

Subversive Self-Care: Black Women Faculty and the (Im)possibilities of Healing in Higher  
Education

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Abstract

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In the backdrop of pervasive violence and oppression against Black women in higher education, Black women faculty (BWF) at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) have endured relentless race and gender discrimination for decades. This long-standing injustice has spurred an examination of the healing practices of four BWF working at PWIs through the sharing of their stories. This research study is guided by two central questions: (a) What are the racialized lived experiences of BWF at PWIs? And (b) What are the (im)possibilities of (racial) healing in higher education? The study is grounded in the theoretical framework of Black Feminist Thought, providing a lens to understand the experiences of BWF while critically examining the power structures inherent at PWIs.

The research identifies four key themes that vividly depict the impacts of misogynoir and the strategies that participants employ to restore a sense of wholeness:

1. **Campus Climate:** This theme illuminates the challenges and opportunities for healing within institutional contexts. It sheds light on the participants' narratives, unveiling the institutional norms, policies, and procedures that perpetuate harm. Their stories underscore the pressing need to dismantle oppressive structures.
2. **Mind-Body-Spirit:** Healing for BWF is a holistic journey, addressing not only intellectual and emotional aspects but also the physical and spiritual dimensions. The participants' accounts align with existing literature on the harmful effects of racial microaggressions, emphasizing the urgency of healing interventions.
3. **Resistance:** BWF actively engage in advocacy, community-building, and narrative reclamation to challenge oppressive systems. These acts of resistance embody their resilience and commitment to bringing about social transformation.
4. **(Re)covering Self:** This theme centers on the participants' journeys of self-discovery, self-care, and self-affirmation. It highlights their empowerment, identity reclamation, adept navigation of multiple roles, and prioritization of well-being. This underscores the vital role of self-empowerment and self-love in the healing process of BWF.

This research spotlights the complex landscape that BWF face in higher education and the unique and individual ways that they heal from (racial) trauma.

Note: By using parentheses with the term racial, I indicate that while I write specifically about racial trauma and healing that BWF experience, in this research study I do not want to exclude other intersectional traumas, such as those caused by sexual violence or physical violence.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

For too long, powerful people have expected the people they have mistreated and marginalized to sacrifice themselves to make things whole. The burden of working for racial justice is laid on the way people bearing the brunt of the injustice, and not the powerful people who maintain it. I say to you: I refuse. (Legal Defense Fund, 2021)

After a salacious scandal and much public outcry, the Board of Trustees at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) begrudgingly offered the MacArthur “genius grant” recipient Nikole Hannah-Jones (NHJ) a five-year contract as the Knight Chair in Race and Investigative Journalism at UNC’s Hussman School of Journalism and Media (Gurley, 2021). This belated contract came after the UNC Board of Trustees decided not to vote on the faculty recommendation for tenure voiding her opportunity for employment (LDF, 2021). Despite proclaiming an institutional commitment to reckoning with race, UNC leadership predictably reflected US societal anti-Blackness.

That an overqualified Black woman was passed over by those in power in the academy is not surprising and is, in fact, a clear demonstration of white supremacy maintaining the racial hierarchy by disregarding Black excellence. NHJ’s experience of being silenced, denigrated, and dismissed is *par for the course*. An investigation into university governing bodies found “a system that is vulnerable to, if not explicitly designed for, an ideologically driven form of college governance rooted in political patronage and partisan fealty” (The Profession, 2018). I concur with Tamara Lomax (2015) when she rightly states, “I’ve come to the conclusion that the academic industrial complex and those who help it soar don’t care about black women” (para. 23). In this instance, students and faculty protested and mounted public pressure on the board of trustees as news of the scandal broke out. Because of the public outcry and threat of legal action,

UNC eventually received a new proposal to grant tenure to NHJ. To this, NHJ, now a tenured member of Howard University's Cathy Hughes School of Communications and inaugural Knight Chair in Race and Journalism, said, "I refuse" (Legal Defense Fund, 2021, p. 6).

For her own peace of mind and well-being, NHJ decided to walk away from the abusive relationship she was in with her *alma mater*, a school she loved and had given back to. NHJ had the unanimous support of the school to be granted tenure; her qualifications and credentials included being a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, MacArthur Fellow, and Peabody Award recipient. Despite the abundance of awards and accolades, NHJ was anathema to the logics of white supremacy and anti-Black racism and represented a dangerous threat to the current political arrangement and power structure. Indeed, her Pulitzer Prize-winning piece, *The 1619 Project*, (re)tells an honest account of the nation's history, centering on African Americans and calling out white supremacy. While not all BWF are as prolific, recognized, or up front about challenging white supremacy in their scholarship, all operate within anti-Black, white supremacist higher education institutions.

### **Rationale for the Study**

In the United States, education is framed as deliverance from societal inequities (Patton, 2016), and education is a long-standing strategy of uplift for Black people. Higher education is also characterized and idealized as "one of the greatest hopes for intellectual and civic progress" (Boyer, 1997, p. 85). Patton (2016) wrote, "Popular rhetoric suggests that higher education is the great equalizer and affords life opportunities, particularly to those who, regardless of circumstance, 'work hard'" (p. 318). And it is believed that in a democracy, higher education helps societies "meet demands of a post-industrial economy and in promoting the development of skills which potentially promote social equity" (Evans-Winters & Hoff, 2011, p. 462). Higher

education in the U.S. is touted as an equalizer that prepares students for life after graduation, with the promise of making more money after earning a degree. U.S. society holds out to students the promises of an enriched life and social and class mobility.

As far back as I can remember, I believed college was the pathway to “success,” and I worked hard to graduate with a college degree. Statistics show that having a college degree increases economic earnings, improves job prospects, and provides greater access to health care and retirement plans (College Board, 2019). Furthermore, while I am now in school to earn the highest degree possible, I will be in debt and working to pay off unsubsidized student loans for the next 10 to 20 years. Yet, the promise of higher education as the purveyor of knowledge and exceptionalism and as the great equalizer in society has not panned out for Black people, most People of Color, and certainly not for Black women. For example, according to the National Science Foundation (2019), Black women are “. . . the second largest minority group earning graduate degrees, earning approximately 7% of all doctoral degrees conferred.” Despite having earned so many graduate degrees, Black women faculty (BWF) are disproportionately underrepresented in higher education. To illustrate, in the fall of 2016, Black women represented merely 1.6% of tenured, full-time faculty nationwide, while white women constituted 26.6% (The Profession, 2018). Predictably, Black women continue to occupy lower positions within the academic hierarchy. In 2017, a scant 2% of full-time professors were Black women, and a mere 3% of faculty across all ranks in U.S. postsecondary institutions were identified as Black women (NCES, 2019).

Higher education in the U.S. has, in fact, been a site of struggle for Black people, particularly for Black women. The racism, prejudice, and discrimination pervading U.S. society are fostered and reflected in higher education, a microcosm of the larger culture, especially in

Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (Harper et al., 2009; Mustaffa, 2021; Patton & Njoku, 2019; Rogers-Ard & Knaus, 2021). Indeed, in U.S. institutions of higher education, a system built on white supremacy (Harley, 2008; Patton, 2016; Wilder, 2013) and explicitly designed to exclude and harm Black people, anti-Blackness is pervasive and intentionally detrimental to Black humanity (Dancy & Edwards, 2021; Squire et al., 2018). NHJ's story at UNC is a startling yet predictable example of institution-sanctioned violence that is "inherently woven into the fabric of higher education and is a permanent aspect of how colleges and universities operate" (Patton & Njoku, 2019, p. 1177) to silence and erase Black women, while simultaneously benefitting from their labor.

