed me in states of vulnerability and power, and I witnessed them in states of vulnerability and power. We shared through the process of text messages, emails (which were end-to-end encrypted to protect their anonymity), and member checking. We continued conversations about our hopes for representing the study far after the recorder left our relationship.

In this chapter, I hope to illuminate the process of witnessing and unsettling transgenerational trauma with incredible research participants through interpretive narrative/endarkened storywork. I briefly describe the participants and offer a guide for reading the interpretive narratives as endarkened storywork. Then, I offer the interpretive narratives as mosaics of the social, political, and cultural experiences of transgenerational trauma transmission.
Description of the Participants

All the participants were recruited during the first round of convenience sampling. They all met the selection criteria and were at least 18 years old, identified as cisgender, transgender women or nonbinary femmes. They were born and raised in the Midsouth region of the United States, and had parents born and raised in the MidSouth of the United States. They also knew plenty of family stories and enjoyed storytelling. Lauren Ashley was the first participant to agree to the study. She is a 49-year-old African American cisgender woman who describes her social economic class as upper middle class. She was born and raised in Mississippi and lives in Middle Tennessee. She heard about the study through a relative of mine, and after connecting on the phone we scheduled the interviews and began. She was easy to connect to and she punctuated her stories with a direct tone and sense of humor. She’s an educator and she believe deeply in giving back to her community and uplifting others.

S was the second participant. We met through a mutual friend after she saw my flyer on social media. She was excited during our first phone call, and her enthusiasm was infectious. She is 27 years old, and her gender identity fluctuates between woman and nonbinary. She is African American and describes her social economic class as “cog in the capitalist machine.” She was born and raised in West Tennessee. S knows a lot of stories, and her connection with her grandparents is close. She’s an artist, a poet, and a lover of animals. N was the third participant. We met through social media after I posted my flyer. We had some difficulty scheduling our interview due to her schedule, but she was open and willing to share her experiences with me. She is 25 years old, and she identifies as a cisgender woman. She describes herself as “a Black woman exploring self day by day.” She was born and raised in Arkansas, and lives in Tennessee. She’s an artist and self-described radical.
BB was the fourth participant. She saw my flyer on a relative’s social media page. She is a 28-year-old cisgender woman. She identifies as African American and West Indian. She described her social class as working class and self-employed. She grew up in Georgia and currently lives in Florida. She’s an influencer on social media and has a deep interest in psychology and the workings of the mind. IN was the fifth and final participant. We knew each other through a mutual friend, so when she saw my post on Instagram we connected. She is a 27-year-old African American woman. She doesn’t subscribe to constructs like social economic class. She was born and raised in Louisiana and lives in Florida. She’s wise beyond her years, and you can hear the ancestors in her voice.

**Reading Interpretive Narrative as Endarkened Storywork**

In congruence with the goals of this project, it is important to continuously unsettle the researching and representation of transgenerational trauma transmission. These narratives are an act of this unsettling and witnessing as “(re)memberance” (Dillard, 2016, p. 17). (Re)memberance is used intentionally to signify how these stories piece together members—members of our lineage, spiritual identities, cultural spaces, and internal longings. (Re)membering is a putting back together “a radical response to our individual and collective fragmentation at the cultural, spiritual, and material levels,” (p. 17). Thus, these interpretive narratives are offerings of (re)memberance, and endarkened epistemology is the altar. Drawing from Toliver’s (2022) endarkened storywork, I invite readers to exert the freedom to make their own mosaic and read the narratives one at a time, as single vignettes, or across research participants.

Toliver (2022) uses term alignments to discuss the arrangements she made to “(re)member the work of the story” (p.xxxi) and resist forcing the stories to fit with the
theoretical and methodological constraints of academic research. As you read the interpretive narratives, I offer some intentions to support your connection to the altar of endarkened storywork and encourage the adjustments you need to make to best hold space for these stories.

1. Center community. Think and feel through how community is experienced in these narratives and how you are in community with these narratives. As you read, I invite you to connect with self and communal care to stay grounded and present with your mind/body/spirit. 2. Center responsibility. Think and feel through how responsibility is experienced in these stories and how you are responsible to interpretation and storying of these narratives. What reactions do you have to responsibility—and responsibility to people/communities you are/are not connected to? How can you think through these narratives differently? 3. Acknowledge subjectivity. I invite you to address your own reflections and reflexivity as you investigate the dimensions of relationality with the participants. Which stories do you connect to and why? Where and when do you react the strongest or not at all? Where are you positioned in relation to these stories? 4. Honor spirituality. Whether or not you identify as spiritual, what do you connect to as sacred? How do you experience these stories differently when viewed as a part of the sacred tradition of storytelling? What ritual do you conduct as a story listener in a sacred process?

Lauren Ashley: Research Participant 1

June 18, 2021

I was ear hustling as a kid

Lauren stories with laughter. She is clear and concise, and she stories her experiences as if she’s told her story many times before. I feel in some moments like a mentee of her life, as she shifts between “I” pronouns and “you” pronouns I see the teacher in her and the preacher. I witness her testimony from the pews of my zoom window. At times, I laugh. Other times, I feel a
heaviness in my chest she doesn’t seem to carry. The first story Lauren shares with me is about the stories she heard growing up. She describes herself as a an “ear hustling” kid, who around age 10 or 11 would gather with her cousins at her aunts and grandmother’s house to listen to the adults. As she shares this story, she paints what I imagine as a house full of love and laughter where the children eat together in the sunroom and the adults cook, talk, and eat in the dining and living areas. The stories, however, were not always light. Lauren recalls hearing a lot of stories regarding the failed relationships among the women in the family. The women often divorced and never remarried, which Lauren believes affected their mental health and sense of self-worth.

Lauren believes self-worth and confidence must be located within oneself, it’s what allows a person to be strong and stay centered.

She reflects, “there was something huge that I noticed as I got older and wanted to be married and I think a part of me wanting to be married at a certain point in my life was because I didn’t want to be like, they are—all by themselves.” I ask Lauren how she reacted to hearing those stories as a child and seeing the impact these experiences had on her family’s mental health. She answers with another story, a memory of her own as a child where she witnessed violence in her parents’ marriage. There were more memories too, memories of friends who looked unrecognizable after being subjected to a man’s violence. She doesn’t volunteer an emotion, but her voice is crisp when she says “never ever will I tolerate a man putting his hands on me. So yeah, my initial response was basically, yeah, that’s not gonna be my life.” She shares more about her beliefs of marriage and relationships with men. Her stories, and her family’s stories have made it difficult to trust and let her emotional guard down with potential romantic partners, but her stories have also given her implicit trust in herself and her faith in God. She chose a path of celibacy over 10 years ago, and for her that was a pivotal moment in affirming
her faith and value in her relationship with herself. I ask her about those stories of trust and distrust. “What does safety mean in relationships?” She laughs. The laugh sounds more like a guffaw. Her safety is the bullet she keeps in the chamber.

**Uh, I would say 50% mess, 50% so now we gotta help her get it together with these kids**

One thing I notice about Lauren is her directness. It could be the difference in our age or interpersonal styles, but I’m not asking as many follow up questions. She’s concise and so we move at a pace that feels natural but doesn’t quite stick to any part of her stories for long. It wasn’t until later when writing my journal, I realized my assumptions that she’d processed these life events before. In the clarity and tone of her storytelling I didn’t ask about what wasn’t there, and I didn’t follow through on what I wasn’t feeling or seeing. She tells me laughingly her directness is a trait reflective of her family dynamic. When I ask her for details, she describes stories often told with “harsh words out of habit” stating the family would come together with these stories to be 50% “messy” and 50% supportive of whomever needed it. The stories were blunt, often communicated without much compassion. Still, Lauren remembers two of her aunts playing an important role in holding space for these difficult but supportive conversations.

One aunt in particular, the youngest aunt closest to the cousins in her generation was usually the listening ear for them as they grew up. This aunt was the favorite in the family and Lauren recounted her aunt as close with everybody. The conversations would happen spontaneously with her and she always tried to be supportive. Lauren remembers the second oldest aunt as well. This aunt had a different style. Lauren recounts the second oldest aunt in particular would usually use a story from a past experience to relay a message to them. She remembers these stories as being supportive with the intent to help someone, and not coming from an intent to harm. I ask Lauren how she responded to these stories then, with the stories that
were messy or harsh. She recounts having attitude and funneling her anger to call out those she felt were hypocritical or responsible. She declares, “I was always the devil’s advocate in conversations.” As she says this, I can see the pleasure she took in that role and we both laugh. As she grew older, though, she received feedback about being harsh and realized she could be guarded or corrosive with her words, especially towards men. She pauses, as she thinks about the most important men in her life, her sons. She regrets the habit of harsh words she used with them. The tone of our conversation is more somber as she talks about parenting as a young mother and the wishes she has for her children. “Sometimes by the time you know better, it’s too late and the damage is already done.” In her voice I hear a ring of acceptance. I interpret Lauren as understanding her limitations at each stage in her life regardless of what she might want to do-over.

Well we call it the generational curse of not being married

I ask Lauren how the women in her family story their experiences and what’s changed in how stories are told in her family. She responds, “I don’t think they ever really looked at it generational, even if they did, I think the biggest problem is that you know, back in the day it was deal with it, don’t necessarily talk about it...” Lauren proceeds with an example. As she speaks, her voice is clear and loud. She was a young mother, and her mother was a young mother. Her mother didn’t have a conversation with her about how she became pregnant young and what she went through. She simply told her to wait until she was married to have sex. Lauren and her cousins talk about their relationships and their parents' relationships. They call it “the generational curse of not being married.” Lauren says this with laughter. She describes the conversations among her cousins usually the women and some of the men. They talk about how they deal with rejection; they laugh, they drink. The conversation among the cousins is joking,
but sometimes sad. They don’t just talk about themselves, they talk about their mothers too and self-isolation, lack of self-care, and pushing themselves in their careers...what she describes as the depression her family didn’t have the words for then. They use this storying to voice their struggles, to understand their parents, and to figure out their balance.

This is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. You can’t treat yourself like this. You can’t allow yourself to be treated like this

At this point we are in the middle of the interview. Lauren is leaning closer to the screen, and she has taken off her glasses. “What are some hard/stressful/painful experiences that have happened in your life related to being an African American woman?” She doesn’t hesitate to respond. “I would say the rejection piece, oh for sure.” She delves into her relationship background and her desire to create a fate different from the women in her family. She didn’t marry a man but became more dedicated to her faith. Her tone doesn’t change as she talks about her relationship with God, and yet there is something more impassioned in her speech. She tells me her faith broke her open and helped her to reflect on the person she’d become and not all of it was nice. As she reflects on the rejection other women in her family experienced in their life, she uses words like “allow” and “choose” conveying a sense of autonomy in her decisions. She believes self-confidence and worth are at the core of healing her generational patterns and making different decisions than her foremothers. For her, believing her body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit is one of the first steps. “I asked God to show me, me, and He showed me that I was just like my daddy.” I look at Lauren in that moment, taking in my body’s reaction to her statement. The therapist, or researcher, or human being arises as I question, “Wow, how did you feel about that?” “Oh that definitely hurt because it was true and I knew it,” she said. Lauren reveals how a sermon sparked a lot of these revelations in her life. The hard work of healing her
heart exposed anger, hurt, and regret. It changed her communication style, for the most part, and it led to apologies, mostly to her children. She wanted her children to know why she communicated how she did and to acknowledge how it impacted them. “I didn’t like seeing the same things repeated,” she asserted.

So I tend to find I share my experiences more with those young girls trying to get them to see

Throughout our conversation, Lauren affirms her faith in God and her belief in the power of choice. She shares her story with her students, especially young women. She hopes to inspire reflection and insight with the students so they can re-evaluate their values, purpose, and goals. Lauren doesn’t share her story with everyone, however. She’s selective, but she also knows when God is calling her to be open with someone who might benefit from hearing her story. Because of this, it’s allowed her to have a closer relationship with herself and the other women in her life. As she talks about this, more pieces of her story unfold. She reflects on the difficulty of being a single young black woman with a child and her deep drive to avoid becoming a teenage pregnancy statistic. “I was determined for my kids not to be as poor as I was growing up...having to live in communities that were dangerous.” She has 5 degrees now and she recounts how her struggles influence her value of giving back to her community. She speaks of community, of seeking guidance from her elders, and God as the sources which keep her compass of fulfillment pointing in the right direction. Prayer. Reading the word. Being in silence. Lauren lists her practices succinctly. It’s how she keeps herself afloat and striving. It also reminds her of her intrinsic value, right to self-nourishment, and inherent self-worth.
Generational Dysfunction

I ask Lauren how she names the experiences we’ve talked about today. She responds “generational dysfunction.” Lauren defines generational dysfunction as a combination of habits, behaviors, and beliefs that are handed down throughout generations which can cause dysfunction in our lives. She adds, “I think it is a combination of experiences that you have to have to become who you’re going to become to think the way that you’re gonna think.” I take in her definition sifting through my own reactions at the fated sense of her words. Lauren continues to work thought the definition processing her thoughts aloud. “...it doesn’t have to stay dysfunction if you choose to do something different with it...”

Whether I make it or not, you’re gonna finish

We arrive at the last question with only minutes until the 2nd hour of the interview. I ask, “Is there anything you want me to know that I didn’t ask about? Anything I should have asked about but didn’t?” Lauren gifts me her last story of the interview about a time when her mother became ill just as she was beginning her PhD program, and about other times when she lost students and friends. “I wanna be able to feel like I---I feel like I should feel when certain things happen,” she says calmly. I didn’t ask her how her experiences impacted her emotionally. Or maybe I asked feeling questions, but I didn’t follow up when she offered her thoughts to my questions instead of emotion words. She feels hurt, but she doesn’t always cry. She explains sometimes there’s an emotional detachment to the losses in her life, because there have been so many losses without nearly enough time to pause and process and so much she’s had to take care of on her own. She tells me this, storying in first person voice and second person voice, what working 18 hours out of a 24-hour day can do to a person, and what having to grieve so much for so long can take away. “Over time I’ve become numb to those things, and I just keep it moving.”
When her mother became ill Lauren called her at the hospital during her orientation for the doctoral program. It was cancer. Terminal. Her mother told her “Whether I make it or not, you’re gonna finish.” And she didn’t make it—it was the first time she didn’t make it and still, Lauren finished. The grief of losing her mother demanded pause, a long, hard pause, and that day Lauren wept.

**July 17, 2021**

_I was like see, this the crazy foolishness I’m talking about_

The energy of the second interview is lighter, perhaps more spacious. We arrive on zoom, on time, and flow into the conversation easily. I feel gratitude for the opportunity to connect again and explore the nuances of her stories and hopes. I feel grateful for the honesty and vulnerability of our first interview. As I ask Lauren how she felt after our first interview and what it was like for her to share her stories with me, she laughs. “I actually went—I've gone to a wedding since then with my family and it made me think of the interview because I was laughing. I was like, see, this is the crazy foolishness I’m talking about!” Laughter is in her eyes as she says this, and I join in, feeling lightheartedness and joy in my chest. She continues, “Yeah, like this is exactly what I say here about my crazy family. You gotta love ‘em.” Lauren reflects more on our conversation last month, exploring what she calls “the blessings and curses that are passed down from generation to generation.” She speaks with her usual clarity, but something feels softer and more open in her language. It appears even in our conversations something has shifted in her perspective.

I was sitting with her term generational dysfunction since our last session and my reactions to the word dysfunction. When I spoke to my mother about my interview questions she called it “traumatic ignorance.” Both my mother and Lauren conceptualize the process of healing
similarly—it begins with awareness. Lauren elaborates on the importance of being aware of what carries across generations so we can determine what we don’t want to be and what we are, then choose to be different. She also draws strength from this perspective, adding we may find ourselves in circumstances that feel impossible until we look back and recognize there is someone who came before us who made it through. A word pops up in my head from West African philosophy and culture, Sankofa—the looking back to look forward.

**Equality Across the Board**

We delve into one of my favorite questions of the interview. “I’m wondering for you, what do you imagine as justice for African American women?” “Equality across the board,” she declares. Then adds, “Um, acknowledging our voice.” Without pause she continues to talk about the importance of mental health and how African American women are stereotyped as being aggressive. She passionately discusses how African American women’s concerns are “blown off” and dismissed, exclaiming, “We know our bodies just like anybody else knows their bodies.” Lauren seems to pick up momentum in the conversation, as the list of injustices African American women undergo pour from her mouth. Employment. Unequal pay. Tokenism. Environmental justice. “How do you allow certain businesses to inundate certain communities that you know are only going to pull them down further?” I’m nodding, an emphatic “mhmmm” in my chest. We know the pawn shops, cash advances, liquor stores, and gun shops in our neighborhoods intimately as signals of income, race, and power.

“Treat everybody the way you treat me. How you treat the people in your neighborhood. Give me those opportunities, protect me and protect where I live like you protect where you live.” She’s talking about the zip codes of Nashville, and I understand. She assumes I understand too, as she never says exactly who she’s speaking to, the elusive “they” or “them” the “give me”
and “protect me” just like “their” own. We go along in our assumption that we know the “we” and the “they” in this narrative. The tax brackets are evident in the opportunities we see. I don’t know exactly what she means by protection, and I don’t ask. Protection from what? “And is justice for African American women different than justice for African American communities?” I ask. “Ah, I would say so,” she responds, “because Black African American men are already perceived to be a more dangerous more intimidating, so their justice is going to be harder to come by because there is always the littlest reason.” I feel surprised by this response, and sit with my stance, my positionality as a feminist in the room. I think to myself there are spaces where I suppose being a woman is perceived less threatening and therefore less subject to violence, but then I think of Breona Taylor and a long list of names scrolls through my mind, and I’m unsure.

**And then we’re changing the village we’re in**

Faith and therapy. Acknowledging what she has control over, what she has no control over and letting it go. Lauren expounds on her definition of healing, “The only person that can change is you...if you keep hearing the same things at some point, you gotta sit down at the table and turn your phone around at look at yourself...and like it’s YOU girl.” Being confident. Loving yourself. Having a relationship with God, Lauren adds, “uhm can’t hurt nobody.” Sharing your process so others can heal. These are the ingredients of Lauren’s healing toolkit. She tells me of the women in her life who she saw evolve from difficult places and unhelpful behaviors into vessels of healing. These are the women who inspire her and encourage her, the ones she knows and has seen change. Lauren values community and believes it begins with the individual and sharing that change with another and another until change spreads. “Yeah and then we’re changing the village that we’re in, yeah, with the women we have access to. Uh, even at a political level in your community, reaching out to those local politicians about the resources
needed in those communities.” I feel inspired as Lauren shares her ideas and beliefs. Her clarity of vision makes our radical dreaming feel possible. I follow up with our final question, “I want to know what are some creative and powerful ways you might like to see your story represented?”

Performance, she replies. “Where people can see the transition from...Let’s even say the childhood ear hustling to the teenage pregnancy to the adult, young adult moving out on my own, and repeating the behaviors I was exposed to...and then acknowledging that this is not right and deciding to change and going through that process and the process of healing.” I hope alongside her we can transform her story, this co-created narrative into something those who need it can see and hold as a spark of affirmation and validation that where they are is where they need to be.

SS: Research Participant 2

June 28, 2021

I entered the interview with the second participant prepared to ask all of the questions and circle back around to those needing more probing. I scheduled three hours for this interview, and we went our time. It’s interesting really, if I could sum up the emotional mechanisms of this conversation I would point to tension, vulnerability, and deep sadness. The tension arose first, as I realized S was a true storyteller and my thoughts tried to calculate how much time I could allot before interjecting and redirecting her storying. I felt the tension of my power as the researcher and the realization I am not her friend, her family, I am a stranger who doesn't want to be a stranger, but who wants to be strange enough to hurry so we can "get to the next question". I physically had to take a deep breath at the beginning of the interview. I mentally reminded myself of my responsibility to her story and her ancestor's story, and that responsibility is to witness. This allowed me to relax in my researcher self and feel into myself as a person, and my
identities as an African American woman. I relinquished control of how I wanted S to understand the questions or respond. I was here to hear it like she needed to tell it, not for her to tell it like I wanted to hear it.

She saw them as the children of her bosses...but she couldn’t progress because she was a Black woman even though she was like, really light skin...mulatto

The first question was tough and tearful for S. I ask her the second question unsure of where it will lead or what we will learn. “What are some of the stories you’ve heard about hard/stressful/painful events that affected the women in your family and community?” As she readies to respond she averts her gaze. Suddenly, we are pulled into the role of researcher and participant, just as it was beginning to feel close(r). Her grandmother and mothers tell her 95% of the stories she knows, most of them, she says, are about working with racist white people. These stories linger in the relationships with themselves and others. Her mother holds tightly to these stories and it’s hard for her to understand how her children can be close to white people. Her mother is often angry at her sister, because her sister has white friends. S says they go to dinner together and live comfortably. Even as S describes her sister’s relationships, I’m unsure of how she feels. There’s a wistfulness in her tone, and I wonder “do you want that? Friends who go to dinner—who live comfortably?” There’s an unsaid question of who gets to live this way and why.

Even S’ best friend is white, well her roommate is. She looks confused about this, stating she and her best friend are sometimes distant, things were said which were unforgivable, and she’s never sure if her friend helps her because she loves her or because she feels guilty.

Friendships have their ups and downs of course, but the question of race reverberates between them. She feels frustrated by the constant reminder of her roommate’s ability to be ignorant in a
way she can’t afford. Throughout the story she comes back to her mother’s animosity towards her sister—wonders at the vitriol. She looks at me, offering her theory of her mother’s relationship with whiteness “In my mind I thought she saw them as the children of her bosses or coworkers--These were the people that stepped on her.”

We are time jumping as she recounts her grandmother and great grandmother’s experiences of racism and work. S remembers more stories of her maternal grandmother who worked at the IRS. Her grandmother describes the job as very stressful—ambulances arriving every day and constant harassment by customers. S isn’t sure if her grandmother dealt with racism from her coworkers. She assumes so, considering her grandmother was one of the few Black people working for the IRS at the time. When I ask her what it was like to hear these stories from her grandmother and mother she cries out “It was messed up, it messed me up a lot!” Her memory leans back, then, reaching for a story of her great grandmother. She remembers being told her great grandmother was a classic pianist. She remembers seeing the piano she never heard her great grandmother play. She was talented. And, she could “pass”. Great grandmother was considered “mulatto” which perhaps it had its privileges. Still, it wasn’t enough to protect her from the racism which kept her from performing and living her dream. S too, loves art and music and wants to be a photographer. She too has felt unsupported in following her dreams. While some of these messages seem to be in the water of society’s expectations of black women and femmes, some of these messages are explicit words of disbelief voiced by a family who holds stories of why she can’t follow her art.

**Just you know, little microaggressions...I need you to see this on my body**

As S flows through her story, the threads between her matrilineal line become clearer. She recounts her experiences of racism and sexism in her career carrying the exasperation of
generations in her tone. Anger constricts her vocal cords as she describes driving through the placid neighborhoods of suburbia as a delivery driver. She enjoys the fields, farms, animals and scenery, but as soon as she spins onto the winding drives in the gated communities, she imagines the suspicious gaze of the neighborhood and turns the recorder on her phone on. She bought all of the apparel she could find with her job’s logo on it—the hat and the sweatshirt. She’s afraid someone won’t see the logo on her clothing and decide to “defend their property”. We assume defense means death, and we don’t clarify the assumption. “I’ve never felt otherness like that before,” she says, detailing the microaggressive comments while on the job. People telling her she was intelligent as if they were surprised and often being called her “sir” perceiving her 6’1 slender frame and brown skin qualify as “man”. The fear really began after Trump was elected. Someone signed “Trump” on one of her digital receipts. She drove to neighborhoods with large flagpoles and signs supporting “Trump”. Her coworkers dismissed it, and their lack of understanding and desire to understand her, made her feel worse. To them, these people were assholes, but to her they were “racist assholes”. To them, these were simply things you dealt with when you lived in the south. To her, they were acts of “psychological terror”. She remembers George Floyd, Breona Taylor, and Taya Ashton. She lives them.

The gentrification is just triggering

As she drives, she notices the changes closer to the city. Gentrification. It reminds her of the times she drove around with her paternal grandmother. Those times were like history lessons. Her grandmother would show her the streets that used to be dirt roads and tell of S of the times she walked those dirt roads with her friends after work. S mirrors this sentiment, seeing whiteness where there was once blackness, seeing deep poverty juxtaposed with microbreweries. Her grandmother points out the historical black neighborhoods, tells her of the many “firsts”
Black folks in Memphis brought to the world. S sounds impassioned and nostalgic as she recounts the drives along Millington with her paternal grandmother and the drives along Park with her paternal grandmother. She shares how her grandparents storied differently from one another. Her father’s mother kept a religious lesson tucked neatly inside a sobering truth. Her mother’s mother was a historian, and her stories nestled between an assortment of facts and institutional information. S crosses over Poplar, Orange Mound. She knows these spaces intimately. Her voice is reedy. “I saw every day,” she pauses, “like that was where the money was, and that’s where they stopped.” She carries the geopolitical striations in her heart.

My great grandmother’s first memories of Memphis was somebody getting hanged on Beale St.

S inherited the geopolitical maps of Memphis through her family’s lives. She began adding to her family’s stories two years ago when she became interested in ancestry. She wants to find new ways to honor her ancestors, but she feels doubtful. She’s still figuring out her practices, hybridizing between her family’s Christian religious background and what she’s learning in her collectives. “I guess” she questions. She feels wary her grandmother won’t be open to her spiritual practices, and she’s surprised, when instead, when her grandmother is open and curious. Perhaps these practices skipped around and landed with S, residing in the family’s memories, stretching across the delta into forgotten terrains. Her grandmother remembers the stories across time and place. S remembers her grandmother telling her of the family’s first memory of Memphis which lives in her great grandmother’s life story. Her great grandmother was a young woman from Mississippi living with her sisters and parents before she came to Memphis. One day, she overheard her parents talking in the kitchen. They sounded worried, and they were discussing the girls. The girls were getting older, and they needed to leave Mississippi.
So they moved to Memphis. And so their story traveled with the young classical pianist from Mississippi. Her first memory was of someone getting hanged on Beale St. S says this with an exclamation, and exhalation. I witness and I feel unsure. Uneasy. I have a story like that too, on my mother’s side. I don’t share this with S, but I remember the shock of hearing them say they took the lynched man’s heart out and carried it around town. S and I move on from this story as my researcher role carries me away from self-disclosure. I don’t ask any more details about the lynching. I presume neither of us want to imagine who the “someone” was, or what the hanging symbolized. She says “you know” multiple times throughout her story, filling in the unsaid. I nod and I “hmmmmm” co-regulating in chorus, buying time and holding space before we move on.

**I don’t think she would want to sit on, you know, all that messed up stuff**

S transmutes her family’s story and our co-created space by drifting into positive memories. We’re reminded of the good times. S’ grandmother stories in the small moments between running errands and cooking. “My grandmother tells stories here are and there, randomly, but she would also tell me about the fun times.” S describes late nights with records playing, dancing, and cooking, people arriving for “come as you are parties” with rollers in their hair and pajamas. She describes a sense of community and safety we both long for but lives somehow in the distant past of our grandmother’s dreams. It feels like a brief time in our transgenerational history. I wonder why her grandmother mixes sad stories with happy stories. S thinks it’s because the stories are so “messed up”. She says her grandmother wouldn’t “want to sit on it” and I interpret she means too that grandmother wouldn’t want her “to sit on it” either. I see S’ gift in storytelling another transgenerational gift, and I realize she gave us something fun to remember and “sit on”.

More tensions arise and transmute as I witness S’ vulnerability in the second part of the interview. I’m asking about her stories now, how she shares, and stories. Many parts of me join
the chorus of witnessing as my inner therapist and inner rescuer listen on. I tell her I want to respect her vulnerability, and hopefully I do so by holding space. I fight the urge to let my inner therapist appear and wage an internal battle not to counteract her self-criticisms. I wanted to suggest deep breathing during the moments of emotional intensity, but I question (can I even do that??). Is that too much? Too therapisty? Later, in my journal I explore the decisions I did/did not make in that moment. I never suggested deep breathing. Would I be fragilizing her by assuming she needed communal soothing? Am I projecting strength on her informed by some Black strong woman stereotype? She's younger than I am, and our differences in SES and education are apparent from her story and history. Am I assuming she needs my help? I accept my internal dialogue and focus on her words. Sometimes I feel the researcher's self-rise to the fore and steer the conversation back to what I (as the researcher) see as important, but also to places where I (as a trained therapist) would want to explore. My therapist self hears symptoms, side remarks, and notices the lack of eye contact, body language. As a Black woman I deeply appreciate and respect her pain and empathize. All of these selves respect that she is sharing with me at all.

I’m unlearning ya know, like 25 years worth of brainwashing

I ask S about herself. "What are your stories of difficult/painful/stressful events? What’s it like for you to share them with me? With others?” She seems weary. S states she’s distant from her family for a reason. She’s tired of being vulnerable, of being shamed for being emotional and sensitive. “Makes me wanna disappear...I’m unlearning 25 years of brainwashing,” and she describes it’s better to do that away from the people that harmed her, though it’s even harder doing it alone. She talks about her panic attacks and the non-cancerous tumors along the lymph nodes of her body. It’s painful. Her head is turned to the side and her medium sized locs are piled onto her head. She’s crying as she tells me about her first panic attack, a manifestation of feeling
afraid to speak, to breathe. She doesn’t think her father believes in something unless it’s physical which makes mental health difficult to discuss. I wonder how that validation lives in her nervous system, and if it’s next to the parts of her that feel unloved. Her mother, stopped responding “I love you” to her and her sister one day when they were younger. She remembers saying “I love you” and never hearing it reflected again. No one really noticed her pain, so sometimes she would pick and scratch at her skin, as if something as embedded inside. “My mother told me it would make me uglier.” S can’t remember if that’s exactly what her mother said, but it feels true. She says, “And I’m still trying to unlearn that now.”

What I’m familiar with is I guess pain? So trying to like love myself even saying it out loud just feels weird to me

S says she’s changing her narrative, her definition of “okay”. Her parents defined okay as “you alive, and breathing you got a roof over your head you got some food in the refrigerator”. She describes her brother’s getting ATV’s when they were younger and her getting a much smaller allowance from her father which was to be spent on what he determined, beauty, which meant her hair. Her voice rises as she describes this, stating she tried for a very long time to be more feminine and spent a lot of money to soothe her body dysmorphia. When she cut her hair, her grandmother told her not to bring a woman to the house, her sexual identity tethered to the inches of her hair. She remembers the messages about being a Black woman clearly—being strong and looking feminine were the most important parts of her identity. Now she says, she resists these messages by “not affording to maintain the stupid ass standard of beauty that’s not even real!” I agree. I also enjoy make up, struggle with performing femininity, struggle with my own connections to gender socialization. She finishes her exclamation by acknowledging the futility of performing femininity as a Black woman. She was still dismissed and overlooked. By
whom? Jobs and relationships. This has an impact on how she feels about herself, how she loves herself or conceptualizes what love is. She tells me she never had a conversation about relationships, sex, respect or love with her family.

She’s having those conversations with me and with herself. The ones about worth and work and love. Uncompromising. She accepts that loving herself and saying it feels weird, but she wants a new definition of “okay”. She says that being “okay” isn’t about consumerism. She wishes her parents had been able to pass on the wonderful things of their childhood instead of “get get get”. For her, being a consumer is not a part of being “okay”, She wants to be like her granny, with a home, garden, and animals.

She remembers reading a book which talked about how history repeats itself and has a trickledown effect. She proclaims, “It doesn’t have to continue with me,” as she blows smoke from the blunt she rolled. She smokes casually as she calmly states, she can’t blame her family and she must be okay with not needing them to fix herself. She talks to her ancestors and prays; she pays respect to them and appreciates them for what they’ve done and ask them to protect her family. She calls this process an umbrella of healing. She describes her storytelling as stories she keeps in her back pocket to “justify how slow her healing is.” When I ask her about keeping these stories and retelling them she says, “Saying it to where I can just be free of it, I guess.” I think about what we witnessed and unsettled. It makes sense to me.

July 9, 2021

The second interview is different—far away. Perhaps, last time felt too close for the both of us. It felt tougher and easier that way. I’m staring at a black screen. I ask S if she wants to keep her camera off during the interview. She explains something is going on with her Zoom, and the camera wouldn’t work. Her use of the past tense makes me wonder if the camera works
now. She adds, “I’ll leave it off.” I respect that. I begin the interview by asking her how sharing her story with me impacted her. She says it didn’t impact her at all. I’m surprised, and I notice a sense of disappointment. I’d never felt more like a researcher. Are these the feelings of someone who excavates? She goes on to say the stories she shared with me are the stories she tells all of the time to her friends, to whomever would listen. I feel the distancing, or perhaps connecting. Am I like her friends, or unlike them in this story and context? I respect the distance, and I’m eager to move on.

In this interview the intent is to radically dream a WHOLE NEW WORLD. A world where Black women can heal and have support and justice isn’t just a buzz word. In my head, this part would be fun. It is just as heavy as the hard questions. I realize these questions are hard too. She’s very clear when she describes what healing would look like for her, justice. She declares, “I wanna go to my family so I don’t have any more sad stories, like get to the root of it.” My brain is buzzing. Yes, rootwork. I offer, “a circle of women, like a meeting?” She responds, “yeah, but I wanna bring that same energy from a meeting to my actually like to the actual people who have hurt me instead of like strangers.”

“Being heard like, the first time”

We’re at question 3 and staring into the blank black screen is both comforting and disconcerting. I wonder how she feels, seeing me while I cannot see her. I wonder if she feels less vulnerable. “What do you imagine justice looks like for African American women?” I ask. “Being heard like the first time.” She says this with no pause, no hesitation. I sit with her answer. “Be able to tell my own stories,” She continues. We talk about how beautiful Black women are and the support and care we would love to see for our people. For a moment, we are dreaming, we are dreaming up a space where Black women are loved and cared for, where they feel safe.
We use similar words with different meanings. I notice she says, “cared for and protected”. I dream of a space where we have the capacity to love, to care for ourselves...where we don’t need to be protected. Perhaps we mean the same thing. She describes a vivid metaphor of her experience as a Black woman. Black women are similar to factory farming. We’re stressed flesh, she says. I have a reaction to this in my gut that I can’t quite place.

**Meanwhile, I’m trying to get like my granny who has, you know a house with animals and a garden**

S values community. She recounts the Juneteenth celebration in Orange Mound and how inspired she feels about the work of the Black women in her community. She’s impassioned when she says, “I feel like Black women can be revolutionary, but also conserve like as much life as possible.” For her, Black women are at the forefront of all the activism in her community, and she names patriarchy as the insidious weed which disconnects healing for Black women from Black men. When I ask her what healing means for her, she responds, “genuine acceptance.” I see the light green box light around the dark rectangle with her name on it. We’ve made it to the end of the interview, and I still haven’t seen her face. She elaborates on what healing means to her--to speak the truth, be heard even if it’s uncomfortable and still be loved. This is her healing, and she envisions a home with animals and a garden just like her grandmother. As we come toward the end of the interview, and I ask her how she would like her story to be represented, she seems uncomfortable. When I probe, she responds, “when you read something you already insert yourself in the story just by reading it,” and for her that is enough. I mention how much I appreciate her poetry, and I wonder what it would be like to record her voice. “Uhm so to see myself or to hear my voice. I don’t like to hear my voice.” Something in me drops as she shares this. I feel she wants to give her story to me, and I want to give it to her,
and we are at an impasse. Really, if I could give her anything it would be for her to see how important her voice really is.

N: Research Participant 3

July 14, 2021

N is the third person I talked to about the project, but due to delays resulting from scheduling conflicts, she was the last person I interviewed. We conversed about maybe taking tea at her place, but my IRB dictated the interview be held in my office or on campus, so we decided on a virtual interview. The phone worked best for her, she was busy, and it was difficult to find time to talk. She chose to keep her camera off, because she was moving, driving, I think. At the time, I wrote in my journal how disconnected I felt from her, how something felt missing for me. Afterwards I felt anxious. Was it the screen between us? The recorder? The interview itself? Was it my own expectations of sipping tea in dimly lit rooms talking, reading body language, mirroring back and forward? I sat with the questions I didn’t ask, the moments for follow-up I didn’t question, and I planned to do better the second interview. But there was no second interview.

Yeah it was a mixture of like, I can't relate to like...being surprised that my mom even shared something that intimate

N’s mother is awakened in the middle of the night. They’re in Flint, MI. All she knows is her mother and two sisters are gathered, and her mother tells her they have to leave. Her mom doesn’t get to say goodbye to her friends or to her family. One day everything she knows, and loves is in Flint, MI, and the next day she’s gone. N tells this story with a quick pace. It’s the story she’s heard the most about in her family. She describes hearing her mother talk about it “offhandedly” one day. She was still in high school at the time and wasn’t used to her mother
saying much about her past. She knew of her family in Flint, MI, but she didn’t know about this. Suddenly, her family is more complicated than she realized. She remembers having a lot of questions at that time. Her mother was meeting her father for the first time, which meant the man N thought was her grandfather wasn’t...at least not biologically. “How did you react to hearing that story at that time?” I ask. “Yeah, it was a mixture of like I can’t relate to like...being surprised that my mom even shared something that intimate, I guess.”

N recounts the pain and anger her mother felt when she told her, how it still pains and angers her mother, feelings of loss and resentment piling up over time. For N it led to an exploration of her maternal grandfather’s relations. She visits her maternal grandfather’s family and continues to keep in touch with them after he died. “It’s been nice ‘cause I don’t have a whole lot of family members that have a spiritual mindset the way I do.” Though N’s found a connection with her mother’s father’s family, she shares her mother is still processing what occurred when she grew up. “She was his first kid, but um he wasn’t really like, he didn’t raise her or anything. He left not too long after she was born and went—went on to have another family.” N recollects wanting to support her mother emotionally when she first heard the story, recognizing her mother doesn’t open up much. She didn’t ask questions then, but she says, now she can identify how the experience impacted her mother. “She’s not super physically affectionate. Right, she’ll let me hug her of course, like she’s been more open about like her emotions in the last few years, but she still has some feelings of resentment towards my--my grandmother...and she also struggles with epilepsy which I think is just a culmination of mental and emotional stress.”