Patton and Njoku's (2019) observations about "the unbridled culture of violence and oppression against Black women in higher education" offered a useful categorization of how colleges accomplish this. They identify "six functions of institution-sanctioned violence colleges and universities enact: (a) to discredit Black women; (b) to subject Black women to heightened scrutiny; (c) to blame Black women for their predicament; (d) to hold innocent those who target Black women; (e) to rob Black women of attention and protection; and (f) to treat Black women as a threat" (pp. 1167–1168). To be sure, as a Black woman, NHJ, speaking truth to power, was seen as the ultimate threat to the status quo of white supremacy and its ability to protect itself (Haynes et al., 2021). UNC subjected NHJ to each of these acts of violence—her work was questioned and discredited, she was seen as a threat by the politically conservative donors, and the Board of Trustees never had to apologize. It was not until NHJ retained legal representation, in addition to public scrutiny and outcry, that an offer was made. BWF face numerous challenges as they navigate a structurally oppressive higher education system not designed to foster their well-being or professional success. While NHJ's story was prominent in the media, injustices

against Black women are rarely acknowledged. Invisibility is normalized both within and outside higher education. Yet and still, BWF have persisted despite how the “academy functions as a bastion of racism/White supremacy” (Patton, 2016, p. 3).

Black women live in a society that overlooks, devalues, and restricts them ideologically, socially, politically, and economically (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981). Black women endure “longstanding endemic racism and sexism that still exists and marginalizes them based on aspects of difference” (Croom & Patton, 2012, p. 14). The social location or multiple oppressions that Black women face allows their experiences to go unnoticed, relegating them to the margins (hooks, 1981). Therefore, researchers need to center Black women in their investigations and determine how they thrive in the face of daily encounters of *misogynoir*—a term Moya Bailey (2016) coined as the confluence of misogyny and anti-Black racism. Moya Bailey, a queer Black feminist scholar at Northwestern University, coined the term “misogynoir” to describe the anti-Black misogynistic racism directed at Black women or “intersectional violence Black women experience when misogyny, racism, and anti-Blackness converge” (Patton & Njoku, 2019, p. 1167). Bailey has described misogynoir as “anti-Black misogynistic racism directed at Black women” (p. 1).

For this study, I wanted to know how Black women faculty survive, resist, respond, and heal from the violence and hostility enacted by U.S. higher education institutions. This study explored the experiences of Black women faculty at PWIs, guided by the questions: What are the racialized lived experiences of BWF at PWIs? What are the (im)possibilities of such (racial) healing in higher education?

## **Importance of Study**

This study is derived from an overarching concern with the well-being of Black women and how they exist, persist, and thrive within anti-Black colleges and universities. While some progress has been made in recent years in furthering the position of Black women, and educational attainment has increased tremendously, this advancement has come at a high emotional and physical cost. This research project was rooted in the larger goal of supporting and nurturing the soul of every BWF to heal from intersectional identity-based discrimination that fosters gendered racism and sexism or *misogynoir*. More specifically, this study focused on the experiences and reflections of BWF who have navigated higher education and found ways of dealing with the (racial) trauma of anti-Blackness and white supremacy.

This study complements the work of numerous scholars by illuminating Black women's ways of thriving that complicate dominant constructions of how they experience higher education. I created space for participants to talk about how Black women faculty are healing as "praxis," could be healing as "practice," and what Black women could be doing to move from coping to thriving. Freire's notion of praxis means reflection plus action (Freire, 2018). By engaging in this inquiry project, I hoped to create space for the healing of Black women and that this transformational knowledge is produced and utilized as a roadmap for other Black women in higher education.

## **Definition of Terms**

**Anti-Blackness:** Anti-Blackness is defined as the socially constructed rendering of Black bodies as inhuman, disposable, and inherently problematic (Warren & Coles, 2020). Additionally, "Anti-Blackness is shorthand for epistemic, ideological, material, and /or spiritual violence against Black people" (Ohito & Brown, 2021, p. 139).

**Black:** The term Black represents people of African descent throughout the African Diaspora or of a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. I capitalize Black because it refers to a racialized “social group that shares a specific set of histories, cultural processes, and imagined and performed kinships” (Dumas, 2016, pp. 12–13). Capitalizing Black also represents a form of resistance to challenge the dominance of white culture.

Lowercase **white:** After Dumas (2016), I do not capitalize “white” because “it is nothing but a social construct and does not describe a group with a sense of common experiences or kinship outside of acts of colonization and terror” (p. 13) as cited in Quaye et al. (2020).

**(im)possibility:** The use of the (im)possibility was deliberate. The concept represents the tension that the phrase creates between possibility and impossibility. It expresses a range of potential outcomes or perspectives. Higher education is anti-Black; therefore, is it even possible for Black people to heal/thrive within a space of anti-Black violence?

**U.S. Institutions of Higher Education:** Four-year institutions that award Bachelor, Master, and terminal degrees. For the purpose of this research project, community colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and Tribal Colleges were not included in this definition. This term is used interchangeably with “PWIs.”

**Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs):** This study’s term *predominantly white institutions* refers to a learning institution (University) that was not originally intended to educate Black or non-white students. These institutions are predominantly serviced by and for white students, faculty, and staff.

Colleges and university systems are collectively known as the **academy, academe,** or the “**Ivory Tower**” (Evans, 2007).

## **Black Feminism/Intersectionality**

A white woman has only one handicap to overcome—that of sex. I have two—both race and sex. I belong to the only group in this country which has two such huge obstacles to surmount. Colored men have only one—that of race. (Mary Church Terrell, 1940, p. 15)

In order to understand how Black women faculty experience racial healing, it is necessary to explore and name the anti-Blackness and racial trauma they experience and the ways they (re)cover self. Across the literature focused on Black women's experiences, scholars engage various frameworks. Black feminism is introduced as a theoretical framework that guides this study and explores its applicability to higher education. Black feminism is an epistemological perspective that centers Black women as knowledge holders who experience race, gender, class, and sexual oppression across various contexts. The voices of Black women are central to this study and dissertation. The lived experiences of Black women have been overlooked and devalued in American society (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981). As such, integrating a Black feminist theoretical framework is significant and relevant to the unique perspectives and self-defined ways of being for Black women in academia. I use intersectionality and the tenets of Black Feminist Thought to analyze the research.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) introduced and coined the term “intersectionality” in her article “Mapping the Margins.” The theory of intersectionality is a conceptual framework for understanding an individual and how her multiple identities are connected. Intersectionality helps to conceptualize the overlapping identities and experiences of race and gender that do not exist independently of one another and to show the complexities that Black women faculty face. Intersectionality explains that inequities against Black women cannot be relegated to either racism or sexism as single-axis oppressions from a legal perspective (Crenshaw, 1989).

Dr. Crenshaw (1989, 1991)—legal scholar, civil rights activist, and critical race theorist—asserted that racism or sexism alone do not adequately describe discrimination Black women face because of the multidimensional intersectional aspect of Black women’s social identity. Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Browne Hunt (2016) concurred with Crenshaw’s definition. They asserted that Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality clarifies:

How Black women could encounter: (a) similar experiences (single-axis approach), that is, racism similar to African American men and sexism similar to White women; (b) double jeopardy (additive approach) or multiplicative effects (interactional approach), that is, racism and sexism are separate yet cumulative experiences of oppression; and (c) specific oppression (intersectional approach) that is based on the intersections of race and gender. (p. 230)

The origins of the concept of intersectionality can be traced back to influential Black feminists who have used their voices to address the social inequality of Black women, such as Sojourner Truth (*Ain’t I a Woman*), Anna Julia Cooper (*A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South*), and the Combahee River Collective’s late 1970s manifesto on Black feminism (Harris & Patton, 2019). The manifesto acknowledged that racism, sexism, heterosexism, patriarchy, and capitalism are interrelated forces that affect Black women and articulated the “compounded nature of oppression” and “the systemic structure of inequality” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 70). The Combahee River Collective’s manifesto also argued that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race; thus race, class, and gender cannot be addressed as separate entities. Using an intersectional framework allows for identifying how all forms of oppression maintain inequality for Black women.

Black feminist epistemologies are grounded in the understanding that Black women have ways of knowing and knowledge production that are overlooked and undervalued in patriarchal, white systems (Collins, 2000). While not an essentialist standpoint, Black feminist epistemologies center the experiences of Black women, privileging them as experts and holders of an outsider-within status (Collins, 1986) or on the margins (hooks, 1981) in the academy. In this research, I used Black feminist values of prioritizing the specific perspectives and ways of knowing (Collins, 2000) to examine the (im)possibilities of healing among Black women faculty on college campuses.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review provides an overview of the historical and contemporary struggle of Black people in general, and specifically Black women in (higher) education. I engage with how anti-Black, gendered racism, specifically misogynoir, fosters silencing, marginalization, inequities, and harm to Black women academics. I then reviewed the literature examining the material effects of misogynoir on Black women, including Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF). And finally, I looked at the literature on (racial) healing within education and the fugitive practices that Black people have employed to thrive and heal despite encountering institutionally sanctioned violence. The literature on Black women in academia documents their complex experiences, and a solid and growing body of research explores the lived experiences of women of color in higher education. Although several scholars have written about the experiences of Black women faculty in the academy (Croom & Patton, 2012; Harris, 2008; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001), there is still much to uncover about the coping and healing strategies BWF employ, particularly in PWIs. Furthermore, there is scant research on BWF and ways of (racial) healing in the academy.

### **Black Education as a Fugitive Project**

No, child, white people never teach colored people nothin, but to be good to dey Massa en Mittie. What learnin dey would get in dem days, dey been get it at night. Taught demselves. (Louisa Gause, 1937, p. 111)

Louisa Gause's narrative is one of many ex-slave narratives written to document the history of slavery in America (Works Progress Administration [WPA], 1941/2007), and her words speak to the difficulty Black people, both enslaved and free, had in gaining access to education. The WPA narratives are the words of newly freed individuals, who, though nearly

erased from history's memory, stood as witnesses to the ordinary brutality of chattel slavery and offered a counternarrative to the benevolence of slavery. Many of these stories and life histories illustrate the horrors of slavery—the flaying of backs, the separation of families, the brutal rapes, torture, and the fear of lynching and being sold. They also portray the humanity enslaved people retained under dehumanizing conditions—the joy of a wedding, the love of a family, hearing the sounds of slave songs, and finding moments of Black joy in fugitive spaces. Despite the assault on the dignity, humanity, and soul of the enslaved, these portrayals reveal the humanity of those who were enslaved and the beauty in their ability to laugh still, play, celebrate, and find joy.

From its inception, the United States was founded on racist principles that have permeated all facets of American life, including the systems and institutions upon which this country functions—education is no exception (Harper et al., 2009; Patton, 2016; Wilder, 2013). It has only been five decades since the last major civil rights law was put into effect that legally ended Jim Crow segregation in 1969; hence, racial oppression is deep, foundational, and systemic in the United States. For most of U.S. history, from 1619 to 1969, extreme oppression in the form of slavery and legal segregation was the foundational reality (Feagin, 2013).

The history of Black education in America begins with the struggle of antebellum enslaved people who were willing to risk their lives to learn how to read and write, and as such, have always called attention to education as a liberating force to uplift the Black community (DuBois, 2014; Williams, 2005; Woodson, 1933/1993). During the era of slavery, the education of Black people, both enslaved and free, was discouraged and eventually made illegal in many Southern states following slave insurrections (Aptheker, 1937). Enslavers developed elaborate techniques and laws to establish and maintain dominance over and control of enslaved Black people. One was to ensure that Black people would remain illiterate. Enslavers of enslaved Black

people knew that knowledge was power and that control of enslaved people could not be based solely on physical coercion. In Frederick Douglass's 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*, he described the moment he understood the power of literacy after his master, Hugh Auld, warned his wife about the significance of teaching Douglass to read:

Unlawful as well as unsafe to teach a slave to read . . . If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world . . . fit would forever unfit him to be a slave. (p. 29)

Like most Black people, Douglass believed in the power of literacy as a pathway from slavery to freedom. White people created slave codes as one of the legal strategies to control the time, energy, and bodies of enslaved Black people. These laws effectively placed restrictions on enslaved Black people's ability to communicate with one another, travel, and learn. One such slave code made teaching enslaved people to read or write illegal. An enslaved Black person who had learned to write could write passes allowing him and others to escape (Aptheker, 1937). Anti-literacy laws stated that enslaved Blacks could be severely punished, including severe beatings, jail time, amputation, and even death if found reading or writing (Williams, 2005).

Black people have always resisted, rebelled, and revolted against bondage since they were enslaved. Black people fought against slavery because they refused to accept their lot in life. Wanting their freedom, Black people endeavored to make life worth living. There are many accounts of resistance to slavery, and while rebellion was the most dramatic type of resistance, smaller acts of resistance defined the daily lives of the enslaved, such as work slowdowns, destruction of property, theft, alliances formed with Native Americans, abortion, infanticide, and running away (Forbes, 1992).

Despite the inherent risks, free and enslaved Black people continued learning to read and write. In her book, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Cultivating and Historically Responsive Literacy*, Gholdy Muhammad (2020) articulated why literacy is important beyond the common notions of literacy as “skills and proficiencies” (learning how to read and write), but as liberation and power (p. 22). For example, Muhammad quoted an excerpt from *The Colored American Newspaper* (1837–1842) where the writer pleads for his fellow brethren to seek “mental and moral improvement” through literary pursuits:

It is essential to our highest interest, it is due to our self-respect, to the justice of our cause, and to our brethren in chains, to seize upon every facility afforded us for mental and moral improvement . . . (p. 18)

Enslaved Black people engaged in a number of creative, clandestine, and subversive ways to literacy. They created literary societies (Muhammad, 2020); they gathered information through eavesdropping and “listen[ing] hard and remember[ing] well,” thereby developing acute skills of perception and memory (Williams, 2005).

Enslaved Black people gathered secretly in the *hush harbors* of slave quarters, learning how to read and write. Hush harbors were hidden spaces where the enslaved gathered secretly to pray, shout, and dance (Grant, 2021). These were the spaces where slaves gathered in a subversive act of “freedom dreaming” (Love, 2019). Love (2019) defined freedom dreams:

Imagining worlds that are just, representing people’s full humanity, centering people left on the edges, thriving in solidarity with folx from different identities who have struggled together for justice, and knowing that dreams are just around the corner with the might of people power. (p. 101)

Black education, thus, is a fugitive project, “mobilized as a fugitive activity of escape, violating the parameters of Black Americans’ curtailed citizenship and position as legally *and then* civically unfree” (Givens, 2021, p. 24). Black people understood education as a space of *radical hope* within the journey toward Black freedom and “it was through literacy that enslaved Blacks believed they could secure freedom” (Grant, 2021, p. 67).

Furthermore, education for Black people represented a world beyond bondage. Andrea Williams (2005) described the importance of enslaved Black peoples’ pursuit of education as an instrument of resistance and freedom:

Access to the written word, whether scriptural or political, revealed a world beyond bondage in which African Americans could imagine themselves free to think and behave as they chose. Literacy provided the means to write a pass to freedom, to learn of abolitionist activities, or to read the Bible. Because it most often happened in secret, the very act of learning to read and write subverted the master-slave relationship and created a private life for those who were owned by others. Once literate, many used this hard-won skill to disturb the power relations between master and slave, as they fused their desire for literacy with their desire for freedom. (p. 17)

Despite laws prohibiting enslaved Black people from learning to read and write, a small percentage acquired a degree of literacy. After the Civil War, during Reconstruction, Black people pushed for schools and the right to be educated (Evans, 2007; Williams, 2005). Through sheer will and effort, freedmen set up and built schools and taught others to read and write as liberation.