As N tells this story I listen to the calmness of her voice. I can hear her empathy for her mother and wonder how it feels for her to share this with me. She says the story seems abstract
since the pain didn’t happen to her. When I ask her how this experience impacted her, she recalls a memory of her father. There are other stories in the family, stories about relationships with men and children, and the men not being there to rely on. Her parents are married, and she grew up with both parents in the home, which wasn’t how a lot of neighbors grew up. What stands out to her are the times she had to advocate for her father to be present, though he was physically there. “How do you tell a man to show up for the woman’s life when you never saw your dad do that for you?” she questions. “Like how to encourage my father to be present in his—in his daughter’s life,” she pauses, then continues, “that was something I had to stand up and ask for at a young age.” I feel sad when she says this, but she sounds powerful, sure. I don’t know what’s beneath, if anything, and I don’t ask, but I understand her experience.

**One day I just sat at the table, and I was able to actually like participate**

I follow N’s story as she speaks of the day, she realized she was “grown” or considered an adult by the women in her family. N remembers her mother could usually be found cooking in the kitchen during family gatherings. Her aunt would come by and grab food, and most times she would stay and talk for a while. Her father and brother may stop by and drop in, but they usually didn’t stay. N would stay. She’d sit at the table and listen to her mother and aunt. She recalls, “My mom would be like this an A-B conversation you know, kind of thing, so I was always usually—it wasn’t until I got maybe into high school that I was able to like vocally participate, but I was always able to sit and listen.” N expresses how empowering it feels to participate in these conversations. She voices how prior to this transition if she spoke up during these conversations, she was likely to be perceived as disrespectful. Now, she can support, vocalize, and seek. This process illuminates aspects of her mother’s story and grandmother’s stories she didn’t know before. She tells me the first time she sat down with her grandmother to initiate a
conversation about their past. She heard her grandmother’s story, felt her remorse. N is there, no longer “seen and not heard” but hearing and holding what her mother and grandmother cannot. Their sadness, guilt, and anger, the grief between them. I reflect to her what I see, saying “it’s almost like a rite of passage, it sounds like.” We agree. “Yeah.” she responds. “that’s why I definitely felt like it was like one day I just sat at the table, and I was able to actually like participate and I was like oh, I’m going wow, lie.”

It wasn't until I started getting into more creative jobs that I could present myself as I am and not be like a novelty

When I ask N about her stories of difficult hard and painful events which have long lasting impact she readily responds about her experiences in work. N is a classical musician. She went to a predominantly Black arts school where wearing her natural hair and being unapologetically Black wasn’t an anomaly. She distinctly remembers when things changed. The microaggressions ensued. “And as it got more competitive, my environments became more white, and I’ve even had, uh...most teachers like, teacher tell me like ‘oh, it’s not every day that we see a black girl in orchestra.” Even as she performs gigs now, she’s very aware that if she doesn’t modify her hair and presence to more Eurocentric beauty standards it impacts her money. She calls it making herself more “palatable.” She tells me this experience isn’t relegated to her gigs for predominantly White audiences, and she’s also received comments from other Black people she’s performing for. She recounts some of the comments she’s heard, “Do you think you can put—like, a clip on your fro, you know, power to the people, but you know like maybe a little more...” How is it showing up as herself is interpreted as an act of politics? Resistance? Before N was working for herself, she continued to struggle in finding work that didn’t come with a host of racist and sexist remarks. I don’t ask her how she feels about this, she volunteers
the emotion freely, describing how enraged and depressed she was at this time in her life. There was a point where she wasn’t being hired for jobs other than fast food and warehouses. She spoke to her mother. “And my mother kind of told me like, oh, oh you should like...dye your hair black.” N refused. She didn’t want to take out her piercings, remove her hair color, slick her hair back into the hats fitted for one hair type. “But then I wasn’t getting jobs, so I was like slick my hair back and took my piercings out and dyed my hair black, and I started getting jobs and um it of—it made me really really really really angry.”

With each “really” she repeated I felt that anger too. Anger for her and for myself. I asked her how she felt about her mom’s advice. She knew her mother meant well—wasn't angry at her, but she also knew her mother couldn't completely understand. Colorism and hair type discrimination meant their experiences were different. She called her mother’s skin tone “light bright” and said her mother often wore her hair in two braids or down her back. Her mother didn't understand and being in the classical world meant she felt more alone. “I understood what my mom was saying, and I could tell she didn’t like saying it, but I mean it was the reality of the situation--like white people like us to present ourselves a certain way...” When she worked in fast food, her managers wouldn’t compromise on the headwear attire she wore. People made comments which made her feel exoticized and othered. She couldn’t take care of her hair how she needed, and her mental health suffered. I listened to her story aptly, resonating with the emotions she described. I wondered why it took me so long to feel enraged. Customers talked about her like a beautiful object. Coworkers tried to touch her hair. “Yeah, it enrages me. And—and it wasn’t until I started getting into more creative jobs here that I could like...present myself as I am, and it not be a novelty ‘cause there were other people like me in the field.”
I still had to like subdue my Blackness to be worth any capital

Working creative jobs provided some relief from the microinsults and aggressions related to N’s hair, but it didn’t solve the problem. After attempting to stuff her hair in ill-fitting hats and use products which achieved a “slick” result but left her hair dry and flat. She felt depressed. Her experiences in the workforce were vastly different from her experiences in school. She told me school was different and described herself as “radical” then. She explained “I’ve been a part of every Black association that I can remember in school and everything and it was humbling to find that even though I can believe those things, but still had to like, like subdue my blackness to be worth any capital.” “hmm” I responded. I feel this clearly as she speaks it, too often caught in the tensions between my values of liberation and how I compromise those values to survive. My “hmm” is a “I know what you mean.” While going through this time of job transition and workplace violence she asks her ancestors to guide her to a new job, one where she can be freer to express herself and be authentic. She gets a job as a photographer. She’s able to feed herself. She doesn't feel as alone as she did before, however, the microaggressions shift from her hair to her body. She explains to me that while she wasn’t the only Black person working those jobs, her curves attracted more attention than the slimmer framed women.

N remembers many moments of feeling singled out and being asked not to wear certain clothing though her colleagues who were smaller and more petite wore the same thing. I feel her irritation as she shares this, and I throw in the word “policed”. She begins to use the word policing too, as she describes an incident where she and another colleague are wearing the same outfit but she’s asked to put on a jacket. I’m aware of my own anger and irritation, and I ask her about her reactions to these moments. She says she often doubted her experience and needed to check in with others to make sure she wasn’t being “sensitive or crazy”. She adds “you know?”
to the end of this. The inflection, the “you know?” There are so many layers there—Black woman to Black woman. I feel sad hearing it, thinking of all the gaslighting she experienced. She adds “I’m hoping I’m not being singled out ‘cause that makes me feel a little—a little more safe because if I’m not in a community, I have like a bunch of people who can stand up for me and everything, but when—when I’m alone in an experience and it’s like, oh, goodness, now I’m gonna have to single handedly either be submissive and not say anything or stand up for myself and potentially lose my job, yeah?”

**But I will say I deal with body dysmorphia**

N deals with body dysmorphia. For her, this means “sometimes [she] can’t really tell, if [she] looks good or not.” N illustrates a story of herself as a young girl and her mother telling her not to wear certain clothing because of her butt. What she wears is supervised, and everyone seems to have an opinion about what’s “appropriate” for her body before she determines what’s appropriate for herself. This manifested into hours spent in front of the mirror and a complicated relationship with her body characterized by anxiety. She tells me there were many phases of challenging people’s perceptions of her, starting with her hair. “I cut my hair off—it was like bald for a while ‘cause I wanted to like show myself that I was attractive and beautiful without my hair. I was like finally I don’t have to worry about my hair like my hair isn’t a stress issue anymore, because I don’t have any hair.” Her hair is growing back, and she continues to be critical of the Eurocentric standards placed on Black women’s hair especially in the entertainment industry. She and her friends notice how musicians and artists who may start their careers wearing their natural hair become more popular as they transition to wearing wigs...and losing weight.
N recounts how shaving her hair relieved the stress associated with her hair, but also stirred other people’s anxieties about her sexuality and gender. She didn’t wear earrings and enjoyed baggy, comfortable clothing. Then people would tell her to wear earrings, that she looks like a boy and ask if she was gay. N narrates what I find ironic and intrusive experiences of people continuing to police her body and define for her the identities they can’t see. She portrays societies fixation with Black women’s bodies as objects of desire, control, and repulsion through her stories. She conveys how people react when she dresses “scantily.” As she works through her own anxiety about gaining weight and accepting her curves, people still tell her to “cover that up” --that being her flesh, her body. She says she believes in being comfortable with her body whether that’s dressing more gender fluid or showing off her body.

**Checking in with myself and making sure my relationship with myself is good**

N and I don’t have another conversation following this interview. I texted a few times to follow up, to schedule the conversation where we talk about healing and justice, but she didn’t respond. I’m okay with it, and I feel grateful for what she decided to give to the project. She names her healing process in our first conversation, stating it began with an awareness of how her interpersonal style was similar to her mother's. She labels them “emotional and mental blocks.” She adds, “…like when something bothers me. I don’t say anything until like—like--I blow up one day about it or like completely shut down and don’t want to deal with it or that person ever again.” Her method of healing this pattern is checking in with herself by meditating, taking solo trips, and using her ancestral knowledge to work with her subconscious. “I call it like, ‘the old ways’” she says. She didn’t learn these ways from her parents. In fact, it’s important to her to converse with her parents about her choice to resist societal expectations. She
has a list of values she lives by, and they include being honest in her relationships, being vocal, and self-soothing in different ways than her parents.

I call it like, 'the old ways'

The old ways. African and indigenous. N’s spirituality is important to her relationship with herself. She uses her dream state to navigate her life and tune into her needs. Her focus on her body is turned inward to how she feels. As she shares this with me, I feel a deep sense of happiness. Body and spirit. I ask her how she would name the experiences she’s shared with me today. She responds, “I describe it as just like continuous self-exploration ‘cause even though they’ve gotten older there—there are memories and things from my past that had like resurfaced and I’m like oh, like I didn’t know that—that affected me that way, or even to just like taking time to like sit down and like mull over the things that happened in the past day or the past week.” Continuous self-exploration. It gives me the sense of hope and discovery, and acceptance, something unfolding and perhaps unanswerable.

BB: Research Participant 4

June 10th, 2021

BB is inquisitive. Insightful. Her stories revolve around her endless curiosity and need to know “why”. Her questions cause tension and expose heartache within her stories, but her questions also lead to invaluable truths. I think her questions foster healing where once lay silence, and underneath that silence, the pain of generations. BB and I spend a lot of time together. The storying between us is intense, our feelings palpable. There’s a lot of emotion between us, and so many of our stories said and unsaid are the same. Our mechanisms for excavating truth, similar. We both like to ask questions. The seekers, anthropologists of our ancestors. The holders and containers of our family’s mysteries.
Sometimes it makes it feel like the time we spend together isn’t real. Because it’s like we all want to have a good time, we don’t want to talk about what’s happening.

BB begins her story by talking about the closeness within her family—the family events and gatherings during holidays and the BBQ’s and cousins coming together in a blend of West Indian and African American traditions. It sounds wonderful. But there’s another part of her family’s story which speaks to closeness fractured by silences and moments where the unheard voices of those before reverberating along the family lineage. BB quickly reveals how she feels about the fractures in her family’s relationships. She’s puzzled, upset, and always questioning. She can trace this fracturing to a story of her great grandmother who lived right around the Florida Georgia line. BB doesn’t know a lot about her great grandmother, but she questions the absence of her great grandmother’s voice—she tells me her great grandmother was mute and deaf, was married “4 or 5 times that” she knows of and had “all of these children”. BB has numerous questions about her great-grandmother’s life. How did she get married so many times? How did she have children? Her volume and tone of her voice is a higher octave when she asks, “How do you know how to express love to someone, and you can’t even hear what they’re saying, and you can’t really—express it back to them you know?” I think she’s searching for her great grandmother’s agency, and I think there’s a lot we don’t know about her great grandmother’s beliefs around marriage and love. I hear care in her tone, concern. I’m not sure, but her story makes me think about embodiment and autonomy. I later question how did her grandmother use her agency to take care of herself—to create a secure/safe life for herself?

As BB continues her story, she mentions her grandmother’s marriages and children. This story is filled with more details about the family and the vulnerability of children. I’m understanding now why BB questions agency, safety, and trust. These questions seem to live in
her family’s womb alongside the stories of her mother, grandparents, and great grandparents. As she talks about her grandmother’s life; she mentions her grandparents separated when her mother was 12 years old. At the time, the family still lived on the Florida Georgia line, with her grandmother in Georgia and her grandfather in Florida. She says her grandfather would drive up in the middle of the night, wake her mom and uncles when they were children and take them away through the window. “Kidnapped, back and forth” is how she describes it. I notice my reaction of surprise in my chest, and I hear emotion escalating in BB’s voice. “It was very traumatizing for all of them, like my uncle—I know that one of my uncles on my mom’s side has been a crack addict since he was 15 years old. He’s almost 60 now, and I’ve never seen him clean in my whole life because he always goes back to—he’s never had stability in his life...”

There are more things the family doesn’t talk about, and one is Cousin E. BB shares the story of Cousin E with selective words. I see her choosing them as she talks, and my brain fills in the rest. “He had a problem with children.” she says. My chest tightens. “He was sexual with children.” I hold my reaction as we move on, the tight ball in my chest remembering alongside her. Cousin E used to be one of the primary sitters for the family’s children. One of her cousins who was placed in his care carries the wounds of her experiences. She’s adamant she’ll never leave her children with him, and she doesn’t think Cousin E’s older age and disability make him any less harmful. BB seems exasperated as she talks about this. She doesn’t understand how her family could know about Cousin E’s behavior and never speak or intervene on behalf of the children. She isn’t the only family member of the younger generation who wants to talk about these things, but she feels the older generation in the family can’t or won’t talk about it. She wants to feel the happiness of gathering with her family and the closeness of speaking the truth about what hurts. She questions, “Why like do you wanna keep this cycle of trauma going? I
don’t understand. So, it’s--it’s like a lack of accountability and responsibility and all like it just—it makes it hard ’cause I can’t fake my feelings.”

I can see BB holding it all with her body--her questions, frustrations, and a genuine desire for closeness and truth in her family. Her voice fluctuates and echos across the screen. I see her holding herself as tears grace her eyelids. I comment on what I see, wary of crossing the boundary between my researcher and therapist self—how much energy of her family’s stories are filtering through her body? I’m glad for the next question, because I really want to know when she began holding these stories and how long they’ve been resting in her nervous system. “Do you remember, like, the first time you heard these stories?” I ask.

“Maybe 10 or 11” she responds. BB went searching for the stories when she was young. She noticed the things that were out of place or didn’t seem like other families, and she started questioning. Her mom answered her questions, giving her stories here and there, and other family members would too. She remembers some stories were harder for her mom to share than others. As much as BB wants her questions answered, she worries about her mother’s hurt the most. Her mother isn’t a crier, so when her mother cries it disturbs her. And her mother cries every time she talks about the kidnappings as a child. She stops her questions there, when she senses it’s too much for her mother, but she always wonders “what really was going on.”

**My grandmother is Pandora’s Box**

BB’s grandmother is a mystery to her. What she knows is her grandmother was taken away from her great grandmother when she was young and placed in the care of her great grandmother’s sister. She heard the aunt who raised her was abusive and strict. There’s also the question of her grandmother’s parenting. Her skin color tone is very light, but both of her biological parent’s skin tone’s are dark brown. BB looks at the family photos and to her it
doesn’t add up. She chuckles as she tries to find the photos quickly in her phone, to show me, but she can’t find them. “So, I’m just looking, I’m like right, and my grandmother is 80 years old, so I’m like great---grandma is your daddy white because you light?” BB shares her skepticism with me, but she tells me she’d never question her grandmother. “I don’t ask no questions ‘cause she gets very testy about it,” she adds. Grandmother is a mystery to the entire family, even her children. “My grandmother would only tell them what she wanted them to know, and that’s just how her life is set up.” A question hangs in there that neither of us speak. Is silence a sign of repression or resistance? Can it be both? I share in BB’s wonder, imagining what it means for her grandmother, the daughter of a woman who lived in auditory silence to selectively mute her truths.

**People can only do the best they can and sometimes they’re not—they’re not doing the best they can**

Trust is at the crux of a lot of BB’s stories, and her experiences taught her there are few people she can trust in this world. She doesn’t trust everyone with her story, and like her grandmother, there are things she doesn’t share with anyone, not even her family. When I ask BB how hearing her family’s stories impacted her, she begins to hug herself. “It made me very angry as a kid like it made me very very angry.” BB explains how hearing her family’s stories made her think about the cycles of negative experiences in her family and how they were being repeated. She wished as a kid that her parents would do more to protect her considering their own experiences of pain. BB’s voice changes as she recounts a memory where she felt vulnerable, unsafe, and violated. Her voice quickens while tears stream down her cheeks. She was turning 14 in a week. Her grandfather just passed away. She walked home alone to wait on her mother who forgot to pick her up from school. She felt unprotected. She was unsafe. Her
trust and her body were violated that day. Throughout her story BB shifts between blaming her mother for not being there and forgiving her for not being there.

She never told her mother what happened. Towards the end of her story, she explains why she never told her mom. She doesn’t want to rehash something which happened so long ago. “Like, I—I'm ok, I'm ok. Hey like, I’m good,” she says. I don’t know if she’s telling herself, me, or her mother that she’s okay now. She went to therapy, and it helped, but it’s still hard for her to trust. There are many stories of times where she needed her parents to support her, and she felt utterly alone. The stories that made her angry as a child now give her perspective of her parents’ limitations. She’s not always sure if they’re doing their best, but she tries to accept them as they are. It seems hard for her to accept them and to hold her anger and hurt at the same time. “I can’t be mad,” she says, as she talks through her struggle to accept what happened and failed to happen in her relationship with her parents. I want to assure her she can be mad, but I hold that feeling and urge in my chest instead.

**I’m not gonna keep putting myself at risk for other people that don't care.**

BB transitions into another story where her strongest relationship, the one that never fails to see her and hold her, helped her to overcome one of the most traumatizing experiences of her life. BB went through 9 months of being pregnant...except she wasn’t. After months of doctor's appointment and baby showers, and watching her body grow and expand, BB found out she wasn’t pregnant, and in fact her symptoms were related to Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS). She really needed family. Her aunt sent her a card which essentially read, “God is so disappointed. You should be ashamed.” BB left her job, dropped out of school, and moved. Her voice is trembling as she retells how isolating and terrifying it was for her body to be unrecognizable. She had no idea what was wrong with her.
For a while her life consisted of going home and going to work. Her trust was shattered, with her family, with medical institutions, and with her body. She explains to me her sole focus was getting closer to God and surrendering to the only relationship she could trust. Her guards eventually came down, though it was tough. She shares “And it just they literally had to work with me ‘cause it was like, I wouldn’t talk. I was just like I just need some church and that’s it. I know I need to be in church. I don’t really care about the relationship with these other people. I know that. I don’t need them right now. I need-I need to hear what you’re telling and what you’re teaching.” I notice as she’s speaking, she’s covered herself in a blanket, and I am wrapped tightly in my sweater. The vulnerability of her words wafting between us as we hold ourselves.