Additionally, philanthropic organizations, churches, and teachers from the North were also instrumental in supporting freed Black people to set up schools. Among Black communities,

education was always understood as a way to uplift the community, and educating Black children was viewed as the community's collective responsibility. Evans (2007) wrote, "Despite, or perhaps because of, the barriers presented to African Americans' educational attainment, college attendance was inseparable from community engagement and social responsibility" (p. 52). hooks (1994) noted, "For black folks teaching—educating—was fundamentally political because it was rooted in antiracist struggle" (p. 2).

Grant (2021) examined how Black people saw education as a spark of *radical hope* as they moved from Enslavement to Emancipation to Reconstruction. In his article, "Radical Hope, Education and Humanity," Grant offered a clear link between radical hope and freedom dreaming when he writes how Black people dealt with the end of Reconstruction: "Being emancipated and socially and politically enslaved again, along with having their blackness humiliated, didn't cause Blacks (collectively) to engage in suicidal despair, become indifferent and to stop hoping and striving for a better way of life" (p. 69). He borrowed Furrow's definition of *radical hope* as "the ability to maintain hope in a meaningful existence even when one's existence has lost all meaning. It is hope that goes beyond one's ability to formulate an idea of what one hopes for" (Furrow, 2007, p. 2, as cited in Grant, 2021, p. 66). Thus, BWF operate in a historical context of intentional, collaborative struggles for education rooted in hope.

### **The State of Black Women in the Academy**

Much like other traditional organizations and systems in the United States, the American higher education system is embedded with Eurocentric values and viewpoints that purport white epistemologies are superior to all others (Croom & Patton, 2012). This is because the elitist higher education system was created for wealthy white men. White supremacy, then, has reigned in the Ivory Tower of academia since its inception (Evans, 2007; Mustaffa, 2017; Wilder, 2013),

and the “formation of American higher education mimicked the formation of the United States” (Patton, 2016, p. 318). Thus, PWIs were not designed with Black students in mind (Mustaffa, 2107; Tuitt et al., 2018; Wilder, 2013). Indeed, higher education’s beginning in the U.S. cannot be disentangled from chattel slavery. Craig Wilder’s (2013) book, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities*, examined the relationship between Ivy League institutions and slavery:

American colleges were not innocent or passive beneficiaries of conquest and colonial slavery. The European invasion of the Americas and the modern slave trade pulled the peoples throughout the Atlantic world into each other’s lives, and colleges were among the colonial institutions that braided their histories and rendered their fates dependent and antagonistic. The academy never stood apart from American slavery—in fact, it stood beside church and state and the third pillar of civilization built on bondage. (p. 11)

Wilder (2013) noted how founders of colonial colleges were from slave-owning families who made their fortunes from slavery.

Additionally, Wilder (2013) also revealed that the wealth experienced by the United States because of the transatlantic slave trade was also experienced by and even facilitated through higher education institutions. Understanding how contemporary institutions of higher education “are both a reflection of and an engine of racial hierarchy wherein white supremacy is central” (Mustaffa, 2017, p. 712) provides essential context for understanding how racism shapes the experiences of Black women. As such, Black women’s experiences at PWIs mirror the historical experiences of Black women in the United States. In an article documenting Black women’s academic oppressions, including her own, Tamura Lomax (2015) pointed out

poignantly, “The North American academic structure and its proximation to the institution of slavery as well as its particular treatment of black women cannot be ignored” (para. 11).

The societal violence that Black people experience and navigate daily is replicated and upheld in the academy. Patton (2016) explained:

The convergence of race, property, and oppression is intricately linked to the formation of U.S. higher education. Although early institutions faced significant financial struggle, their leaders quickly connected slave trading to institutional viability. Institutions used slavery for capitalistic gain as they strengthened the establishment of their physical campuses. (p. 6)

The presence of Black women in higher education in the U.S. is one of historical significance. An increasing body of literature focuses on the experiences of women of color faculty and presents a wealth of evidence of the systemic disadvantages they face because of racism and sexism that hamper their professional development and success (Aguirre, 2000; Harley, 2008; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). For instance, Aguirre (2000) referenced data from the National Center for Education Statistics data which showed that African American, Latina, Native, and Asian American women collectively represented just 4% of the full-time teaching staff in U.S. colleges and universities. Among this group, Black women accounted for 2.2%, while white women, in contrast, made up 29% of the full-time faculty. Despite slow increases in representation, the number of Black and Latinx faculty earning tenure has remained relatively stagnant (Zambrana et al., 2015). Black people make up 4 to 5% of full-time faculty in the United States, and only 1 to 2% are tenured or tenure-track (Overstreet, 2019). Women of color, and Black women specifically, occupy lower ranks in non-tenured positions, with few reaching full professor status (Croom, 2017; Croom & Patton, 2012; Porter et al., 2020).

According to Thomas and Hollenshead (2001), Black and other women of color report organizational barriers that hinder their career progress. The research in this area reveals the existence of negative stereotypes rooted in racist, sexist, and classist notions from the era of chattel slavery (Walkington, 2017). These stereotypes translate to fewer educational and employment opportunities and lower wages for BWF than their white male counterparts (Sotello & Turner, 2002; Walkington, 2017). Black women in the academy also encounter epistemological racism. Delgado (1984) demonstrated that scholarship produced by people of color is often marginalized or unacknowledged. Part of this marginalization suppresses the voices of BWF through unfavorable racial campus climates (Patton, 2016). Black women at PWIs are more at risk of experiencing racism and institutionally sanctioned violence (Patton & Njoku, 2019; Young & Hines, 2018).

Many additional factors adversely impact women of color faculty's career progression and success, such as: (a) isolation and devaluation (Turner, 2002); (b) hidden rules, and supplemental but unspoken expectations during tenure review (Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001); (c) less favorable judgments of their work compared to their white counterparts (Turner, 2002; Williams & Williams, 2006); (d) lack of or minimal opportunities for research collaboration (Patitu & Hinton, 2003); and (e) little or no mentoring and support (Alexander & Moore, 2008). Aguirre (2000) presented evidence suggesting that the work of culturally diverse female faculty is more criticized than that of their white counterparts due to gender- and race-based stereotypes about their abilities. The threat of being personally reduced to a stereotype based on one's race contributes to Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF). I will discuss RBF in detail in the next section.

## Misogynoir

Bailey (2016) defined *misogynoir* as “the co-constitutive, anti-Black, and misogynistic racism directed at Black women, particularly in visual and digital culture” (p. 2). The term combines *misogyny*, the hatred of women, and *noir*, meaning Black (Bailey, 2016). As opposed to Essed’s (1991) term, *gendered racism*, Bailey made it a point to say that “misogynoir can come from Black men, white men, white women and even other Black women” (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). According to Trudy (2014), there are four distinctive characteristics of misogynoir:

(1) it is a term that was developed exclusively for Black women to describe how racism and anti-Blackness dehumanize them and impacts their lived experiences; (2) failure to recognize the value of the intersectionality of Black women and their unique experiences as Black women is viewed as an attempt at erasure and codified as violence; (3) it can be experienced interracially through stereotypical images and montages of the strong Black woman or the angry Black woman or intra-racially through colorism or other acts of prejudice; and (4) misogynoir is about “naming the actual violence that Black women uniquely face. (p. 1)

Misogynoir deepens the oppression that Black women experience, such that despite incremental advancements of Black women on college campuses, racism, and sexism remain a permanent vestige of American higher education.

### **Impacts on Black Women: Racial Trauma**

The university was not created to save my life. The university is not about the preservation of a bright brown body. The university will use me alive and use me dead.

The university does not intend to love me. The university does not know how to love me.

The university, in fact, does not love me. But the universe does. (Gumbs, 2012, p. 4)

The continued exposure to racism leads to emotional/behavioral, psychological, and physiological stress responses (Okello et al., 2020). Researchers have found correlations between racism and mental health, showing elevated rates of depression and anxiety in women of color (Paradies, 2006). Racial trauma, also referred to as race-based traumatic stress, is the psychological, emotional, and physical injury from experiencing real and perceived racism (Bryant-Davis, 2007; Carter, 2007; Mosley et al., 2021). According to medical scholars, research has shown a relationship exists between racism, sexism, and traumatic stress among women of color (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Comas-Diaz & Jacobsen, 2001). The impacts of racism and sexism, or misogynoir, have profound implications on the health and wellness of Black women in the United States; statistics on Black women's health are dismal. Black women are especially likely to face many health challenges, including a wide variety of deadly, yet preventable chronic diseases (The Black Women's Roundtable, 2014).

Regarding physical health, Black women face challenges around heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity. Black women have higher rates of high blood pressure than any other demographic group in the nation, and the maternal mortality rate for Black women is fully three times that of white women (The Black Women's Roundtable, 2014). Regarding mental health, Black women experience depression at a higher rate than white women (Bronder et al., 2013). Furthermore, Black women are especially likely to be victims of violence. According to the Roundtable (2014), "No woman is more likely to be murdered in America today than a Black woman. No woman

is more likely to be raped than a Black woman. And no woman is more likely to be beaten, either by a stranger or by someone she loves and trusts than a Black woman” (vi).

Black women have been called the metaphorical *maids of the academe* (Harley, 2008) because they are often overworked and overlooked. To be a *maid of the academe* is to be a recipient of “deprivileged consequences” (Harley, 2008, p. 20), unlike white female professionals who are benefactors of white privilege. The literature consistently posits that “Black women faculty are the most stressed, the least satisfied, almost the least represented, possibly the least supported, and the most overworked of all faculty in academe” (Trotman, 2009, p. 81). Thomas and Hollenshead (2001) stated that women of color rate their universities’ institutional climates poorly, even when white men rated the same university positively. Underrepresented faculty commonly report a devaluing of their research, overt and covert racism, and feelings of isolation, all of which contribute to their attrition (Zambrana et al., 2015). All these realities produce robust amounts of stress for Black women as they labor extensively to serve the institution, their fields, and their students (Harley, 2008).

### **Microaggressions**

Often frequent interactions, in the form of microaggressions, contribute to the racial trauma that Black women experience. According to Sue (2010), microaggressions are “the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 5). The commonplace and insidious nature of microaggressions is what makes them so dangerous (Overstreet, 2019). Not only do they leave the target feeling hurt or angry, but they also cause the target to wonder if they have a right to be hurt or angry. The worry, the self-doubt, and the

isolating feeling of being “too sensitive,” or the “angry Black woman,” are enough to damage anyone’s mental and emotional well-being (Abrams et al., 2014; Overstreet, 2019).

Microaggressions have a real-life impact, and the long-term accumulation of these experiences can create a burden and strain that manifest in physical, mental, and emotional fatigue.

Constantly enduring microaggressions often results in Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF).

### **Racial Battle Fatigue**

Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) has been operationalized as the psychological, emotional, and physiological toll of fighting against racism. RBF is defined as “social-psychological stress responses (e.g., frustration, anger, exhaustion, physical avoidance, psychological or emotional withdrawal, escapism, acceptance of racist attributions)” (Smith et al., 2007, p. 552) associated with being a person of color and the repeated target of racism. RBF was conceptualized by William A. Smith in 2004, initially focusing on Black male students and university faculty. In his article, “Black Faculty Coping with Racial Battle Fatigue: The Campus Racial Climate in a Post–Civil Rights Era,” RBF is a framework to understand how universities operate from a dominant, white, hegemonic perspective that perpetuates racial microaggressions. In this context of racism, Black people must devote their energies to cope with the stresses of overt discrimination, as well as covert forms through everyday racial microaggressions that are described as: “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward People of Color” (Sue, 2010, p. 5). Over time, the accumulated effects of racial microaggressions can result in RBF via a host of psychological, physiological, and behavioral symptoms and expressions, including but not limited to tension headaches, constant

anxiety, ulcers, increased swearing and complaining, insomnia, rapid mood swings, difficulty thinking or speaking, and social withdrawal (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2006).

Despite the documented evidence of discrimination and marginalization of Black people and Black women, institutions of higher education have not seriously engaged in disrupting or dismantling their racist status quo (Patton, 2016). To do so, institutions would have to acknowledge and value Black women. Valuing Black women would change the material reality of BWF who work at PWIs. Although scholars have discussed the experiences of Black women in the academy (Harley, 2008; Patton & Njoku, 2019; Porter et al., 2020), few studies examine the specific impacts of misogynoir on Black women and even fewer studies explore Black women's healing in higher education. In response to Ruth Farmer's question, "Is there space for African American women in White institutions?" (p. 219), Idriss Davis (2008) asked, "Is there healing space for African American women in White institutions?"

### **Coping and Healing from Racial Trauma**

Scholarship, counter-narratives, and *testimonies* are used as weaponry to speak truth to power. Black women and POC know that the revolution will not be televised (Scott-Heron, 1971) and cannot wait for the Master to dismantle the Master's house (Lorde, 1984; Phelps-Ward et al., 2021). For centuries, Black women have had to build an arsenal of coping and defensive strategies and techniques to navigate and contend with anti-Black institutions. Foremothers such as Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Audre Lorde, and countless others have taught Black communities how to survive and thrive in oppressive conditions, as seen in their scholarship, counter-narratives, and *testimonies*. bell hooks (1990) explained racial healing:

[It's] really about us as black people realizing that we have to do more than define how racism ravages our spirit (it has certainly been easier for us to name the problem)—we have to construct useful strategies of resistance and change. (p. 227)

Similarly, Edwards and Baszile (2016) highlighted the *testimonies* of Black women intellectuals and draw on the testimony that emerges in the context of the Black church: “This testimonial practice is about sharing one’s story of perseverance, healing, and spiritual fortitude” (p. 1).

Several studies have examined the effect of various coping mechanisms Black women use to resist identity-based discrimination (DeCuir-Gumby et al., 2019; Nicol & Yee, 2017; Okello et al., 2020; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). Okello et al. (2020) asked what possibilities exist for Black students, faculty, and practitioners to heal from racial battle fatigue in higher education in their article, “*We wear the mask*”: *Self-definition as an approach to healing from racial battle fatigue*. The study’s authors introduce the concept of “self-definition” as a potential alternative theoretical framework for healing racial battle fatigue. The framework involves considering the health and survival of Black peoples’ mental and physical well-being in response to white supremacy and systemic racism.

There is, however, no cohesive body of work on *healing* within higher education. According to Acosta (2020), “The exploration and use of *healing* in the context of education has, historically, been considered nonexistent or, at best, marginal” (p. 22). The use of healing scholarship in the field of psychology primarily reflects individual processes in the relationship between racial trauma and healing (Chioneso et al., 2020). Some scholars have presented a community healing framework informed by multidisciplinary scholarship (Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022; Chioneso et al., 2020; French et al., 2020; Ginwright, 2016). These researchers have advocated for shifting from self-care to community care to acknowledge the importance of

community in well-being and to resist neoliberal logics that emphasize the individual (French et al., 2020).

In her discussion of homeplace as a site of resistance, hooks (1990) examined the role of Black women in cultivating safe spaces at home that offered relief from the overt surveillance and racism that Black people encountered once they left home. These homeplaces served as places of comfort, healing, love, and resistance against white supremacy. Both a physical and symbolic place, hooks noted the vital role that the home has played in the lives of Black women as they sought refuge from racist oppression and sexist domination. The home is a place of resistance, renewal, and where Black people feel humanized and safe in a society that dehumanizes them and inflicts violence. Thus, homeplace functions as a site of resistance against racial domination and oppression for Black people and are “spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality” (p. 42). Throughout history, homeplace has served as a site to organize and unify Black people towards achieving liberation.