Although it took time to build trust, the pastor and his family went with her to appointments. They didn’t judge her for her circumstances Her voice is tender and welling with tears as she says, “Always, I always, always hold it very close to me ‘cause they’ve been there since the first—the hardest situation I’ve had in my life.” She went to church seeking God, and through God, she found family. This experience changes BB’s life. She’s pregnant now, and she hopes it’s a girl. She and her child are her priority and putting her well-being on the line for others is no longer a part of her story. “I’m very mindful about how you know I live my life and who I decide to have in it.” She loves her family, but she’s also thinking of who she wants to be around her child. She doesn’t want anyone to disrupt their peace. I ask BB if she shares her experiences with others since she had to go through so much alone. She tells me if people really want to know she will tell them about her life, but she tries to keep a realistic and positive outlook. She shares with her therapist, her cousin, and her social media platform, but she rarely, if ever, shares all of the details. I ask her what it’s like to share her stories with me. I really want to know what’s going on, and I acknowledge I’m also on some level, a stranger. As we talk my
roles as researcher, insider, and outsider collide. BB responds to my question about sharing her stories with me, “Ah, to me it’s healing...” and I feel some measure of relief.

**Some of us are more resilient than others—some people they get stuck**

BB wants her family to heal despite the hurts and conflicts they’ve had. She loves them, and she sees them clearly. The largest barrier to healing in the family is the disconnection between the older and younger generations. BB believes some people in her family have been through so much that they “get genuinely stuck—in a certain place”. Some are more resilient than others, she says. To illustrate this, she shares a story of one of her cousins who experienced multiple sexual assaults throughout her life, and molestation as a child by relatives. BB shares this story with a tone of concern for her cousin. She thinks both the family’s pattern of minimizing their issues and her cousin’s lack of accountability for her actions contribute to her cousin’s current circumstances. “She’s very very angry like very,” she shares. As this cousin became older, she also came out as gay which BB’s family found unacceptable. “Because my family is West Indian you know the homophobia is a little bit of a thing,” she explained. It’s “not a thing” for BB though, she considers herself an ally, but the homophobia in the family sparked the grandfather’s decision that someone else should raise her cousin’s children. So, her Aunt J took custody of her cousin.

**We all want to get back to that place where we're that close, but then at the same time, it's like I know I need to step back from y'all for A little bit**

As we move through the interview I realize BB stories in layers and webs. Her answers to my questions often lead to stories within stories, memories connecting to past hurts and future clarity. The closeness she described in her family appears more fragile and liminal than it did at the beginning of the interview. As she tells me about the transitions in the family, she refers to
this “weird” feeling quite often. Her mother’s generation is becoming the elders and the elders are transitioning into ancestors. BB questions what this means for the position and power she and her cousins now have in the family. At different points, she and her cousins have stepped away from the family to heal and to protect themselves and their children. BB doesn’t think there’s space to have difficult conversations about hurt and healing in the family. There’s BBQ’s crab boils and laughter alongside what BB calls “the familial trauma.” BB talks with her cousin T about the changes in the family. Together they investigate the complexities of closeness and encourage one another to seek healing.

Accountability is an important part of their healing process, and in many ways, they serve as each other’s accountability partner, whether it’s addressing difficult emotions in their relationships with others or looking in the mirror and learning to love themselves. BB expounds on her struggles to love herself. “Growing up like I said in Georgia, I was the dark-skinned girl in the group.” She laughs as she says this, but beneath the laughter are what she describes as painful and othering experiences throughout her childhood. She rarely received affirmations of her beauty and desirability growing up, and she yearned for the affirmations and protection of her father the most. Looking back now she understands the emotional absence of his presence was learned from his parents as he was taught being a better father than his father meant he needed to provide financially for his family. BB explains she thinks “dealing with that and the daddy issues” is common among African American women. She’s dealt with feelings of rejection and abandonment, as she watched girls with light skin and long hair consistently be selected for male attention and desire, for affirmations and love while she watched on the sidelines.
But BB was also a dancer, and dancing gave her an intimate connection with movement, trust, and flow. She’d practice 3-4 hours after school. She was slender with strong large legs and a “late bloomer” which for her meant she didn’t always feel she fit the cultural expectations of Black women’s bodies. She describes the constant mental comparison to the “ideal African American woman” and feelings of rejection and sadness growing up. “Coming from a culture where you’re supposed to be super curvy and all, and I just wasn’t that girl,” she says. This affected her self-esteem and self-worth when she was younger. She describes being quick to cling to anyone who told her she was pretty, because they accepted her for her. As BB shares, I feel intrigued by her relationship with her father in particular and her need to be affirmed by him. I’m also curious how the women in her family affirmed each other, if at all. I ask, “were you affirmed by your mother or other women in your family?” She tells me though her body type is like her mother’s her mother grew up in the 80’s and 90’s where being tall and slender with a large bust was more culturally acceptable and desirable. She doesn’t say if she and her mother ever talked about the similarities of their body shape and experiences. She doesn’t say if she and her sister talked about their bodies and experiences either. She recalls how her sister was slim which “didn’t work in her favor” but she was also “very very lightskinned” which we both assume means her sister benefited from the different expectations of women across colorism.

**There's not anything anybody can say to me about my achievements**

Although BB faced challenges in learning to love and affirm herself as a Black woman, she always felt confident in her intelligence and work. She leads me through examples of the women in her family, who, across many different fields “work diligently [at their craft] until it’s almost perfected.” She isn’t sure how her family’s work ethic began, but she remembers her grandmother working until she was 76 years old, full-time as a nurse. For BB this is a source of
pride, and her voice is clear and strong as she declares, “There’s a lot of things people say about my family—there's a lot of things people say about me, but like, I’ve never struggled with how I felt about myself as being, as far as my capabilities.” BB worked full time throughout her undergraduate and graduate school career. Now, she owns a lucrative business, and she works full-time. As BB shares more the complexities of her family’s relationship with work arise. The women in her family have also experienced deep betrayals of their trust. Because of this, for some of them it’s easier to do all the work and take all the responsibility than risk sharing the load with someone who may not be dependable.

BB speaks of their achievements with confidence. She also adds that behind these achievements are growth areas. She knows her family could talk about their trauma or focus on their wellbeing and development rather than work. I don’t ask why she thinks the women in her family spend more time on what they produce than how they feel, but I imagine it’s for the same reasons so many of the women in my family have done the same. Necessity. I tuck the question away for the second interview, hoping we have space to radically dream about what women can do when they have time the time to heal.

I think—was it Malcolm X said the most unappreciated and most unprotected person in America is the African American woman?

As BB and I talk about the social factors that impact African American women we oscillate between our emotions and intellect. She recounts her time studying for her master's in social work at FAMU. It was one of the first times she was exposed to the racism etched into educational and institutional policy. Her professor was lecturing on the history of accreditation boards and the gatekeeping process which targeted historically Black colleges. She remembers feeling blindsided by it all. To add to matters, she decided to do her research paper on the
infamous No Child Left Behind policy. “I went back and looked at all the schools that were
demed as failing in my county. Every last one of them were the ones in the Black areas of the
list. And it really—it upset me—but then it didn’t at the same time.” BB’s paper led her on a
journey of questioning. The policy made no sense to her. They took the funding out of schools
that weren’t performing at their standards and reallocated the funds to schools that were doing
well which were in predominantly White identified neighborhoods. The obvious injustice
bothered her for a long time. She questioned how institutions could design systems to
intentionally disadvantage children. Children. This is something we questioned together.

When I ask BB about how she navigates holding her identities as a Black woman and the
impacts of some of the events we talked about today she shares her feelings of disheartenment.
She understands how some women feel depressed and want to give up after cycles of being
underpaid by employers and unappreciated by partners. She talks about the cultural norms of her
family’s West Indian and African American background. When she grew up, she was taught you
feed the men first, the children second, and the women eat last. She saw this dynamic with her
grandparents—the same grandmother who worked as a full-time nurse until she was 76 years old
also took care of the finances, the children, the home, and the meals. Her grandfather couldn’t
read so she wasn’t sure if this dynamic was created through necessity or culture, or both. BB
states her nuclear family had a different dynamic. Her father was a vegetarian, so her mother
didn’t cook his meals. I wonder what it meant for BB to see different dynamics between her
grandparents and parents. I ask her, “What were some ways you pushed back or you know,
resisted some of these—these things that were placed on you...or expectations I guess might be a
better word?” I hear the assumptions in my question as I say it. I worry it sounds judgmental. If it
does sound judgmental, BB doesn’t comment. She replies she never pushed back on these gender
expectations, and in fact because of her values of loyalty and protection she didn’t mind distancing herself from family if they had issues with her partner in the past. BB resist others' expectations of her role as a Black woman by choosing the values and expression of those values which allow her to live a life of peace, and she also holds the deep cultural and social roots of a family whose story travels across the palms of the Florida Georgia line to the coast of the Caribbean.

**Even sometimes I need to talk through it I don't necessarily need a response**

As we come to the end of the interview, I realize we’ve spoken for almost 3 hours. Through the ups and downs of our journey, I’m glad I can ask BB how she holds it all together and what she needs. BB has built a veritable toolkit of coping strategies. She went to therapy for the first time while she was an undergraduate student in college. She explains how it happened by accident when she visited a group therapy session and someone recommended, she try individual therapy as well. “They would just come like you need to talk to somebody like are you okay?” and BB was surprised. She didn’t see herself as someone who needed therapy at the time. The second time, her professor at FAMU read her paper about her experiences of trauma. He asked her if she was okay, and her response, similar to the first time was “I mean, I’m good. I’m you know everything isn’t ideal, but I'm okay with where I am right now.” At first, she questioned why people would ask her if she was okay when she shared her story. Now, she understands that sharing by itself was an important part of her process.

She writes about what she’s been through, and she also opens her laptop and talks to her webcam. “Even sometimes I need to talk through it I don’t necessarily need a response, so I literally just talk and then when I was done, I just stuck with it.” BB got the idea to speak into her webcam from Beyonce, and she thinks it’s a brilliant idea. I ask BB what she’d call her
experiences and her family’s experiences. “I will just call it humanity honestly.” BB doesn’t see the point of letting what’s happened to her limit her experience of the world. Whether a person’s decisions are right or wrong it’s important to her to extend grace to herself and others. “A lot of times the people walk around with these chips on their shoulders about what happened to them. They don’t understand that humanity has no bounds. There is no limit.” I feel warmed by this. Humanized. Then, we end, having shared a lot and feeling full.

August 1, 2021

Do what you need to do to protect your child’s peace

After our last interview I’m grateful for the first question. I felt raw and overwhelmed after our last conversation, and I also felt gratitude. I want to know how she felt too. “I wanted to ask you, you know, since that conversation, what impact did sharing your story with me have in your life?” I wait. Following the last interview, she and her mother had a conversation, and her mother apologized. Her mother tells her to do what she needs to do to protect her child’s peace, and it sounds like she wants to offer her support to BB and the child she’s carrying. “It was almost like it was freeing for me ‘cause it—it just, we’ve never had--me, and my mom have never had that conversation ever like about how she was not supportive and other things that have happened to me.” BB voices this with tender and intense emotion. Now she and her mother talk three times a week and text on other days. She feels overwhelmed by the attention and affection, because it’s unfamiliar. However, she doesn’t say it’s unwanted.

Our interview moves quickly after this moment, and BB and I easily imagine what her stories can do. She hopes her story will be relatable for other African American women and that they’ll feel understood by sharing in her experiences. When I ask her to imagine what justice looks like for African American women, she responds “acknowledgment.” She wants to see a
world where the needs of African American women are no longer dismissed—where they are seen, validated, and appreciated. She thinks healing for African American women and the African American community are complicated by gender and sexism. She mentions the Surviving R. Kelly documentary, and her feelings of shame that so many African American men were silent and so many women victim blamed. “What about justice for African American communities?” I question. She reimagines equitable educational opportunities for children—a righting of the wrongs of policies like No Child Left Behind and the educational debt owed to African American communities. For, her, this change would foster justice and the opportunity to thrive for African American people. She hopes her story will highlight the importance of intergenerational support for internal healing of African American communities. As always with BB, both the systems and the people have to be accountable to change.

**Being given the space to feel**

When I ask BB what healing looks like for her, she offers a process of unlearning and relearning. She’s learning new behaviors and different expectations than the ones she used in her childhood. Her healing comes back to her peace. If she can protect her peace and her child’s peace then, she’s okay. While talking about healing I notice the energy feels more hopeful between us. She believes healing for African American women is “being given the space to feel” and the resources to support themselves throughout the process. I think about her mother and her mother’s mother and all of the time they worked but how little space they had to feel. For BB, reclaiming space to feel is a transgenerational process whether it's working through her emotions or her self-storying. She continues to question, read, and connect with whatever she needs to support herself in her healing journey. She shares her insights, “If we don’t heal from them—we keep—it keeps showing up. And it keeps you know whether it shows up in your children,
whether it shows up in how you parent your children or whatever. Whatever part of your life is
gonna keep showing up until you deal with it.”

Healing is never like a final destination

After the last interview, I journaled about our co-creative process. I described it as
looking at a room of half unpacked boxes, some labeled, mislabeled, some miscellaneous, and
things strewn out and about, some artifacts of unknown origins...I felt responsible for organizing
those boxes, allowing my researcher role and insider/outsider identity to perhaps assume too
much responsibility. Entering the end of the interview feels like a co-organizing of our co-
creation. The fast intense pace of her stories and our emotions calming to a steady cadence on an
August afternoon. BB reveals how she wants her love of dance to live through her storying. She
hopes to represent her story through dance, evolving like her journey, moving in unending cycles
and rhythms, because “healing is never a final destination.”

IN: Research Participant 5
June 11, 2021

They have to be an adult in places and spaces where they were meant to be children

IN is powerful and self-assured. Her power isn’t a posturing or an affect, rather a strength
in her tone and her gaze. It’s an energy she exudes and carries. We begin the interview, and the
cadence of our call and response feels effortless. IN begins by sharing she doesn’t know a lot of
stories about other women in her family, because her mother was adopted when she was younger
and they aren’t close to her adopted mother’s family. IN and her siblings became estranged from
most of their family on her father’s side after moving from Louisiana to Florida, and she doesn’t
remember much of her life in Louisiana. She does, however, remember overhearing the stories
told among the women in her community growing up. She recounts overhearing stories of sexual
abuse, and women whose years as children and teenagers were short lived—forced to grow up through situations and responsibilities they shouldn’t have had to bear.

As she speaks, I imagine her, a child of age 6 or 7, listening curiously to the adults talk and trying to piece together their words; inquisitiveness and precociousness embodied in the tilt of her head and glint in her eye. Now, she is analytical as she talks about her development through understanding the stories. She tells me she began to understand the intent of the stories around age 10 or 11. Some of the women shared these stories to help her, and it made her feel mature to be invited to listen. Sometimes, the stories shed light on her own experiences. “Certain stories, especially the ones around like sexual abuse, it helped me to recognize certain sexual abuse and you know I used to be naïve and I’ve gotten sexually abused too, and there was a point when I didn’t even realize that I was being sexually abused until these stories came out, and I’m like, Ok this is clearly something that’s not supposed to happen,” she shares.

The stories she heard growing up were complicated, and in retrospect she wonders if hearing those stories put her in danger and exposed her to unsafe spaces as a child. IN also divulges how her perspective has shifted regarding these stories—especially the stories her mother shared with her. IN grew up 1 of 5 children with a twin sister, mother and father. She’s currently estranged from her family, but at one point in her life they were her biggest source of connection and support. She describes her mother as a narcissist, explaining her mother’s stories were not easy to trust, because her mother manipulated the details to maintain her position as “right” or as the “victim”. IN shares that around 10 or 11 she began to see her mother’s flaws. This came with the understanding that her mother’s intention in sharing these stories wasn’t always for their benefit or wellbeing. IN doesn’t volunteer how she felt about this discovery. She remembers being precocious, able to understand the conversations and behaviors of adults from a
young age. She also remembers knowing about sex and being exposed to sexual energy from family members and neighborhood kids from a young age. Throughout our conversation her voice is clear and sound. Even as she shares her feelings of resentment towards her parents for not protecting her from sexual abuse when she was younger, her voice remains steady.

As we talk about how IN shares her story with others, she tells me of the closeness she had with her sister growing up and how they would always support each other. “Even though I was going through this trauma, it almost felt like it wasn’t that bad because I wasn’t alone,” she explains. She didn’t have to hold those feelings of resentment by herself, because her sister experienced them with her. There was always someone there to witness her who understood. Sharing her story and feelings with others is more complex for her now. She describes herself as “pretty open and pretty much self-aware” but she also adds she’s “gotten really good at masking things.” I wonder if the steadiness and strength I experience in her storying is her balancing vulnerability and self-protection in this moment, but I don’t ask. The older women who shared stories, her mother, and her sister, provided spaces to speak and share about difficult things, but sometimes the intention and boundaries of that sharing were fuzzy. Sometimes she implicitly trusted Black women because of their shared identities and trauma. Still, just as she had learned she could not always trust her mother’s stories or intentions, she had learned to fear others’ judgments of her. Still, sharing is her primary coping mechanism and she’s used both therapy and her close relationships to understand her experience. I comment that even as she’s sharing with me, I notice she doesn’t seem activated or upset. She responds, “It’s not like my first time talking about it. I’ve gone through the motions of, you know, writing down my trigger and doing shadow work. And doing all that stuff so it no longer really hurts me. I have a better understanding of it.”
Because I have done my work I can see pretty clearly when someone hasn’t done their work

IN remembers how she came to understand her family’s and community’s narratives of sexual abuse and trauma. She shares how these stories both helped and harmed her, and now her purpose is ensuring she heals through understanding and protecting her child. Before IN shares her process of healing she tells me of the similarities between her story and her mother’s stories, and how changing her narrative meant sacrificing her connection to family. Her mother, who also experienced sexual abuse at a young age, had her first child at 17. She was raised by her adopted mother, who IN remembers being told was religiously conservative and sometimes cruel to her mother. IN draws inferences from her mother’s upbringing and current patterns, stating “She would make my mother wear like long skirts or sometimes even a skirt with pants under them just because she didn’t want to have her skin showing, and I believe that manifested into my mom being hypersexual.” She also thinks her mother’s experiences led her to value hyper independence and dominance in her relationships. She says her mother consistently has sexual relationships outside of her marriage, and her father is likely aware of some of these relationships. Yet, she doesn’t believe her father will leave her mother, because he is mostly dependent on her and is the submissive person in the relationship dynamic.

I can see the wheels in IN’s mind turning as she adds to her analysis of the connections between her mother’s relationship with sexuality and her relationship to sexuality. She considers herself to be sexually liberated and comfortable with both her masculine and feminine energy. Still, she wonders if maybe her mother’s hypersexuality alongside her value of hyper independence were transmitted to her. She remembers her mother’s focus on her daughters’ physical appearance as a child, and sometimes wondered if her mother was jealous of her and her
twin sister. They were a source of pride for her mother, and she would often dress them up and display them. “I guess her worth and the fact that she had beautiful daughters it kind of ended up damaging me and my sister because for some reason they would refer to us as the pretty twin and the smart twin.--So I always grew up feeling like oh, they think I’m dumb and my sister grew up thinking oh well, they think I’m not pretty you know.” As I hear her describe these feelings, I connect with the vulnerability of what she’s sharing and feel deeply the pain of being compared to someone who is your sister and friend and the tensions that can cause.

IN continues to share how she perceives a lot of her mother’s choices in romantic and sexual partners as directly related to her sense of self-worth. “I know that she had been hurt by the men in her life, and she is also overweight, and because she’s overweight and how society treats people who you know tend to be overweight, she accepted those labels and those perceptions of her, and she let it define who she was,” she explains. I interpret IN’s explanation as a form of empathy for her mother, and I also hear IN’s desire perhaps that her mother would reject those labels and perceptions of herself. IN, through therapy, through shadow work, spirituality and constant reflection is healing and “doing her work” which means refusing other’s perceptions of her and choosing self-determination instead. She’s found herself in her work, but she has also lost contact with family and friends. “I’ve been cut off from my family.” She proclaims. “I’m kind of the black sheep now, and that’s because I was aware of trauma patterns, and I don’t allow some of these things to happen anymore, especially now I have a daughter.” She loves her family, but she also sees they all have work to do, the work of healing the trauma that bonded them. The distance between her and her family seems to be on both sides. “So, because I have done my work, I can see very clearly when someone hasn’t done their work.” She
adds, “unfortunately” to this statement, and I glimpse the powerful and often lonely choice of choosing oneself in her words.

**I need to say that I love women, especially black women**

IN explores her relationship with Black women by filtering through moments of connection and disconnection. There’s her sister, who used to be her biggest confidant. Although sharing their traumas was comforting, IN always hungered to move past it, to understand. Then there’s also the subject of IN’s spirituality, which her sister, who practices Christianity, disapproves of. Now, they don’t talk much. There’s also the subject of IN’s friendships with women. She tells me she was close to three women who she considered best friends, but their relationship fell apart. “I think it’s been hard for me to have relationships with other women simply because I feel like I’m always being judged, and it started with my mom and now my sister don’t want nothing to do with me” she clarifies. I listen for emotions in her voice, but I don’t know IN well enough to decipher what I’m hearing. “So I love women. I need to say that I love women, especially black women. However, I don’t know how to have these healthy relationships,” she explains. I hear the sincerity in her voice. It seems this is one of the few things in her life she is unsure about, what it is about her or them that impact her ability to have the relationships she wants with other women.

She elaborates on this struggle; her difficulty finding a Black woman therapist who is open minded about her spiritual beliefs. She’s felt judged and questioned before in her therapeutic relationship and she explains, “that in itself kind of caused a little bit of trauma.” Vulnerability and trust are risks she feels she can take with a very specific kind of woman. I’m reminded of her ability to mask her emotions and the necessity for doing so. She adds that showing vulnerability for her is rare, and she doesn’t show vulnerability with men at all unless
they’ve earned it through trust and effort. She refuses to be used, or to have her “vulnerability used against [her],” she believes in protecting herself and her daughter emotionally even if it means wearing a mask.

**If I’m going to anything in this world, I’m gonna raise a daughter that’s free from the curses I had**

A significant aspect of IN’s life is her relationship with her daughter. She wants her daughter to understand what she couldn’t and to protect her in any way she can. Like her mother, IN birthed her daughter when she was 17 years old. She describes having a large support system at the time which helped as she struggled between her identities as a young adult and mother. She shares with me that she didn’t know how to be a mother and she still wanted to enjoy her youth, which meant at first, family took a big role in raising her daughter. “I guess I should say that when I turned 27 last November, that was the first time I saw myself as an adult. Up until I turned 27 last year I considered myself as a child...so, with that being said, now I have like more awareness in how I’m raising my daughter,” she declares. She wants her daughter to be emotionally healthy and intelligent, to understand people’s projections onto her as a young Black girl. She also wants her daughter to understand there are levels of trust, and while she can trust family in certain aspects, she must be aware of their flaws as well. IN illustrates her intentionality in raising her daughter and how it’s changed her communication and interactions with her. She expounds on the development of their relationship, “The words that I would use toward her and how even though I had all these traumas from my mom subconsciously and—and---and not even realizing it, I was doing the same thing to my daughter, and so I’ve changed that by being more open...trying to help her identify her emotions by giving her the space to tell me how she felt.”
She gives her daughter the apologies she never received as a child. She demonstrates boundaries by discussing her need for space. She lets her daughter know how she’s feeling and allows her daughter to see her as human. She’s vulnerable with her. As IN talks about her daughter a new energy surges through her. Her eyes are bright and dark and her smile is accentuated by the tautness of her cheekbones and the long locs pulled back from her face. Although she’s talking to me, I see she’s talking to her daughter in her heart. “Yes, I’m going to protect you, but I’m also human. So I’d rather be vulnerable with you versus being vulnerable with anybody else. If anybody needs to know the real me, it’s going to be you.” I hear her promise to her daughter as she speaks, and I know implicitly she means it.

She recounts more of her transformation as a person through motherhood. There were times where IN would verbalize her distress towards her daughter and at night, she would lie with the hurt of what she did. But now, as she’s grown, she believes being a mother is a part of her mission. She doesn’t cuss at her daughter or hit her, because she wants her daughter to know her voice, honor her feelings, and recognize harm when she sees it. She wants her daughter to leave any situation that doesn’t feel healthy for her, so IN is purposeful in showing her what healthy relationships look like. “I feel like one of the main things that pushes me to be better is the idea that she is my mission, and not necessarily my only mission but if I’m going to do anything in this world, I’m gonna raise a daughter that’s free from the curses that I had...as long as I feel like I’m being a good parent, that’s what really matters to me, because she is my greatest investment.”
I realized that some of the trauma from these stories that I was holding onto I let it go because it wasn’t my life

IN tells me she released a lot of the stories she heard growing up. She realized they weren’t her stories and she allowed herself to let them rest. Other stories are harder for her to release, and the toughest stories are the ones she heard from her mother. She remembers these stories centering around sex and men seeing women as sexual objects. The general theme of those narratives was that “women have a lot more to worry about.” IN begins a story about her and her twin sister and how they learned of things little girls had to worry about. Her older brother’s friend was sexually abusing her and her twin sister. They were six years old. He began spreading rumors in the neighborhood about her twin sister. I notice myself feeling a mixture of anger, shock, and sadness as I listen. The volume in IN’s voice rises slightly as she shares how the adults in the neighborhood contributed to the rumors, saying “oh this girl is fast.” No one held the boy accountable for abusing 6-year-old girls.

This was one of many times she experienced or heard of victim blaming. She shifts to another story when she was 20 years old, and she was date raped by a friend of a friend. “I came to terms with what happened, however part of me didn’t even want to go to court because I knew that I was going to be victim blamed.” I feel pissed off with her, for her, for women, for Black women. “I knew that I wasn’t in a space to heal if I was going to have to be victim blamed,” she elaborates. I don’t refrain from responding, adding my own feelings of anger and hurt for her experience and that women rarely receive justice in these scenarios. IN’s friend didn’t believe her when she told her about the date rape, in fact the friend feared being ostracized from the community and that people would think she was a “set up”. IN tells this part of her story as if she’s still surprised by her friend’s rejection and perhaps the hurt that followed. Her theory is it
doesn’t benefit women to believe each other and protect one another, because so many women identify with their social roles as mother, wife, partner, etc. She thinks we’ve developed this pattern of protecting men and thus, relieving them of accountability to protect “the sanctity of the community.” We both wonder what community is there, if children aren’t safe and women don’t have the right to their bodies and boundaries. In that moment, the sanctity of community feels a mere illusion.

Yeah, that’s why I’m sexist now

“I feel like sexually I prefer to be in control,” she says calmly as she shares with me about her role as a dominatrix. She reclaims power over her sexuality and boundaries over body through her work, though at times her emotions about her work are complicated. IN feels empowered by her role as a dominatrix, but she also fears the judgement of others—that the representations of Black women as hypersexual will be transposed onto her work. She believes in her intentions to heal, educate, and uplift others through pleasure and pain. She endeavors to be trauma-informed in her work, and ensures she understands her client’s limits, needs, and history. Even as she reclaims power over her sexuality and her body through BDSM, she remembers the pain of being called “fast”, the moments she doesn’t feel strong. She perseveres through ostracism, through judgment to do the work that feels meaningful and healing to her. Her role as a dominatrix is complex, intertwined with her complicated relationship with men.

She tells me she doesn’t like men and she considers herself openly sexist against men. It’s part of the reason she pursued her work as a dominatrix, but it’s not the entire reason. “There were too many instances where I wasn’t in control, and too many instances where I felt like my body was being used for a man’s pleasure and not my own so, if I’m going to do anything I’m going to at least get pleasure out of it,” she voices. As much as her role as a dominatrix is about
pleasure it’s also about education. She uses her position to teach men accountability, submission, and introspection. I imagine they do not leave her presence unchanged. When I ask her what accountability looks like for men, she mentions men recognizing their privilege and changing their behavior. “They don’t want—they want to retain this power, and that in itself is toxic and that is what they consider masculinity.” I hear the frustration in her voice as she recounts the different experiences where men were not held accountable for their actions and the women in their lives chose to support the men.

IN pronounces she is unafraid to expose any “minor or major” behavior she deems problematic in her community. She also uses her knowledge to educate other women. “I feel like I have a duty to protect them...and what better way to protect them by being vulnerable with my support by telling them what to look out for by making them aware.” People consider her “problematic” because she does speak up and advocate. She is passionate and convicted as she says, “I had to come to the realization that a lot people might not believe you, but my story isn’t dependent on if people believe me or not.” She wants her daughter and other women to feel this empowered to know and speak their truth, but she feels first women must relinquish their attachment to the “pick me” mentality which asks them to choose partnership and romantic love over their truth. IN doesn’t sound hopeful that the dynamics of abuse culture, patriarchy, and toxic masculinity will change anytime soon, but this doesn’t thwart her efforts to do her part. She knows a lot of these dynamics are born out of trauma and she thinks it complicates the ability for African American couples to move beyond trauma bonding. “That’s going to take a lot of healing on both parts before we can actually move to trying to establish something healthy...it’s almost like meeting someone in therapy versus meeting someone like at a bar.”
I try not to let anybody define me

When it comes time to ask IN about ways she’s pushed back or resisted the expectations of her as an African American woman, I’m not surprised at how much she has to share. “There’s no set way to live,” she states, “and so I try to push back against society norms, in general---I’m always there questioning.” Her gender performance, sexuality, roles, and energy are all places of reclamation and resistance. She believes in being in touch with her masculine energy and feminine energy. “I try not to let anybody define me or tell me what I should be or what femininity looks like, because it looks like different things to different people.” Her confidence is inspiring, and I add supportive “mmms” and nods as she continues to share how she rewrites her story every day by living in alignment with what she wants. She doesn’t subscribe to heteronormative gender roles about submission, femininity, and staying silent. Though there are moments when people project their blame of the dissolution of Black manhood or Black families on her as a Black woman and single mother, she still resists. “I try not to let it get to me...like oh, this is why our generation of men is like this—it's single mothers’ fault? No it’s not. It’s like we’re left with scraps and we have to make do our of fucking scraps.” She has no qualms in ignoring and invalidating responses like these. To her, if it qualifies as toxic, she’s not listening. She knows these people are trying to trigger her, and ignoring them is integral to protecting her mental health. She mentally returns to her mission to educate her daughters and the women around her so the next generation can do better.

I believe I am the black sheep because I pose a threat to the norm

As we near the end of our first interview, I’m surprised at how long we’ve spent together. The interview feels more like a conversation, and I’m invigorated by witnessing both the pain and power of her story. I ask IN about her healing journey, what’s helped, and how did she get
here. Shadow work, she calls it. Her spirituality and connection with her ancestors are where it
began. “I feel like they want more than anything for their ancestral debt to be paid for their
trauma, to end with me, that’s why.” She’s the black sheep in the family and she knows it. She
says this clearly. There isn’t much space between her words. “So even if nobody else in my
family heals, I know that from me, and my generational line is going to be.”

Learning about her ancestors was an individual undertaking. She recalls asking her uncle
about family members’ names and birthdays and creating her ancestral altar. “Then I just started
connecting with them, feed them you know, sitting things on the altar, giving them offerings, and
then I started to feel their presence,” she says, her voice strong and soft. Her connection with her
ancestors is palpable in how she speaks of them and her rituals of care. They are a source of
strength—the spiritual family she needs. “Knowing that I have this power, and not only do I have
the power of the women and the men that came before me whose blood runs through my veins I
had their power too, and it made me feel as if I’m not alone, especially now that I am the black
sheep and I feel alone physically.”

Another important aspect of her spiritual journey is her dominatrix style which is all
about teaching men how to be better people and “recognize toxic patterns.” “So not only am I
doing this for me, but I’m also doing this for the next generation.” She says this matter of fact. It
is both cathartic and empowering to express her feelings unbridled and with consent towards the
men she works with. “So that’s fulfilling for me as well to think that I could possibly be
changing the narrative for men in the community,” she adds. There’s a purpose to her work and
sometimes it’s just nice that a man will ask her to “slap the shit out of him.”

As we move toward the end of the interview, I ask IN what she would name the
experiences we discussed today. For her, the stories she’s witnessed and shared are a result of or
cause post-traumatic stress disorder. “Mislabeling this type of thing means mismanaging the type of health that person gets from it whenever they discuss it---it’s generational PTSD.” As she’s sharing her thoughts on PTSD and the African American community, she recalls a time when she realized her experience of the world was vastly different than her white counterparts. She formed a connection with a white man at the time, and he seemed to always be carefree and careless to her. At first, she thought he was immature, but then it dawned on her “that’s what true freedom looks like.” She shares with me, “It made me realize I’m not as free as I want to be...like yeah, I’m really not free in this world. I’m not free in this society the way they want to present to us that we are.” In our sharing of moments of connection, disconnection, and empowerment, we somehow arrived at this—comparing our experiences to White men and finding our freedoms lacking. We finish the interview discussing what we will explore next—how to imagine freedom and justice for Black women in this world.

June 25, 2021

There’s no justice as long as we’re living under a patriarchy

The second interview is relaxed. IN is sitting outside on her porch, and the sun is highlighting her face. We’re reflecting on her story and what she hopes sharing her story will do for other African American women. She hopes others will be able to see themselves in her story and recognize their traumatic retentions and transmissions. “I think it’s more so about healing the next generation because what’s happened has happened to us, and so there’s nothing more we can do to come from these things other than heal ourselves so that we can be the best version of ourselves for the next generation.” I agree with her. There is a place for accepting what is and focusing on moving on, on becoming a good ancestor. IN doesn’t just want her story to support women in their reflection and growth. She also wants to inspire men to see their patterns and
consider how their behaviors “may be toxic towards the healing and growth of women.” She adds, for there to be healing we must recognize we’ve all been victims of trauma at some point and be accountable to changing the patterns we’re transmitting. It’s not about blaming one another.

When I ask IN what she imagines justice looks like for African American women she quickly responds. We’re radical dreaming, and the possibility of living without patriarchy arises. “It’s kind of hard to fathom living in a world not under patriarchy,” she shares. “…but in order to really experience justice, especially for the Black woman we would have to eliminate the patriarchy completely.” All forms of oppression which impact African American women’s ability to be equal and have equitable access is a radical, yet beautiful, world. It saddens me that this is radical. For IN, equity implies reparations. I query what does she imagine as reparations. “No laws governing our bodies,” she states. The freedom to determine sex, sexuality, and motherhood for ourselves. Good health care. I ponder how reparations are simply human rights.

IN continues to share her beliefs about justice for Black women. It’s more than reparations and self-determination, it’s also eradicating the limiting and harmful representations of Black women. IN discusses how these representations as hypersexual or caretakers or masculine/strong are rooted in racism and slavery. Across the media, the medical field, and hip-hop music she finds the same stories of dehumanization and sexualization. She shares a story of realizing her body was sexualized in ways her white counterparts were not. She remembers wearing shorts to her high school which was predominantly white. Her peers wore “short shorts” all the time, but they were never reprimanded. However, when she wore shorts to school she was asked to change. She was the same age as her peers. She was the same, but her body was perceived differently. “Automatically sexualized” she names.
The other aspect of reclaiming self-representation is being able to speak one’s truth. IN desires for every Black woman to “unapologetically speak”. What would it mean if she had been able to name her experience of being sexualized in high school without being targeted as “angry” or “crazy”? How often are Black women gaslit into silence, into illusion, or into submission by being demonized for their truth? IN believes by creating this representation of Black women we are essentially gaslit out of our justice—they can’t be held accountable for what isn’t happening. “Usually when it comes to Black women [the narratives are] always the same, and so it’s going to start with you know killing that image of us, and really presenting, giving us the power to change our own narrative and present ourselves how we want to be presented.” She wants other women to have the opportunity to refuse the internalization of these representations and claim unapologetic expression. She’s doing it. I’m doing it. We are never without these representations, and yet, by relaxing into who are, we are resisting. I agree so much with what IN shares, I lose myself in listening and learning. The follow up questions fall away as I assume we feel the same. When she says “them” and “their” I assume I know. And when I hear her share about gaslighting and justice, I don’t even ask how she feels. I know.

The healing is gonna come once the justice is there

IN isn’t waiting for reparations or justice before she dedicates herself to her healing, but she believes justice is necessary for collective healing. Justice is necessary to honor the work of healing, and to support it. It’s hard to heal when the patterns which keep one safe are reinforced by continuous trauma. “I’m gonna heal regardless if, you know, the patriarchy ends today or not. I’ve had to come to terms with I grew up in this time so I have to make do with what I have so healing for me is mostly about teaching my daughter and raising her differently,” she shares. The thread connects to what her ancestors did to bring her into this world, to stay alive and thrive,
and now she is doing her part. She’s focusing on her healing, and she believes asking women to heal while living without justice is no better than gaslighting. She explains her belief that societies cannot heal without justice. “That’s pretty much like people constantly throwing rocks at us and hiding their hands and telling us that we still have the same opportunities as everybody else, and that’s not going to help anybody else. That’s going to drive us crazy...”

**How often do we get to be children? And exactly, how long do we get to be children?**

As we near the end of the interview I feel like a student of IN’s life and a temporary insider into her process. When I ask her about how she would like her story to be represented, her excitement is palpable. She has many ideas, and she shares them freely. “Dance....we’ve always expressed ourselves through dance even before we were enslaved.” “Storytelling,” she interjects. “Like a regular narrative or an audiobook with the voice of a powerful or strong black woman.” As we talk through the ideas of representation, we imagine how to engage all of our senses in the storytelling. Movement, music, voice. If it’s an audiobook or performance she would like for the narrative of her youth to be read by a child and the other parts to be read by an adult. I feel this is powerful and wonder how to convey the complexity of her experiences as a child while also protecting the child reading the story. It strikes me that her inner child, her younger self is not just reading this, but experienced it. I share my thoughts, and we brainstorm. “That way when people are hearing it, they can hear the sincerity and they can hear like, hey this was somebody that was a child so that they can really understand the implications of it.”