While hooks (1990) described homeplace as a site of healing and resistance outside of the physical spaces that reinforce racial oppression, homeplaces can also be created within such spaces. Audre Lorde and bell hooks write about self-care and see the self-care work of women of color, inside or outside of the academy, as revolutionary and transformative. They write of the necessity of Black women to practice self-care and self-love to deal with the daily onslaught of racism, sexism, homophobia, and class oppression. The literature on self-care asserts that self-care among Black people and communities is political (Collins, 2000; Harris, 2017; Lorde, 1984, 1988). In her book, *A Burst of Light*, Audre Lorde (1988) confronted her mortality and battle with cancer, providing a clear link between self-care and revolution: “caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (p. 131). Black

women have engaged in self-preservation since being kidnapped and enslaved. In the face of unspeakable and enduring trauma, many Black women have relied on spirituality, hope, and faith (hooks, 2005) as healing mechanisms. hooks (2005) wisely purported to be whole: “Black women [and all minoritized people] deserve to have multiple paths to healing, multiple ways of thinking about spirituality, multiple paths towards recovery . . . When we choose to heal, when we choose to love, we are choosing liberation” (xxx).

### Chapter 3: Positionality

One of the significant challenges I confronted during this inquiry project was acknowledging and grappling with my own positionality while undertaking the task of collecting and interpreting the data set. To navigate this challenge, I embarked on a process of reflexivity, where I revisited specific moments from my life that have significantly influenced my perception and understanding of the lived experiences of Black women (in higher education). This reflection took place within the context of my own identity as a Black woman faculty in higher education.

Throughout this section, I offer a series of vignettes or snapshots drawn from my personal experiences that have a pivotal role in shaping my subjectivity and frame my comprehension of what it means to be a Black woman healing in higher education. These anecdotes and reflections revolve around four themes that provide the context of my research project: understanding how Black women heal in higher education. Within these themes, I delve into my racial identity, recount an instance when I grappled with feelings of inadequacy, discuss the guidance and wisdom my father imparted to me regarding racism and autonomy, and conclude by exploring my journey with mental health as a doctoral student amidst a global pandemic and the ongoing violence against Black people.

#### **Black or White**

A dimension of my identity that is important to my research project is my racial identity. Because I am conducting a study of Black women faculty for Black women faculty, I must reveal the tension I feel in being too much or not enough (Grier et al., 2014). In an article regarding her positionality as a biracial Mexicana, Cristina Santamaria Graff (2018) adapted Milan Kundera's (1984) title, "Unbearable Lightness of Being," to reflect the unbearable quality of and tension between being both Mexican and white. She explored the complex and

multifaceted ways whiteness has afforded her privilege and inflicted pain. Graff introduced Ellis Hurd's (2011, 2012) conceptualization of pain and privilege as the "discourse and homily of one's plight and affordance concerning mixed identity(ies)" (Hurd, 2018, personal communication as cited in Graff, 2018, p. 1). Like Graff, I grapple with how my racial and cultural identity has shaped how I experience life, pain, and privilege and the unbearable tension of being both Black and white.

Graff (2018) wrote, "The simultaneous and dichotomous interplay of experiencing both the benefits and marginalization of identifying with more than one race or ethnicity is a common phenomenon for those with mixed identities" (p. 1). As a biracial Black woman who looks racially ambiguous, there is a dissonance between how I self-identify and how others tend to perceive me. There are aspects of myself in which I feel comfortable in my skin: mother, social worker, and educator; however, I have felt tension and disconnect with my light-skinned body. I know that my phenotypical appearance privileges me in a white-dominant society and prevents me, to some degree, from being entirely accepted as Black or white. Although I do not look like a white woman, I do not look like a Black woman. I remain racially ambiguous. In sixth grade, I was told that because I looked Hispanic and had a Hispanic-sounding name, I was "probably Hispanic." I self-identify as a Black woman—an identity label I gave to myself that represents "a constellation of choices I have had the privilege to choose from" (Graff, 2018, p. 11). For me, being a light-skinned, biracial woman who presents as racially ambiguous feels too much or not enough (Grier et al., 2014), revealing my plight of finding myself torn between one race and another, caught in the middle between binary opposites.

I grew up in Seattle, Washington, in a working-class neighborhood near the University of Washington, before Starbucks went public and Amazon was not even a thought. I lived with my

mom and baby sister in a home we were invited to share with an elderly gentleman we called Grandpa. I did not have a lot growing up, which has had a lasting impact on my relationship with money. I was a serious student who strove to do well in all my classes so that I could get scholarships to college. I viewed college as a way to move out of my impoverished upbringing. I earned a bachelor's degree and a Master of Social Work from the University of Washington. Before returning to graduate school, I served as a master's level Social Worker, gaining 20 years of experience in public child welfare.

### **Good Enough**

If I could go back and tell one thing to my teenage or twenty-something self, it would be, "You are enough!" When I was 15 years old, a young ballet dancer at Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB) on a full-ride scholarship from the age of five (a detail that reminds me of my class distinction), I yearned to be a ballet dancer with the company and dreamed of performing in Swan Lake. Each year, as a student on scholarship, I was required to dance in any of PNB's productions, such as *The Nutcracker* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and participate in their highly selective summer course. I moved up the ranks every year to Level VIII. That year, I went to the office of Ms. Fedine, Headmistress, with trepidation for my spring evaluation. The next level is the Professional Division, and I desperately wanted to advance to it. Ms. Fedine beckoned me to sit down. "You have come a long way, Hermenia. But I can't tell if you are passionate about ballet. You would do well at Alvin Ailey or Dance Theater of Harlem." I was devastated and confused how she used my Blackness as a deficit. Like any athlete who does not make the cut, I felt devastated, inadequate, and on that day, embarrassed. I did not want to cry in front of her, but tears trickled down my face. That day, I learned I was not good enough to dance professionally with PNB. I quit ballet shortly after that. Looking back on that experience, I think

about how the odds were stacked against me and other Black dancers becoming a part of the Company. There were only a handful of Black dancers at PNB, and none were a principal or soloist.

Looking back on my life, I hate that I often felt inadequate—I was not smart enough, pretty enough, skinny enough, Black enough, white enough—*not deserving enough*. This is part of the ongoing healing work I am engaged in. I have found that living in American culture, rooted in rugged individualism, scarcity mindset, workaholism, relentless ambition, and unremitting competition, is designed to keep people ashamed, insecure, and exhausted. I learned to bury my insecurities beneath ambition and suffered in silence when I did not live up to my expectations. “If only” became a constant refrain in the recesses of my mind as I thought about what I could accomplish “if only” I worked harder, was more intelligent, skinnier, or more Black.

### **Never Trust The Man**

In high school, my father started taking an interest in talking to me about politics and government—and his thoughts regarding them. He wanted to ensure his children were savvy to the machinations of government/institutions against Black people. He wanted to teach me how to navigate as a survival strategy in an anti-Black world. “Don’t trust The Man” was one of the warnings he often repeated. Growing up, I learned many lessons from my father: the importance of family, the value of an education, and never trust The Man. The Man stood for the white man and his institutions, and my father did not trust him as far as he could throw him.

*Dedicated to Hermenia L. Butler and Family,*

*To raise your and your family's consciousness about the real way, the only true path of a republican government. May you always follow and practice this form throughout your lives.*

*In loving faith, I remain*

*Jerome A. Butler* (personal communication, May 27, 2003)

Those are the words my Dad wrote in a book he gave me called *Analysis of Civil Government*. I got many of my beliefs from my Dad about the way racism works to negatively shape the lives of Black people through institutions like the government. He talked about the racism he experienced at his job as a mail carrier and some of the harm he suffered because of it: Heart attacks, high blood pressure, and anger. While I cannot relate to the heart attack or high blood pressure, I understand the anger.

As a young teenager, I did not understand the truth of my father's words, and I imagined him to be somewhat paranoid. It was not until I went to graduate school for my Master of Social Work that I developed a deeper understanding of oppressive authority and structural power. I learned about formal structures of oppression that shape people's lives and to think critically about my relation to power and how the playing field is unequal for anyone who is not a white, straight, cis-gender, Christian male.

### **I think I'm Going Crazy<sup>1</sup>**

In an article about mental health and healing for Black undergraduates, McGee and Stovall (2015) studied the role mental health plays in mediating educational racism, noting that “. . . the need for hard work and persistence has long been cited as a factor in academic perseverance” (p. 493). I thought that grit, or the passion and sustained persistence for long-term

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<sup>1</sup> While I came up with the heading on my own, I also found an article with a similar title by Gildersleeve et al. (2011).

goals (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014), would get me through this difficult and arduous journey I chose to embark on.

I knew my life would be stressful when I applied to my doctoral program. I entered with the mindset that I would suffer mentally and financially. It would take grit and perseverance to stay focused and get through three years of added stress, and I knew I had to make sacrifices to achieve my goal—becoming Dr. Butler. In addition to becoming a student again at age 50, I started this program during the dual pandemics of institutionalized racism and COVID-19, which exacerbated my stress and anxiety I felt. The enormity of these experiences weighed heavily on my psyche. Anxiety, depression, and trepidation have been faithful companions in my life for over three years. I have been further traumatized by watching the violent manifestations of anti-Blackness regularly on news outlets and social media.

## Chapter 4: Research Design

My research aimed to speak truth to power and call attention to the ways Black women faculty carve out strategies to survive, strategically navigate, and heal from sexism and anti-Blackness in higher education. The purpose of this research project was to explore the racialized lived experiences of Black women faculty at PWIs guided by the following questions: What are the racialized lived experiences of BWF at PWIs? What are the (im)possibilities of (racial) healing in higher education?

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research Design**

To explore BWF's lived experiences of (racial) healing, I used a qualitative methodological approach because it allows for the collection and interpretation of stories, narratives, interviews, and other forms of non-quantifiable data. A qualitative approach also does not demand detached objectivity of the researcher; instead it encourages the disclosure of researcher bias and the engagement of the researcher with the research and subjects in the role of participant-observer. Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) succinctly articulated:

Qualitative researchers seek to assiduously investigate the everyday interactions and taken-for-granted happenings of individuals and groups while seeking to interpret what those conscious and dysconscious (King, 1991) happenings mean to the social actors themselves. (p. 7)

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry was the qualitative design used to conduct this research study. I selected narrative inquiry to shed light on the traditionally silenced voices of Black women faculty and to critically examine practices they employ to thrive and heal despite institutionally sanctioned violence.

## **Participants**

This project focused on current or former Black women tenure-track faculty who worked at any PWI four-year college or university. Participants self-identified as (a) Black or of the African diaspora, (b) born in the United States, (c) self-identify as female, (d) be 18 years or older, and (e) be employed or have been employed at a predominantly white institution in higher education. To recruit research participants, I used the snowball sampling method, utilizing my professional and personal networks to recruit BWF by asking two BWF who fit my research criteria and asking them to refer me to other BWF they knew. I interviewed four Black women faculty.

## **Data Collection**

The primary strategy for gathering information was through semi-structured qualitative interviews. One-on-one semi-structured interviews provided participants the opportunity to share their stories independently of each other. The interviews were conducted with a set of open-ended interview questions (see Appendix A). The interviews were conducted through Zoom© and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and saved on a USB drive to ensure the data remained intact. Following the interviews, I recorded field notes. I used pseudonyms to protect identities and ensured that any personal information used in the write-up was vague.

## **Protection of Human Subjects**

I obtained consent from the participants so they knew “the purpose of [my] research, their role in the research, and whether there is a personal or societal benefit to their participation” (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p. 46). Notes, documents, transcripts, and recordings were kept on a password-protected laptop, which only I accessed in a locked filing cabinet.

## **Proposed Analyses**

To understand/center/recognize how Black women experience healing from RBF, I used thematic analysis to interpret the data. I applied a Black feminist framework (intersectionality and tenets of BFT) to examine their stories and use the experiences of Black women faculty as a source of analysis to understand how they experience (racial) healing in anti-Black spaces. I used inductive thematic analysis, framed by BFT, to analyze the data.

## **Reciprocity and Reflexivity**

I hope to uplift the stories of BWF and elevate how Black women thrive and foster healing spaces within the oppressive confines of higher education. Throughout this study, I interrogated my assumptions, biases, and expectations of participant responses to allow the reader to understand how I, as the author, interpreted the data provided by the participants. To do this, I kept a reflexivity journal to capture my thoughts and document what was happening on the project and how I felt. Also, to ensure my experiences as a faculty member of higher education and graduate student, I documented my connections to narratives.

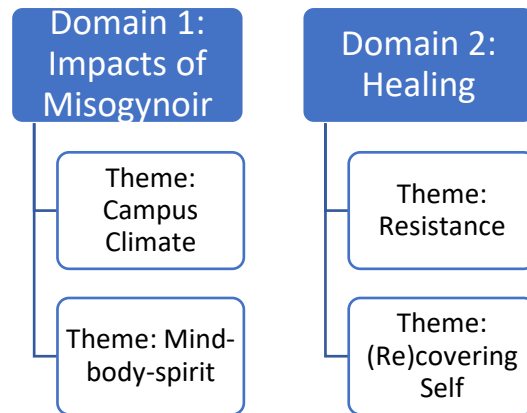
## Chapter 5: Data Analysis

To prepare the data for analysis, the interviews were transcribed by Zoom©. Following the transcription, I watched the recordings again as I read the transcripts to ensure accuracy. I used inductive thematic analysis to analyze the data gathered from the interviews. I applied a BFT framework to examine how BWF coped with gendered racism and created strategies of resistance and healing. I coded and clustered related information organized into emerging themes and patterns. Next, I chunked quotes and aligned them to the research questions. After re-reading the transcripts several times, I came up with themes to represent the finding for the questions I asked. The themes that emerged from coding transcripts were the basis for the findings reported in this study. Because the overall purpose of my study was to explore how BWF experience (racial) healing, it was necessary to hear how each participant is impacted by gendered racism. These data represent the personal testimonies and tell stories of how these Black women dealt with systemic and institutional oppression, stereotypes, racism, and sexism embedded in institutional structures, cultures, and practices within a hostile academic environment and created strategies towards healing.

### **Findings**

This chapter presents the study's results exploring the experiences of the four participants. The research questions guiding this study were twofold: What are the racialized lived experiences of BWF at PWIs? What are the (im)possibilities of (racial) healing in higher education? The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section provides an overview of the participants. I introduce each participant and share details of their personal and professional life to contextualize their experiences. The second section elaborates on the themes. I identified four themes: (a) Campus climate; (b) Mind-body-spirit; (c) Resistance; and (d) (Re)covering self.

Figure 1. Four Themes.



### Participant Profiles

All the women in the study self-identified as Black women faculty who had previously worked or are currently working at a Predominantly White Institution. One of the participants identified as multiracial Black and Asian. All have PhDs. One of the four participants was on leave during data collection. They ranged in age from mid-30s to mid-50s. Their experience working in academia ranged from five to 24 years. Three participants worked at PWIs on the west coast, where one worked at a Research One institution and two at a Research Two institution. The fourth participant worked at a small liberal arts school in the South after working at a prestigious Research One institution. All the women easily engaged in conversation. The pseudonyms I chose for the participants are some iconic Black women activists, artists, and intellectuals who represent Black feminism and have used their voices to address the social inequality of Black women: Billie Holiday, Lauryn Hill, Nina Simone, and Angela Davis.

### Billie Holiday

Billie Holiday is a seasoned professor who is in the Healthcare field, working across disciplines. She is a distinguished Black woman in her early 50s. She wears her hair short and natural, close to her head, accentuating her warm and welcoming smile. She has a smooth,

soothing voice that matches her smooth skin—a testament to the adage “Black don’t crack.” She sounded somewhat formal and professional when she spoke during the interview. Unlike the other participants, for example, she never used a single cuss word. Billie was born and raised in Ponderosa, a Westernized country similar to the United States. And like the United States, Ponderosa’s neighborhoods were segregated by race and class. She recalled, “I grew up in a predominantly white environment” and was one of the only Black families who lived there.