She brings up how a recent article she read mentioned that men see women as primarily sex objects—they don’t see them as once being children. She thinks her daughter is the perfect person to read her youth. She thinks, having her read from the perspective of her inner child instead of retelling the traumatic experiences would be powerful, and moving. We agree. People
have “soft spots” for animals and children, not women. We’re still dreaming. Sometimes people
don’t have soft spots for animals or children either. “So like if we can reach them at their soft
spots, then we could probably reach them at a place where they will be willing to change
behaviors that will impact our children and generations to come,” she says. “Yeah,” I reply. “I
mean, I don’t think that in all the representations of Black women, unless we’re creating it
ourselves.” “How often do we get to be children?” I ask. The question is rhetorical. “Exactly,”
IN responds. “And how long do we get to be children?”
Chapter 5: Discussion

“I surrender...To ancestral reach so long it could become us...To a love too big to name.”

-Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the results of this Black intersectional feminist and endarkened feminist study of the transmission of transgenerational trauma through the cultural mechanism of storytelling with African American women. This study was designed to address the epistemic erasure and elision of African American women within psychology, trauma studies, feminism, and African American diaspora studies by centering African American women’s experiences of transgenerational trauma transmission. Furthermore, this project centered African American women’s experiences by using Black feminist ontoepistemological and theoretical conceptualizations of research, methodology, and analysis.

In this study, I focused on the cultural transmission of trauma through storytelling by investigating the how language is used within stories, how stories are shared, when stories are shared, and how meaning is co-created between storytellers and story listeners across generations, chronological time, and physical locations/geopolitical space. Additionally, this study focused on the embodied experiences of the participants such as their emotions, sensations, and reactions to stories of trauma from interpersonal, intergenerational, and systemic perspectives. The study also addressed the co-creative process of storytelling through the researcher’s field notes and reflexive journaling.

The analysis of the interviews resulted in five interpretive narratives exploring the transmission of transgenerational trauma through each participant’s process of naming, storying, transmitting, and meaning making. Through their storying, participants engaged in the radical act
of (re)membering, refusing the “seduction of forgetting” (p.17) and creating sites of cultural production and resistance (Dillard, 2012). Together, we co-created endarkened storywork where we “cast into relief not only how we’ve been seduced into forgetting historically but what we might choose to (re)member and what we want those (re)memberings to do,” (Dillard, 2012, p.16). In this chapter, I explore the elements of (re)memory in the discussion and the implications for theory and practice. Then, I conclude the chapter with a brief overview of the limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

This research project engaged in unsettling and witnessing the epistemic erasure of African American women’s experiences of transgenerational trauma transmission by dempathologizing and (re)centering African American women’s experiences in the psychological study of trauma. In doing so, I applied Black intersectional feminist theory and endarkened feminist theory to conceptualize the research process including the literature review, methodology, methods, analysis, and interpretation. Furthermore, although I used narrative inquiry as my methodology, I employed it within the framework of Black feminist qualitative inquiry and endarkened feminism. This allowed me to conceptualize ethics, relationality, and reflexivity within a Black feminist epistemology. I created the following research puzzle to address to witness and unsettle transgenerational trauma transmission inter/intrapersonally, socially, culturally, and systemically with African American women:

1. How is transgenerational trauma transmission understood, narrated, and named by African American women?
   a. What are the experiences of cultural transmissions of transgenerational trauma?
   a. What are the experiences of social transmissions of transgenerational trauma?
b. What are the experiences of systemic/structural/political transmissions of transgenerational trauma?

2. What are the rituals, practices, and ways of navigating the transmission of transgenerational trauma?

The findings of this study showed African American women engaged in the radical act of “(re)membering as decolonization” (Dillard, 2012, p. 4). Within their narratives/endarkened storywork they engage in (re)naming their experiences and truths while (re)fusing seductions of silence and complicity in accepting and intentionally perpetuating trauma across generations. Furthermore, participants enact Sankofa, which translated from the language in the Akan tribe of Ghana means “to look back to look forward” (Dillard, 2018, p. 617). Participants enact this radical (re)memberance by using their cultural memories to “change ways of being and knowing” (Dillard, 2012, p. 11) in the present. In this looking back, participants were able to recall the intergenerational impact of trauma transmitted within families and community and across systems, institutions, and geopolitical locations. They carried with them, their great grandmother’s experiences of witnessing lynching alongside their own experiences of modern-day lynching through videos of police brutality. The survivances of their mothers comingled with their inherited survivances and rituals of healing. The silences woven in their stories coexisted alongside their vows to always speak up. Their search for meaning, healing, and love mirrored their efforts to connect, be accountable, and hold what they have close. The spirit of their ancestors reawakened on their altars, in their testimony, and through their service. These participants chose to (re)member with their “whole bodies, minds, and spirits, as tools and sites” so that together we could “ask new questions of the goodness of science, of our multiple histories, of theory,” (Dillard, 2012, p. 21).
Radical Act of (Re)memory

(Re)membering is vulnerable. It acknowledges the threads of African ascendant cultural heritage, identities, and diaspora both painful and hopeful. (Re)membering is liberational. It creates spaces of “new connections, and recognitions, new sites of accountability, and new sources of individual and collective power,” (Dillard, 2012, p. 26). (Re)membering is dangerous. It refuses seduction and dominant ideologies, investigating damage-centered reductive narratives at risk of “metaphorical or literal exile” (Dillard, 2012, p. 26). (Re)membering is offering, an energetic process of recentering desire through ancestral inheritance, spirit, and wisdom which in return creates new knowing and new being toward the way forward (Dillard, 2012, p.27).

Acknowledging the Threads

One of the most salient threads across the endarkened storywork was the participants use of remembering as a radical act in reclaiming, hybridizing, and practicing spirituality. Spirituality can be defined as the belief in a divine or higher being or universal law (Bryant-Davis, 2005). Spirituality is also well studied as a positive coping factor in trauma recovery and post traumatic growth literature (Bryant-Davis, 2005; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). N mentions the significance of her relationship with spirituality in the story “I call it like, ‘the old ways’. In this story, N discusses a painful rupture between her mother and her mother’s father and their side of the family. Despite this rupture, N was able to build a relationship with her maternal grandfather’s side of the family and connecting with her mother’s side of the family exposed her to practices such as venerating her ancestors. She described learning about this practice and how it allowed her to develop relationships which crossed relational divides and heartache in her family. N hybridizes her spiritual practices using elements from different traditions to create containers for self-exploration and self-reflection. IN describes a similar
process of connecting with her ancestors in the story “I believe I am the black sheep, because I pose a threat to the norm.” She contacts her paternal uncle to learn about the birthdays of her family members and slowly builds her altar. Then, she begins to feed them, talk to them, and learn about their unique energetic imprint. This practice not only connects her to her ancestral inheritance, but it also provides a sense of comfort and community while she is estranged from her family.

S also discussed her desire to (re)member and (re)claim the spiritual practices of her ancestors. She too infused creativity in her (re)search for ancestral spiritual practices using divination and tarot as tools for guidance and intuition. S appears to be in the beginning of exploring ancestral spiritual practices. During her interview, she expressed feeling unsure if her spirituality would be accepted by her grandmother or lead to further ostracism from her family. She was pleasantly surprised when her grandmother accepted her interests in African ancestral spiritual practices, but she still felt unsure about which practices were appropriate for her. BB and Lauren Ashley discussed having a close relationship with God and practicing Christianity to connect with their community and themselves. Although they did not explicitly state a desire to access ancestral African spiritual practices it is possible, they engaged in some practices as African ancestral spirituality is often well infused in the traditions of Black churches (West, 2011).

Similarly, to the research on trauma recovery for survivors of child abuse, sexual violence, war, and post-traumatic stress, the findings of this study showed the importance of religious and spiritual based coping strategies such as prayer, mediation, ancestor veneration, and attending spiritual/religious events (Bryant-Davis, 2005; Bryant-Davis and Wong, 2013; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). These strategies further allowed the participants to create meaning,
support connection and compassion with self, and enhance connection to others throughout their experiences of transgenerational trauma (Bryant-Davis, 2005; Bryant-Davis and Wong, 2013). Many participants described their use of spiritual and religious coping strategies as a method to take responsibility for their psychological and spiritual wellbeing demonstrating both a western socialization of mental health and spiritual conceptualization of mental health (Ojelade, McCray, Meyers, and Ashby, 2014).

**Connections, Recognition, Accountability, and Power**

Many of the participants spoke about using their awareness of the transmission of transgenerational trauma to transform their lives and the lives of their family and community. BB spoke of breaking the pattern of her family’s silence around harm and violence within the interpersonal family dynamics. Doing so allowed her to set boundaries around her mental, physical, and emotional well-being in her story “We all want to get back to that place where we’re that close, but then at the same time, it’s like I know I need to step back from y’all for a little bit.” She also shared how recognizing the impacts of trauma in her family facilitated connections centered around accountability and growth for her and her cousin. The empowerment BB shared in being able to set physical and emotional boundaries with her family and to create her own environment may reflect a high locus of control. Locus of control is theorized as a personality trait which indicates how much control a person perceives they have in their environment (Cumings & Swickert).

In studies of post traumatic growth, which is defined as personal growth and perceptions of positive outcomes following trauma such as natural disasters and loss, people who report a higher internal locus of control show a strong correlation with measures of post traumatic growth (Cummins & Swickert, 2010). Those with external locus of control which indicates a low sense
of control over one's environment have a higher correlation with measures of anxiety and depression (Cummings & Swickert, 2010). Lauren Ashley also discussed the importance of taking accountability for her actions and seeking change as a significant aspect of growing through transgenerational trauma. She frequently mentioned throughout her story that she feels inspired by women who changed their mindsets and behaviors after difficult experiences. She used her spirituality, religious community, and relationships to keep her accountable to the changes she would like to see in herself. She also used language such as “allowed” “choose” and “refuse” throughout her storying which indicates she perceives herself and others as active agents in their environment.

Both BB and Lauren Ashley addressed their ability to produce new community through acknowledging and healing transgenerational trauma. Community support is defined as “talking to others (nonprofessionals) to explore themes related to the trauma or to problem solve concerning the effects of the trauma,” (Bryant-Davis, 2005, p. 412). During BB’s most difficult moments dealing with medical and interpersonal trauma she sought her relationship with God through church, and church provided her the community support she needed to heal through that experience. Lauren Ashley talked through how important sharing testimony with friends was to her growth as a person. Furthermore, she felt her purpose was to intentionally share her story with younger women who she felt needed guidance. Overall, their stories portray that transgenerational trauma transmission can be transmuted through community support and a sense of control in one’s environment.

It’s important to note not all participants related to their environment similarly to BB and Lauren Ashley. S mentioned her difficulties developing an internal locus of control in her job and home environments which was also a part of her family’s transgenerational narrative.
However, S also experienced racial discrimination at her job and more isolation from community support which can act as barriers to self-efficacy, psychological well-being, and trauma recovery (Bryant-Davis, 2019; Cummings & Swickert, 2010). Although IN dealt with similar challenges as S, such as restrictions around financial resources and isolation from family and community support, she (re)claimed her power through spirituality and sexuality. IN divulged the details of her relationship with sex, power, and kink in her story “I believe I am the black sheep because I pose a threat to the norm.” As a survivor of childhood sexual assault and revictimization in adulthood, IN expressed empowerment in her body and boundaries through Dominance and Submission play with consenting adults.

Considering the sociohistorical context of sexual assault for African American women and the history of sexual assault in IN’s experience of transgenerational trauma her ability to create an environment of internal locus of control around sex and sexuality is a deliberate (re)fusal of victimhood; it also a reclamation of her inherent right to exist safely within her body (Bryant-Davis & Ulman, 2010). Through her engagement in BDSM kink, IN generated new culture, connections, and community. She used her power as a dominatrix to educate her clients about patriarchy and influence their sociocultural concept of gender roles. She also shared her knowledge and experiences to facilitate awareness of abusive and toxic relationship patterns among women.

(Re)fusing Damage and Dominant Ideologies

All participants discussed learning to navigate reductive representations of African American women in their stories. Moreover, participants refused dominant ideologies regarding race, gender, and class which impacted their experience of political intersectionality, representational intersectionality and structural/systemic intersectionality. Many of the
participants enacted their refusals to the seduction of forgetting themselves by (re)claiming love, care, and worth within their embodiment. African American women are faced with sociohistorical stereotypes that are dehumanized and often hypersexualized (Crenshaw, 1991; Dillard, 2012). Therefore, self-representation for African American women is a radical act “of resisting degradation and of developing (through (re)membering) one’s culture as a powerful ideological and epistemological standpoint,” (Dillard, 2012, p. 30).

African American women’s bodies have historically been the battleground for White cishetero patriarchal supremacist projections. In particular, media representation in American society is rife with misogynoir—the hatred of black women, through stereotypical images of African American/Black women as unattractive, masculine, angry, and “uncouth” (Gaines, 2017, p. 98). Many of the participants shared their battles with misogynoir in their jobs, medical institutions, and intimate partnerships. N spoke of her struggles facing constant policing of her body and hair in the fast-food industry, in photography, and as a classical musician. Regardless of her talent, work ethic, and ability, she was continuously pressured to conform to Eurocentric standards of beauty. She shared the negative impact this discrimination had on her mental health in her story “I will say I do deal with body dysmorphia.” She also explains the nuances of colorism, hair type, and body size in her story and how as a dark-skinned woman with a full body type and kinky natural hair, she experienced more policing of her body than other women. It appeared in some spaces she navigated invisibility and in other spaces hypervisibility. Furthermore, some of this policing occurred within her own family, as questions regarding her hair, style of clothing, and body weight were constant points of discussion.

In her story, “What I’m familiar with is I guess pain? So trying to like love myself even saying it out loud just feels weird to me” S described the uphill battle of resisting misogynoir
representations of Black female femininity and divesting from commercial beauty standards. She mentioned, much like N’s story, that when she cut off her hair the first thing people questioned was her gender identity and sexual identity reflecting the misogynoir concepts of Black women as masculine and unattractive (Gaines, 2017). For both N and S, cutting off their hair was an act of refusal to Eurocentric beauty standards of “good hair” and the sociocultural influenced attachment African American women often have to their hair (Dillard, 2012; Norwoord, 2015). BB also revealed her challenges developing self-worth and self-love due to feeling rejected on the basis of her skin tone and body type when she was younger. She described her body type as more busty and slender than stereotypical representations of African American/Black women’s bodies. She stated her body type was similar to her mother’s body type and her sister’s. However, due to the different images of female body type desirability of her mother’s generation, her mother could not relate to her experiences of rejection. Furthermore, because her sister has a lighter skin tone than her, she did not experience the same feelings of rejection as BB. BB continued to grapple with the pain of her experiences while acknowledging the racist roots of colorism and the politics of desirability (Norwood, 2015).

Experiences of colorism, gendered racism, fatphobia, classism, and “being overlooked and underpaid” were woven throughout the participants’ narratives of transgenerational trauma in interpersonal relationships and institutions. Many of the participants examined the relationship dynamics between the men and women in their family narratives. Most of their stories revealed intergenerational patterns of interpersonal violence and experiences of neglect, abandonment, and rejection among male counterparts. Lauren Ashely analyzed her family’s “generational curse of not being married” with her cousins and they found it to be a point of sadness and humor. She remained hopeful of finding a partner, and also believed her primary relationships were with
herself and God. BB considered the women in her family’s relationship with work and careers as a direct correlation with the patterns of ruptured romantic relationships in their lives. She suspected the ruptured relationships led to a sense of distrust in partnerships, which cultivated a desire for independence and drive to be self-sustaining.

The participants also talked about their relationships with other women and how the internalization of misogynoir impacted their ability to form connections with other Black women. IN and S discussed being outspoken against the misogynoir they experienced and witnessed in their communities only to experience a lack of protection, rejection, and in some cases retaliation from people in their community. IN surmised many women in her community continued to choose romantic relationships over believing women who are being victim blamed and supporting the interests of women, because of the potential social loss in their roles as mothers, wives, and partners to men. The participants described at times, complicated relationships between them and the other women in their family. There were tensions between mothers, siblings, and extended family members as participants challenged relational patterns resulting from traumatic retentions within the family (Menakem, 2017). Overall, their experiences revealed the insidiousness of misogynoir in male to female relationships across generations.

Throughout their stories, participants recounted many examples of structural/systemic racism and misogynoir. For example, Lauren Ashley expressed her anger at the injustices of medical institutions guilty of projecting the “angry black woman” stereotype on Black women often leading to the minimization or dismissal of their pain. S recalled moments working extra shifts and dedicating herself to her jobs only to receive less pay and have her concerns about racial discrimination invalidated. IN disclosed her struggle to guard herself from the hyper
sexualization she received from men since childhood and the victim blaming she experienced and witnessed within her community. She was never given justice for the acts against her body whether due to the gatekeeping in her community or barriers within the legal system. Misogynoir representations of African American and Black women perpetuate images of victimization, violence, and hypersexualization which are traumatizing (Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw, 2012; Gaines, 2017; Norwood, 2015). The participants’ stories portray how these reductive representations significantly impact the lives of Black women. Although these participants find ways to love and support themselves despite these (mis)representations, it is an injustice they must face these experiences at all.

(Re)centering Desire and (Re)creating Being

Gaines (2017) says, “at stake then, for black women in discourses of self-love is not only the personal, but a political rejection of a society that devastatingly devalues black womanhood,” (p. 102). In (re)fusing the political, structural, and representational rejections of African American/Black womanhood, the participants (re)center what they desire for themselves and the next generation of African American/Black women. They look back again to recover what has been lost in the White supremacist soup of anti-black racism, gendered racism, and misogynoir. They recast a net of desire, pulling upon ancestral wisdom, love, and their own divinity. Lauren Ashely discusses in intimate detail the moment she recognized her need to prioritize self-love in her story “This is the temple of the Holy Spirit. You can’t treat yourself like this. You can’t allow yourself to be treated like this.” She decided to take a vow of celibacy and refused intimate partnerships which did not reflect her worth. Her family’s transgenerational narrative was wrought with experiences of intimate partner violence and unfulfilling or failed relationships, so
it was important to her to reclaim and prioritize a relationship with God and herself in hopes of changing that narrative.

BB spoke of the value of career and achievement as a source of self-esteem and self-confidence in her family’s transgenerational narrative. For BB, seeking education allowed her to understand the impact of structural racism such as the No Child Left Behind Act and exposed her to opportunities to seek mental health care. BB mentioned each of the women in her family dedicated time and energy to honing their craft and careers. In some cases, it was possible this contributed to their sense of internal locus of control. On the other hand, it is also important to investigate African American/Black women’s relationship to work and productivity considering the sociohistorical value placed on Black women’s bodies as objects of labor. BB represented the women in her family as high achieving workers who could also use more time, energy, and space to care for themselves.

BB and IN (re)center their desire for a healthier next generation through their roles as mothers. BB, who was pregnant at the time of the interviews, was motivated to set boundaries with her family to establish an environment of peace for herself and her offspring. IN used her role as a mother to teach her daughter self-care and self-advocacy through modeling healthy boundaries and unapologetic self-acceptance. Lauren Ashely instilled hope in others by engaging in community service and mentoring young women. Each participant (re)centers their desire for love, worth, healing, and connection in their own way whether it is by showing up and being themselves, allowing themselves to dream, or looking back to look forward. When I asked the participants what they believed justice looks like for African American women, I was surprised by the simplicity of their answers. I was also saddened: “Being heard, like the first time” “Being given the space to feel” “Equity across the board” and “a life without patriarchy”. These
responses reflect the crux of transgenerational trauma, that across systems there must be changes so we can recreate sustainable containers for healing and that within our individual lives we must hear ourselves and feel ourselves and hear and feel through the stories of our ancestors.

**Implications for Theory**

The findings of this study support the rich and nuanced insight we can glean from studies rooted in endarkened feminist epistemology and Black feminist qualitative inquiry. Furthermore, this study responds to the epistemic erasure and silencing of African American/Black women by centering Black intersectional feminist and endarkened feminist frameworks of theory, analysis, and representation (Pillow, 2019).

Dillard (2012) states

(Re)membering what we’ve forgotten as African ancestral women, through engaging cultural memories threatens the seduction of theory, upsetting the deeply rooted paradigms, theoretical notions, epistemologies and the taken-for-granted nature of the notion of theory itself. It decenters the talk of research and the theories that both drive it and that it generates, helping us to see clearly that what counts as ‘evidence’ can also be unseen, spiritual and is always cultural and embodied. (p. 20).

One of the most important contributions of this study to psychological theory, feminist theory, and trauma studies, is its (re)centering of African American women’s experience through (re)memberance. The spiritual and cultural act of (re)membering allowed us to witness and unsettle the transgenerational trauma paradigm in ways which have not yet been conducted in psychology, feminism, and trauma literature. Furthermore, the research explored the nuances of the cultural transmission of transgenerational trauma through storytelling and the psychological influence these stories have on people’s lived experiences.
Psychology as a field of study and practice often forgets, even in its application of intersectionality, to always consider the sociocultural historical contexts of mental health (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Grounding more psychological studies in endarkened feminist epistemology will greatly impact the ethics of relationship, community, and representation, hopefully reducing the often-harmful reductive representations reinforced by psychological studies of mental health in African American communities (Dillard 2000; Pillow, 2019; Tuck 2009). Moreover, considering that research in psychology is heavily couched in Western Eurocentric formulations of mental health and using its power to make claims about the well-being rights and needs of others, investigating reflexivity as interpretation should be normative to the research process (Adams et al., 2006; Pillow, 2015). In reading my reflexivity journals from the beginning of the research process until now has fostered reflection and investigation of my positionality. It is likely I would have been more easily seduced into forgetting my responsibility to community first without the reflexivity journal to unsettle and analyze my positionality and intentionally reflect on the research process.

Combining Black intersectional feminism and endarkened feminism proved to be a fruitful process, one that has not been done in trauma studies. The theories acted as if superimposed upon one another, as endarkened feminism helped me explore the nuances of spirituality, ritual, and transgenerational (re)membreance and Black intersectional feminism highlighted the layers of layers of political, representational, and structural/systemic intersectionality. As endarkened feminism can perhaps travel transnationally in ways Black intersectional feminism cannot, it may be useful for studies in trauma research and inter/transgenerational trauma to apply both theories. Evans-Winters (2018), Dillard (2012), Toliver (2022) and Tuck (2009) offer questions from endarkened feminist, Black feminist, and
Indigenous perspectives of research, relationship, and community. As a researcher with insider/outside positionality it was essential I ask, “what will be the outcomes and effects of this research in and on our communities?” (Tuck, 2009, p. 410). However, all research, especially those focusing on the impact of trauma with communities who have been historically marginalized should ask this question. Therefore, I argue the fields of psychology, mental health, and trauma research have much work to do in repaying the epistemic debt to marginalized communities and are only scratching the surface with intersectionality.

Feminism and women and gender studies are rooted in racist settler-colonialist discourses which contribute to the erasure and marginalization of feminist of color (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013). As a result, many mainstream feminist discourses discuss the concerns of non-white women as rooted in experiences which are historical (i.e., slavery) and as such irrelevant. Therefore, it has been necessary for feminist scholars of color to create separate epistemological and cultural standpoints from which to theorize their experiences and mobilize for their idea of justice (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill, 2013). Black intersectional feminism and endarkened feminism respond to the epistemological and cultural standpoints of African American women. Thus, framing their experiences of transgenerational trauma transmission within Black feminist epistemology and qualitative inquiry provided a different angle from which to conceptualize this phenomenon. Furthermore, it also responds to the historical epistemic erasure of African American women’s experiences of gendered racism and misogynoir (The Combahee River Collective, 1973). Therefore, it is inappropriate to theorize experiences of transgenerational trauma transmission with African American women through feminist theories which do not account for the lived intersectionality of African American women.
Implications for Practice

The results of this study indicate the need for further exploration into clinical practices and treatment to support African American women who experience transgenerational trauma. Fortunately, recent movements within psychology are recognizing the importance of acknowledging race-motivated interpersonal trauma for Black, Indigenous and other Women of Color (BIWOC). Furthermore, recent studies in treatment of interpersonal trauma for BIWOC are applying Black feminist epistemological frameworks to trauma treatment in lieu of Eurocentric models of trauma treatment (Bryant-Davis et al., 2021). One framework in particular, womanist psychology centers the importance of self-definition, community, spirituality, consciousness raising, and activism in the healing and well-being of Black women, though it can be applied to the experiences of other IWOC and POC of marginalized sexual and gender identities (Bryant-Davis et al., 2021). Because this model centers the empowerment and healing of Black women, it specifically addresses the “role of gendered cultural identity” through the rejection of internalized oppression, facilitating connection with self and others, focusing on justice, and developing self-compassion and self-care (Bryant-Davis et al., 2021; Bryant-Davis & Comas-Díaz, 2016, p.3).

Womanist psychology also encourages growth and healing through a holistic perspective, supporting the interconnections of mind, body, and spirit, expressive arts, ecotherapy, and political empowerment (Bryant-Davis et al., 2021). Moreover, womanist psychology values the witnessing of BIWOC and is purposed in “render[ing] women of color visible, heard, and validated as the therapeutic relationship is grounded in respect, compassion, and the capacity to honor the woman’s strengths while also attending to their wounds,” (Bryant-Davis et al., 2021, p.4). Therefore, Bryant-Davis et al. (2021) assert womanist psychology is inherently trauma
informed and focused on “recognizing the reality and impact of trauma on women of color as well as creating space for healing, restoration, resistance, and post-traumatic growth,” (p. 4).

**Transgenerational Trauma Alchemy**

This Black intersectional feminist and endarkened feminist study highlighted the beauty and power of applying Black feminist epistemology and Black qualitative inquiry to the study of transgenerational trauma with African American women. The study also showed the significant impact the cultural transmission of transgenerational trauma has on the daily lives of African American women. Many participants stated they did not realize the extent of the transgenerational trauma they were carrying until another person showed interest, asked questions, and reflected on the extent of their experiences. Thus, they were not aware of their the trauma they were carrying until someone acknowledged and witnessed alongside them. Therefore, I assert, it is equally important for clinicians to witness through modalities of trauma informed and culturally sensitive assessment and treatment of transgenerational trauma just as we would other forms of interpersonal, sexual, and developmental trauma in clinical practice. Throughout this study, the participants demonstrated the ability to hold multiple threads of storying related to trauma across generations, relationships, chronology, and geopolitical locations. In addition, the participants also maintained an awareness of their personal experiences of trauma and the connections and disconnections between their experiences of trauma and other family and community members' experiences of trauma. What I experienced in co-creating the interpretive narratives and endarkened storywork alongside participants was the process of witnessing and unsettling the transgenerational trauma paradigm through what I call Transgenerational Trauma Alchemy.
Transgenerational Trauma Alchemy (TTA) theory is generated by Black and African American women, informed by Black feminist and endarkened feminist epistemology, postcolonial feminism, and Indigenous and Jewish historical trauma research. Furthermore, it is conceptualized as an integrative framework rooted in womanist psychology. TTA is the intentional process of witnessing through (re)memberance intergenerational experiences of trauma through cultural memory and unsettling the transgenerational experience of trauma enacted by structural/systemic, representational, and political oppression. TTA is purposed in supporting people who wish to enact the principle of Sankofa, “going back to fetch what is at risk of being lost” and thus, reaching through the collective and cultural memory to witness traumas their ancestors may not have had the capacity and resources to transmute during the lives.

Alchemy, in this instance, is defined as, “a power or process that changes or ‘transforms’ something in a mysterious or profound way,” (Breitbart, 2017). Transgenerational Trauma Alchemy is, therefore, the process or power of transforming trauma through the psychosocial spiritual context of therapeutic setting(s) which may or may not take place in psychotherapy. Alchemizing transgenerational trauma, is an undertaking of gathering the threads across generations to and from the ancestral homeland, connecting to the stories, emotions, and experiences of these threads, and choosing one’s attitude, relationship, and ritual with those threads (Breitbart, 2017).

As a clinical practice, Transgenerational Trauma Alchemy is an integrative endarkened feminist and womanist framework which includes the intentional facilitation of alchemical states which are not linear or prescriptive. These states are awareness, acknowledgment, agency, accountability, and autonomy. Many of the participants discussed the importance of being
witnessed and having their stories heard, named, and reflected. This in turn, facilitated the participant’s awareness of the emotional, spiritual, and physical connections they had to their family’s experiences of transgenerational trauma. Acknowledgment—the naming and creating of their identity in connection to systemic/structural trauma and interpersonal trauma coincided with the process of witnessing. Most participants distinctly (re)membered their age, reactions, and interactions when hearing stories of transgenerational trauma. Later in adulthood, many participants sought a deeper understanding of their experiences of transgenerational trauma and sought to create meaning from these narratives.

As participants began to acknowledge their experiences of transgenerational trauma they also began to settle/unsettle their experiences of transgenerational trauma by exploring the impact of transgenerational trauma in their daily lives, and seeking rituals, practices, and traditions for healing. During this state, participants tended to connect with others undergoing similar processes to create relationships which foster accountability for the growth they were seeking. While participants explored and exercised their agency, they also engaged in practices to disrupt the transmission of transgenerational trauma to the next generation. The last state, autonomy is interdependent with the participant’s sense of agency and the lived realities of their intersectional experience. Therefore, some participants used their agency to find jobs which were more affirming of their embodiments and practiced spiritualities which were more connective to their relationship with a divine being, which influenced their sense of autonomy, or right to govern aspects of their lives. However, as one of the participants stated, attempting to heal when there is consistent structural/systemic, political, and representational injustice is incredibly difficult if not entirely impossible. Therefore, participants often made decisions to move toward or create more autonomous environments for themselves, while focusing on supporting the next
generation in accessing more autonomy in their lifetime. Together, these elements create alchemy, a spiritual form of rootwork which transcends the experiences of generations and even physical embodiment.

In summary, TTA is an intentional application of endarkened feminist and womanist principles to facilitate growth and healing through transgenerational trauma. As transgenerational trauma is an ongoing experience for the participants and many African American people, it is not appropriate to use “healing from” or “post” traumatic. However, elements from post-traumatic growth literature and other trauma recovery literature can be beneficial to support people in moving through transgenerational trauma. TTA is intentionally integrative and can be used with experiential, psychodynamic, relational cultural, somatic, and expressive techniques. TTA also offers specific questions and follow up questions which can be used to assess transgenerational trauma. However, remember in asking these questions the most important part of TTA is witnessing as an act of hearing, empathizing, and connecting with the client’s experience.

Some TTA informed questions are:

1. What stories have you heard about trauma (or difficult painful events with long lasting impact) in your family?
   i. When did you hear these stories?
   ii. Where did you hear these stories?
   iii. How did you feel when you heard these stories?
   iv. How does it feel to share this story with me now?
   v. (Optional follow up): I notice these stories seem to be related to (gender, race, sex, violence, relationships, etc.) What other stories are there related to these experiences?
2. What are some stories you heard growing up in your family, but you weren’t allowed to ask about or talk about?
   i. Do you talk about these stories now? If so, with whom?
   ii. What are your reactions to those stories?
3. How do you think these stories impact your daily life?
   i. What do you notice when you think of these stories?
      1. Specific feelings, thoughts, judgments, behaviors?
      2. If you could do anything with these stories what would you do?

These questions are one way to approach assessing transgenerational trauma transmission. Depending theoretical orientation clinicians can also use specific modalities to assess transgenerational trauma. For example, an emotion-focused clinician may assess the transmission of transgenerational emotional schemas or maladaptive emotional patterns and use experiential techniques to support the TTA process. A somatic based clinician may spend more time assessing the client’s somatic experience of transgenerational trauma narratives and work with the client to alchemize their psychosomatic experience of the trauma through self-regulation and co-regulation. Expressive arts clinicians may assess transgenerational trauma by having clients write from the point of view of ancestors and family members and read the narratives aloud in session. Transgenerational Trauma Alchemy is an intentionally integrative framework where clinicians and clients are encouraged to co-create the experience of alchemy using their unique perspectives, modalities, and relationships.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

Although I intentionally focused on the experiences of African American cisgender and transgender women from the Midsouth, she also recognizes the vast and varied experiences of
African American women across the diaspora. Therefore, it is recommended future studies focus on the experiences of African American women and transgenerational trauma from different geopolitical locations. Moreover, I focused on the experiences of African American women as opposed to Black women due to the sociocultural differences between women who may identify as Black but not African American women. Broadening the study to focus on the experiences of Black women and transgenerational trauma will provide more context to this growing body of literature. In addition, I chose to center the experiences of cisgender and transgender women for the purposes of this study. There was one participant who identified as a cisgender woman and as gender questioning/nonbinary. It is important to acknowledge the spectrum of gender identities and impact of colonialism on the gender spectrum in the African diaspora. Future studies should focus on the experiences of transgenerational trauma across the gender spectrum.

Research on post traumatic growth, trauma recovery, and post-traumatic stress disorder will also benefit from exploring psychological outcomes and the components of cultural transmissions of transgenerational trauma. This study focused on the cultural mechanism of storytelling and (re)memberance more than the mental health outcomes of transgenerational trauma. It will significantly benefit the literature and clinical practice to study the mental health outcomes and variables of transgenerational trauma growth from multiple theoretical perspectives. This study was conducted through interviewing with individual people. Different methods such as focus groups and case studies may provide additional insights which will benefit the growing literature on intergenerational and transgenerational trauma.

**Concluding Remarks**

This study sought to give transgenerational trauma transmission a “new language” (Walker, 2012) and it revealed exactly that through the (re)naming, (re)storying, and
(re)membering of the participants. Participants co-created a mosaic of interpretive narrative/endarkened storywork where they followed threads to ancestral homelands, generated connections, recognitions, community, and power, (re)fused damage centered ideologies, and (re)centered desire. Witnessing and unsettling the transgenerational trauma paradigm was the most important project of my doctoral training. Walking alongside participants in their stories, jumping through time, space, and bodies to witness with each other the threads of our ancestry and realities of our lives was beyond anything I expected. Our collective dream in this project is to see these stories positively impact other African American women who are also seeking witnessing and unsettling in their lives. We continue to radically dream, to practice acceptance for who and where we are, and dare to create self-loving and affirming spaces and relationships as we endeavor to change oppressive conditions.
References


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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Dissertation Interview Guide

**Project:** The purpose of this endarkened feminist and Black intersectional feminist study is to unsettle/challenge/question/resist the colonial history of psychology and the study of trauma and African American history. In addition, this study aims to witness the experience of African American women and trauma through learning how African-American women, name, narrate, heal from and experience the transmission of transgenerational trauma (or very difficult/stressful/painful events with long-term impact) inter/intrapersonally, socially, culturally, and systemically.

**Time of Interview:**

**Setting:**

**Date of interview:**

**Informed Consent:** Please sign the informed consent detailing your agreement to participate in this research activity.

**Interviewee Pseudonym:**

**Interview Procedure:**

The interviewee and interviewer will go over informed consent. Upon agreement to the informed consent, interviewees will choose a pseudonym. Upon providing this information, the interview will begin. Once the interview is complete, the interviewee will be asked to fill out a number of demographic questions.

To the Interviewee: You are being asked to participate in an interview concerning how African American women experience the transmission of transgenerational trauma through naming and narrating inter/intrapersonal, social, cultural, and systemic experiences. During this interview, you are being asked to respond to multiple questions that will be open-ended and probing. You may choose not to answer those questions that are uncomfortable for you. The interview will be audio and/or video recorded and transcribed verbatim. Our results will be confidential, and you will not be identified. As a part of the member checking process, all participants can elect to review the transcript of their interview.

**Core Interview Questions**

1. How would you describe your relationships with women in your family such as your aunts, mother, sisters, grandmother, etc.?

2. One of the ways I learned about being an African American woman was through my own experiences and self-storying but also from the stories my parents and grandparents and aunts told about their lives. What are some stories you’ve heard about hard/stressful/painful events that affected the women in your family or community?

   a. When was the first time you remember hearing this story?

   b. What were some of your reactions to this story? Towards the narrator/story teller?
c. What do you think was the purpose of being told this story (in this way)?


d. How did you pass on this story to other women in your family or community?

e. How do you feel discussing this story with me?

3. How do you see the impact of very difficult/stressful/and/or painful events influencing the women in your family?

   a. What are some long-lasting impacts you’ve noticed?

      i. What do you think created the long-lasting impact of these events on the women in your family?

   b. What are some indirect effects of these events you’ve noticed?

4. How do the women in your family talk about very difficult/painful/stressful experiences which have long-lasting/long-term impact?

   a. What terms or phrases do the women in the family use to discuss these experiences?

   b. Where do these conversations normally take place?

   c. Who is present or allowed at these conversations?

   d. How do these conversations change when men are present, if at all?

   e. If they don’t talk about these experiences, why do you think that is?

5. One thing I’ve noticed in my own family is in recent years, as my grandmothers have grown older and become elders in the family, they opened up a lot more about their traumatic experiences, particularly with the grandchildren and this has sparked more conversation about difficult and painful experiences in the younger generations of the family. Are there any changes you’ve noticed similarly to my example concerning how the women in the family discuss very difficult experiences with long-lasting impact?

   a. What are some shifts in how these experiences are named/labeled?

   b. What are some shifts in beliefs?

   c. How do you feel about these changes?

6. Part of this study is to discuss African American women’s experiences of very difficult/painful/stressful events which have had long-lasting/long-term impact. If you don’t mind sharing, what are some hard/stressful/painful experiences that have happened in your life related to being an African American woman?

7. Have similar events (difficult/stressful/painful events related to being AA women) happened to other women in your family?

   a. If so, how were these experiences discussed? How did you learn about these events?
b. How did you feel when you heard about these experiences? Towards them?

c. What were some of your reactions to hearing that other women in your family had similar experiences to yours?

d. Was there anything you took away from learning about this experience? Did it change any of your behaviors? Feelings? Thoughts? Or outlook on life?

e. How did you communicate your experience to other women in your life? Children?

7. Hearing stories from my elders about some of the painful and stressful things that they’ve survived has helped me understand myself better and helped me to think differently about our struggles as women in the family. What are some beliefs you or the women in your family have toward yourself/selves which are influenced by the long-term effects of these very difficult/painful/stressful experiences?

8. How do you think the long-term effects of these very difficult/stressful/painful events impact the relationships you or the women in your family have with others (i.e. partners, children, community)?

9. In what ways do you feel factors such as race, class, gender, etc. created very difficult/painful/stressful events for African-American women?

   a. What were some ways you pushed back/against identities or labels that were placed on you?

   b. How did you navigate holding all of these identities and navigating some of the difficult/painful/events we talked about today?

10. What are some beliefs or practices you use to cope with some of the experiences we discussed today?

   a. Where did you learn these practices, beliefs and/or rituals?

   b. Which of these beliefs and/or practices were learned from your family?

   c. Why or why not do you use spiritual and religious beliefs, practices?

11. When I was preparing for this research I came into contact with a lot of negative descriptions and stereotypes about African American women’s experiences of trauma and our ways of managing and coping. Even the word trauma, carries this negative label. I think it’s important to question how psychology and these other systems name and label our experiences for us. So my question to you is, if you were to come up with your own language for describing the experiences we talked about today or even if you already have your own language what it be? How would you name your experiences?

12. Is there anything you want me to know that I didn’t ask about? Anything I should have asked about but didn’t?

Demographic Survey (To be completed at end of Interview)

Please fill out in the second box.

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?

3. What is your race/ethnicity?

4. What is your socioeconomic status (SES)??

5. Where do you live (City/State)?

**Dissertation Interview Two Guide**

**Project:** An investigation of how African American women name, narrate, heal from and experience the transmission of transgenerational trauma (or very stressful, painful, and/or difficult events which have long-term impact) inter/intrapersonally, socially, culturally, and systemically.

**Time of Interview:**

**Setting:**

**Date of interview:**

**Informed Consent:** Please sign the informed consent detailing your agreement to participate in this research activity.

**Interviewee Pseudonym:**

**Interview Procedure:**

The interviewee and interviewer will go over informed consent. Upon agreement to the informed consent, interviewees will choose a pseudonym. Upon providing this information, the interview will begin. Once the interview is complete, the interviewee will be asked to fill out a number of demographic questions.

To the Interviewee: You are being asked to participate in an interview concerning how African American women experience the transmission of transgenerational trauma through naming and narrating inter/intrapersonal, social, cultural, and systemic experiences. During this interview, you are being asked to respond to multiple questions that will be open-ended and probing. You may choose not to answer those questions that are uncomfortable for you. The interview will be audio and/or video recorded and transcribed verbatim. Our results will be confidential, and you will not be identified. As a part of the member checking process, all participants can elect to review the transcript of their interview.

**Core Interview Questions**

1. I felt very impacted in [blank] ways after our first interview, and I want to ask what impact did sharing your story with me have in your life?
   a. Emotionally?
   b. Mentally?

2. Knowing that your story has had a powerful impact on me and will influence research in psychology and women’s studies, and beyond that, what sort of influence would you like your story to have on other African American women? And the African American community?
3. I spend a lot of time thinking about what justice looks like for African-American women and communities and if justice is truly possible. I’m wondering for you, what do you imagine as justice for AA women?

   a. And for AA communities?

   b. Is justice for AA women different than justice for AA communities?

4. Because of our history and struggles, I think a part of justice, for me, means healing, and I think healing is a process that needs to happen for each generation over the course of generations, but I also recognize that healing can look different for different people. How would you define healing for yourself?

   a. AA women?

   b. For AA communities?

5. There are so many stories out there about African-American women—some negative and some positive. I think a big part of taking back our stories and resisting stereotypical or negative narratives is to tell our own stories, to tell them honestly—but to also tell them our way. What ways do you think AA women can take back power over our narratives?

   a. How do you see this happening?

   b. Are there examples of AA women who have taken power over their narratives that influenced you?

6. A big part of this research project is us imagining how to share our stories with the world. This can be in written form like poetry or blogs, or via art, performance, audio, and I want to know what are some creative and powerful ways you might like to see your story represented?
Appendix B: Informed Consent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informed Consent for Research Participation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Researcher(s)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Researchers Contact Information</strong></td>
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</table>

You are being asked to participate in a research study purposed in exploring how colonialism in psychology influences the study of trauma and African American women. This concept will be explored by investigating how African American women experience the transmission of trauma from one generation to the next via naming, narrating, and resistance and healing practices. The box below highlights key information for you to consider when deciding if you want to participate. More detailed information is provided below the box. Please ask the researcher any questions about the study before you make your decision. If you volunteer, you will be one of about 5 people to do so.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Key Information for You to Consider</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Voluntary Consent:</strong> You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose:</strong> The purpose of this endarkened feminist and Black intersectional feminist study is to unsettle/challenge/question/resist the colonial history of psychology and the study of trauma and African American history. In addition, this study aims to witness the experience of African American women and trauma through learning how African-American women, name, narrate, and heal from the transmission of transgenerational trauma (or very stressful/painful/impactful events with long-term impact) inter/intrapersonally, socially, culturally, and systemically.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Duration:** It is expected that your participation will last over the course of two, two-hour interviews. Due to the nature of this study, you will be asked to participate in two interviews and may be asked to review the transcript of your interview for accuracy and transparency. The LI will ask you a series of questions regarding your desire to participate in the second interview and review your interview transcript(s).

**Timeline:** Please note the research process may last anywhere from the time of the interview to data analysis and representation. This process can last from approximately 6-12 months from date of initial interview or May 2021-May 2022. Data collection will last approximately 2-4 months (May-August). Transcription of interviews will be ongoing and will last approximately 2-5 months (May-September). Data analysis and representation will last approximately 3 months (September-December). Data representation will last approximately 3 months (January-March).

April and May have been added as additional months in the event of extenuating circumstances that delay any part of the research process.

**Procedures and Activities:** You will be asked to participate in two two-hour interviews over the course of this study.

**Risk:** There are no physical, social, legal or other risk associated with participating in this study. Since the study does ask questions related to trauma and family history, there may be unintended psychological consequences. Consequently, should participants experience psychological concerns during the course of the study, they will be referred to community service providers and mental health resources delivered to them upon request. Additionally, participants will be notified of their right to cease participation at any time during the course of the interview or study if psychological discomfort arises.

**Risk Procedure:** The LI will follow the American Psychological Association (APA) emotional crisis risk suggestions in the event that a participant experiences emotional and/or psychological distress or discomfort. Thes APA emotional crisis risk suggestions outline signs of mental health concerns and emotional or psychological distress. The APA The LI will maintain awareness of any signs of emotional/psychological distress throughout the interview and periodically ask the participants if they feel comfortable or need assistance. If the participant states they feel emotionally or psychologically distressed and are unable to complete the interview, the LI will cease asking interview questions and ask the participant the following questions: (a) Do you feel need any support or mental health assistance at this time? (b) Do you have access to a mental health care provider or mental health professional to support you at this time? (c) Would you like a list of resources regarding mental health services in the Memphis area? If the participant would like a list of resources, the LI will provide them an email and/or pdf copy of the list of mental health resources. Please note the LI does not have any affiliation or relationship to any of the mental health resources, community centers, or clinicians provided to the participant.

**NOTE:** If a student: If you decide not to take part in this study your choice will not affect your academic status or grade in your class. Benefits: The participants receive
no direct benefits for participating. The potential societal benefits are: unique contributions to feminist, psychological, qualitative, and transgenerational trauma literature, the problematization of the transgenerational trauma paradigm, and broadening the scope of trauma theory in psychology.

**Alternatives**: Participation is voluntary and the only alternative is to not participate.
Who is conducting this research?

Asia Amos of the University of Memphis, Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology, and Research is in charge of the study. Her faculty advisor is Dr. Sara Bridges and her methodologist is Alison Happel-Parkins. The methodologist may have access to the transcripts of this study to assist the lead investigator in the coding and analysis of the data.

Lead Investigator: Asia Amos is a fourth-year doctoral graduate student in the Counseling Psychology program at The University of Memphis. She has her certificate in Qualitative Methods and is currently completing her course work to obtain a certificate in Women’s Studies. She is active on two consensual qualitative research projects and currently reviews qualitative articles as a member of the Psychology Women's Quarterly (PWQ) Student Advisory Board. She is also a member of QUIC, the university-based Qualitative Inquiry Club.

Methodologist: Dr. Alison Happel-Parkins is an Associate Professor of qualitative methodology in the Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology and Research at the University of Memphis. Her most recent work has centered around collecting and analyzing narrative inquiry data from women who have experienced pelvic floor disorders, and women who had planned to have an unmedicated childbirth for the birth of their first child. She teaches graduate-level qualitative research courses in the College of Education and has presented and published her research work nationally and internationally.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research study is to unsettle how transgenerational trauma (the transmission of trauma (i.e. slavery, mass incarceration, sexual abuse, police brutality, etc) from one generation to the next) is theorized, studied, and treated with African American women by learning how African American women name, narrate, and experience the transmission of transgenerational trauma. You are being invited to participate because you identify as an African American woman, age 18 or older who has experienced and/or knows family stories about inter/intrapersonal, social, cultural, and systemic experiences of transgenerational trauma.
**How long will I be in this research?**

The research will be conducted at various locations in the Mid-South such as private library meeting rooms, my private office in the University of Memphis campus library, and via virtual end-to-end encrypted platforms. It should take approximately two to four hours of total participation time. Participants will be asked to meet for two semi-structured interviews either in-person or through a virtual platform. Each interview will be approximately one to two hours.

Due to the nature of this study, participants will have the option to remain in contact with the researcher after the interview for research-related purposes. The boundaries of this relationship will be negotiated by you the participant and the researcher.

Timeline: Please note the research process may last anywhere from the time of the interview to data analysis and representation. This process can last from approximately 6-12 months from date of initial interview or May 2021-May 2022.

Please circle Yes or No to the following questions and initial next to your response:

Would you like to maintain contact with the LI in regards to the research study?

(Yes or No) Initial______

Involvement would include:

You may be asked to reread parts of your interview transcription for clarity, accuracy, interpretation or follow-up.

You may be asked for follow-up in the form of a second interview.
You may be asked your opinion, advice, or suggestions in creating representation of your data in forms such as narratives, poetry, art formats, and performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Adult Participant</th>
<th>Signature of Adult Participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Would you like to meet face-to-face in a private setting while adhering to COVID-19 safety guidelines such as social distancing, and wearing face masks?
Yes/No (Circle One) Initial_____

Would you like to meet virtually via end-to-end encrypted software?
Yes/No (Circle One) Initial_____

**What happens if I agree to participate in this Research?**

If you agree you will be asked to meet either in-person or via virtual platform to provide demographic information and answer a series of questions. You can expect each interview to take approximately one to two hours. During this interview, your responses will be audio recorded (in-person) and saved on a password protected USB device which will be kept in a lockbox. The interview questions will involve discussing difficult experiences which you may wish not to disclose such as, “Part of this study is to discuss African American women’s experiences of traumatic events. If you don’t mind sharing, what were some difficult/stressful/painful events that happened in your life?” “Have similar events happened to other women in our family?” “If so, how were these events talked about?” During the interview, you have the right to only answer the questions which feel comfortable and safe for you to do so. Additionally, you have the right to cease participation during the interview at any time.

**What happens to the information collected for this research?**
Information collected for this research will be used for a dissertation publication and potential article and arts-based publications. Identifiable information will not be available in the publication of this research. Although we may publish/present the results of this research, your name will not be used in any published reports, conference presentations, or performance/arts-based work. All identifying information will remain confidential and all data saved such as transcriptions, interview recordings, and scanned paperwork will be de-identified, recoded, and saved under a chosen pseudonym and password protected in a locked lockbox. Any information recoded on the final transcript will be saved on an encrypted file and stored in a locked lockbox.

Data will be destroyed in seven years through a professional reputable company that specializes in destroying confidential information.

**For contact purposes:**

The LI may retain contact information for future contact purposes regarding the research study. **Please ONLY sign** below to indicate your consent to have your contact information retained by the lead investigator.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Adult Participant</th>
<th>Signature of Adult Participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?

We promise to protect your privacy and security of your personal information as best we can. Although you need to know about some limits to this promise. Measures we will take include:

All research data will be confidential, encrypted, and saved on a password protected USB portable device.

The LI (lead investigator) will communicate with the participants through email and phone call/texts services which have Transport Layer Security/Sockets Layer (TLS/SSL). The LI will also use an email service that is Internet Protocol Security (IPSec) and Advanced Encryption Standard (AES) compliant. **Please note text messages are not encrypted.

For Face-to-Face Interviews: The LI will store all recorded interviews on a USB portable device with a password protection and store this device in a lockbox with a code.

For Face-to-Face Interviews: The LI will de-identify and scan all paper documents which will be encrypted then saved on a USB portable device with password protection. All paper documents will be shredded after scanning.

For Virtual Sessions: The LI will audio record virtual sessions and store all recorded interviews on a USB portable device with password protection and store this device in a lockbox.

For Virtual Sessions: The LI will only use end-to-end encrypted software for virtual interviews.
For Virtual Interviews: The LI will encrypt all documents exchanged between the LI and participants that contain identifiable information. The consent form and interview guide will be encrypted and saved on a USB portable device with password protection.

All interviewees will choose a pseudonym for their interview. This pseudonym will be used throughout the interview. The transcribed interviews will be kept on the USB portable device with a password protection and stored in a lockbox.

All data will be de-identified prior to transcription. Transcription will be completed by the lead investigator. Transcripts will be encrypted and saved directly to the password protected portable device.

Some limits to data security and storage are: in the case of hacking virtual platforms the LI may not be able to ensure protection of participant data. In the case of a robbery or break-in to the LI’s personal property, the LI may not be able to ensure the protection of participant data.

The LI and the methodologists are the only people who will have direct access to participant data and participant data storage space and only for the purposes of the research. The data will be kept for the duration of the project and up to 7 years pending multiple research projects or publications with the data. After 7 years, the data will be destroyed using a professional and reputable services that specializes in destroying confidential information.

Individuals and organization that monitor this research may be permitted access to inspect the research records. This monitoring may include access to your private information and interview transcripts. These individual and organization include:
Institutional Review Board

The LI’s dissertation advisor

The research study methodologist

For studies in which mandatory reporting is a requirement, the following state must be included:

Research team members are required to report the following if a team member suspects child abuse or neglect, or suicidal thoughts. TN Laws may require this suspicion be reported. In such case, the research team may be obligated to breach confidentiality and may be required to disclose personal information.

What if I want to stop participating in this research?

It is up to you to decide whether you want to volunteer for this study. It is also ok to decide to end your participation at any time. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decided to withdraw your participation. Your decision about participating will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of Memphis.

Will it cost me money to take part in this research?

There are no costs associated with participation in this research.

Will I receive any compensation or reward for participating in this research?
There are no direct rewards or compensation for participating in this research project. The research participants may opt-in to receive a gift of appreciation from the researcher at the end of the interview process. The LI will ask the participant if they would like to opt-in to receive an appreciation gift of two books, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies* by Resmaa Menakem and *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* by Audre Lorde. If you would like to receive this gift, you will be asked to provide either an email address or a mailing address for the LI to mail the gifts the items. All participants who choose to receive a gift will have their addresses saved in an encrypted file stored on a password protected USB device. Upon delivery of the items, the participant addresses will be deleted from the encrypted file and/or destroyed.

**Who can answer my question about this research?**

Before you decide to volunteer for this study, please ask any questions that might come to mind. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Asia Amos, at asia.amos@memphis.edu or Dr. Sara Bridges at sbridges@memphis.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705 or email irb@memphis.edu. We will give you a signed copy of this consent to take with you.
STATEMENT OF CONSENT (The statement of consent should not be separated on multiple pages)

I have had the opportunity to consider the information in this document. I have asked any questions needed for me to decide about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions through the study.

By signing below, I volunteer to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been given a copy of this consent document. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, my legal representative or I may be asked to consent again prior to my continued participation.

If you are using audio/video/photography in the research including the following

As described above, you will be Audio recorded while performing the activities described above. Audio recordings will be used for the transcription of the interviews. Initial the space below if you consent to the use of audio recording as described

_____ I agree to the use of (audio recording)

Name of Adult Participant ___________________ Signature of Adult Participant ___________________ Date _____________

Researcher Signature (To be completed at the time of Informed Consent)
I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understand the information described in this consent and freely consent to participate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Research Team Member</th>
<th>Signature of Research Team Member</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Researcher: Asia Amos, The University of Memphis

Email: asia.amos@memphis.edu
Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Dissertation Recruitment Email 1

Good evening,

My name is Asia Amos, and I am an African American/Black fourth-year doctoral student in the Counseling Psychology program at The University of Memphis. I am conducting a research study for my dissertation which is aimed at unsettling/questioning/challenging/resisting the colonial history and influence of psychology on the study of African American women and trauma. Specifically, this study seeks to unsettle the relationship between trauma and African American women’s experiences by investigating how African American women experience transgenerational trauma (or very difficult/stressful/painful events which have had long-term impact across generations) and how we name, narrate, resist, and heal within these experiences.

If you or anyone you know identifies as African American, female, 18 years or older, born and raised in the Mid-South, has parents born and raised in the Mid-South, and has knowledge about family stories or experiences of transgenerational trauma, please consider participating. The study will include one to two, two-hour open-ended question interviews. Due to COVID-19, in person interviews will be scheduled in facilities which can accommodate social distancing (6ft apart). Video interviews will also be provided via end-to-end encrypted virtual software to ensure participant confidentiality. If you would like to participate, and/or if you have questions and concerns, please contact asia.amos@memphis.edu.

Criteria:

- 18 years or older
- Identifies as African American
- Identifies as womxn/female/non-binary femme
- Live in the United States
- Were born and raised in the Mid-South region of the United States
- Have parents and grandparents born and raised in the Mid-South region of the United States
- Have experienced transgenerational trauma (or very difficult/painful/stressful events which have had long-term impact across generations)
- Have availability for an in person or video interview

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Sara K Bridges, sbridges@memphis.edu

Thank you!

Dissertation Recruitment Email 2

Good evening,
Thank you for participating in the first interview for the study regarding how African American women name, narrate, resist, and heal experiences of transgenerational trauma (or very difficult/stressful/painful events which have had long-term impact across generations). If you are receiving this email, you indicated in your first interview that you would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview for the study.

The second interview will include one to two hours of open-ended questions regarding how sharing your story has impacted your life and how you would like the study to represent your story to other African American women and the larger community. Due to COVID-19, in person interviews will be scheduled in facilities which can accommodate social distancing (6ft apart). Video interviews will also be provided via end-to-end encrypted virtual software to ensure participant confidentiality. If you would like to participate in this interview and/or have questions and concerns, please contact asia.amos@memphis.edu.

Primary Criteria:
- Participated in 1st interview

Secondary Criteria:
- 18 years or older
- Identifies as African American
- Identifies as womxn/female/non-binary femme
- Live in the United States
- Were born and raised in the Mid-South region of the United States
- Have parents and grandparents born and raised in the Mid-South region of the United States
- Have experienced transgenerational trauma (or very difficult/painful/stressful events which have had long-term impact across generations)
- Have availability for an in person or video interview

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Sara K Bridges, sbridges@memphis.edu

Thank you!
Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer

THROUGH THE BACK DOOR:
UNSETTLING AND WITNESSING THE
TRANSGENERATIONAL TRAUMA
PARADIGM WITH AFRICAN AMERICAN
WOMEN

Participants
Needed for in-
person and
virtual
interviews!

Do you identify
as an African
American
woman over 18
years old?

Research Regarding
the Experiences of
African American
Women
&
Transgenerational
Trauma

If you meet this criteria
please contact
Principal Investigator:
Asia Amos

Please Note:
In-person interviews will follow all
social distancing guidelines and
virtual interviews are provided.

Contact: asiaamos@memphis.edu

Did you grow up
in the Mid-
South, and were
your parents
raised in the
Mid-South?

Do you know
stories about
your (and your
family's) history,
hardships, and
healing?