For Billie, being one of the only or few was no better in high school. She attended a Catholic school and clarified that “when I was there, it was kind of weird because even in high school, there weren’t that many Black students, let alone Black girls in the Honor’s program in high school.” Billie struggled to find a community where she felt she belonged:

There weren’t many Black kids in that [Honor’s] program so I felt I had to do much of the work myself. So, it was more my work ethic that made me move through that program because I had a hard work ethic.

By this, she meant that she could count on herself only to try and figure out how to navigate the educational system.

In comparison, she witnessed many of her white peers take prep courses for college entrance exams and receive navigational and financial support from their parents. The feeling of having to figure everything out on her own persisted throughout her journey as a first-generation student, from navigating the rules of college applications to striving for high scores on the GREs and gaining admission to an elite college. Eventually, Billie applied to an HBCU, seeking connections with other Black students in search of community.

Billie’s motivation and passion for going into academia were wanting to make an impact on students. She recalled working in a lab as an undergraduate student researching the impact of

racism and body physiology. Although noble research, she realized that she wanted to marry research and teaching in the classroom:

That work made me realize that it cannot stop in a lab. If I were to get my PhD, I need to do more than work in a lab developing theories and models. It is important to be in the classrooms and teach students exactly what is happening in society. That is where the rubber hits the road. As a single person, it won't make that much of a difference. But a classroom, a cohort of students who understand the real issue that is going on in society, can then go out and make that change . . . I know that if I wanted to do that kind of research in higher ed, I could both teach and do research, but I really wanted my impact to be in the classroom.

Billie takes her mentor role seriously and partners with community organizations. Her dedication to students and community engagement has been recognized with two awards at her university.

After completing graduate school, Billie decided to attend a highly acclaimed university for her postdoc. After completing her postdoc, she was hired at her current university, an R2. She has taught for 11 years and has held multiple leadership roles at her school.

### **Lauryn Hill**

Lauryn appeared relaxed and casually dressed for the Zoom© interview, comfortably situated at home with a charming display of plants, including a long philodendron, hanging over her shoulder. Her affinity for greenery made perfect sense, given her love of the Pacific Northwest (PNW) where she was born and raised. Lauryn's educational journey closely followed her roots, from kindergarten through high school, she attended local public schools, and even for her undergraduate and master's degrees, she chose to stay in-state, staying just a few hours away

from her hometown as a first-generation student. After obtaining her master's in teaching, Lauryn spent a few years teaching in middle school before transitioning into higher education.

Lauryn exudes a powerful and unwavering energy grounded in her strong beliefs and values. During the interview, she stood out among the participants for her willingness to share deeply personal experiences of gendered racism. With remarkable candor, she provided vivid examples of how gendered racism has impacted her mind, body, and spirit. Despite her youth, Lauryn is a force to be reckoned with—fearless and unapologetic in expressing her thoughts and opinions. This fearlessness had sometimes led her into challenging situations like when she attempted to organize a teacher's union at a small liberal arts college she once worked at. She recalled, "I was trying to form a union with other comrades, and I don't think it's ever happened because they got a union-busting firm." On her campus, Lauryn actively confronts injustices and challenges assumed norms, policies, and procedures. Her approach is characterized by unfiltered honesty and offers a raw authenticity that sets her apart.

"Because I didn't know any better," was Lauryn's answer when asked why she entered higher education. She considered returning to teaching K-12 "because higher ed was fucked up." Lauryn enjoys having a schedule that gives her "some autonomy." As a young tenure-track faculty in her early 40s, Lauryn has been grappling with racism at her institution since the beginning of her tenure. The continuous stream of microaggressions she faced in the work environment has significantly affected her well-being and led to burnout. Recognizing the detrimental impact of navigating a system designed to oppress and instill self-doubt, she has made the difficult decision to consider leaving higher education to prioritize her health and overall well-being. Despite her dedication and eight years of teaching experience, Lauryn finds

herself on medical leave, seeking respite from the accumulated toxic stress that has adversely affected her.

### **Angela Davis**

Angela exuded a formidable aura, radiating strength, determination, and an unmistakable flair. As a seasoned academician, her authoritative demeanor immediately captured my attention. Unafraid to delve into controversial topics, she fearlessly expressed her opinions with unwavering clarity and sincerity. I must admit, during the interview, I found her initial presence intimidating—arms crossed and a look that seemed to challenge me, as if asking, “What do you want?” However, beneath this commanding exterior, she was more than willing to engage. Although she dismissed discussing her upbringing as redundant, she did offer some insights in response to my questions.

In her mid-fifties, Angela proudly embraces her natural hair—a practice she has maintained since the 1990s—and displays her love for fashion. Her active presence on social media platforms, like Instagram and Twitter, and her appearances on various podcasts and journals showcase her prolific nature. A passionate advocate for social justice, Angela is particularly devoted to promoting reproductive health causes. She staunchly addresses and confronts the persisting forms of oppression within her institution and field of study. Despite her seriousness in matters of social justice, Angela also humorously describes herself as a “serious optimist,” emphasizing her pragmatic yet playful nature. In Angela, one finds a remarkable blend of strength, intellect, and conviction to making the world a better place.

Angela’s upbringing was deeply influenced by her family’s remarkable history and legacy, which revolved around a strong commitment to education and community engagement. “My parents were civil rights pioneers,” she proudly shared. Her mother, currently the president

of an urban league guild, remains a dedicated community activist. Angela hails from a family of trailblazers, with her father achieving post-secondary education and becoming a judge and her sister holding a PhD and serving as a tenured professor.

Thanks to a full scholarship, Angela pursued nursing at a small liberal arts school, ensuring she could graduate debt-free. She recalled fond memories of her undergraduate experience, expressing, “I had a good time.” Throughout her academic journey, Angela remained true to her values, obtaining three degrees from public institutions despite spending her career within PWIs. Her unwavering dedication to public education has shaped her career choices, preventing her from considering positions at private universities, as she believes it would contradict her advocacy for accessible education for all.

When questioned about her choice to pursue a career in higher education, Angela’s response was clear and unwavering. Education was always a natural path for her, and she saw it as an essential part of her life: *“It was never not an option that I wasn’t going to school.”* Her commitment to principles, public education, and the vision of a utopian society propelled her towards this path, where she believes she can actively contribute to the creation of a better world for all. With an impressive tenure of 24 years in teaching, Angela holds several leadership positions at a Research One institution.

### **Nina Simone**

In her mid-30s, Nina stands as the youngest participant in the group. Married with two young children, she wears her hair long, flowing past her shoulders. Growing up with her father as a professor, Nina was exposed to academic life early on, and during college, she realized her passion for academia and aspired to become a professor. She shared that she had always enjoyed learning and reading, and she had embraced her college experience. Currently employed at a

smaller liberal arts university in the South, Nina began her career at an Ivy League institution. However, she made the decision to leave due to what she described as “explicit foolishness and racism” that negatively impacted her “health and well-being.”

Reflecting on her academic path, Nina acknowledged the privilege and luck she experienced, attributing her success to strong institutional support and “really phenomenal mentors.” These mentors wielded significant “institutional power,” which she was fortunate to be adjacent to and benefitted from. Although she was well-liked at her previous institution, her decision to leave came as a shock to them. Despite her challenges, Nina’s journey has been shaped by perseverance and the invaluable support of mentors who empowered her to navigate academia and achieve her goals.

Nina’s upbringing was deeply influenced by her politically pro-Black household, where a strong sense of self-concept, cultural history, and an early critical consciousness were nurtured. Reflecting on her life, she remarked, “I can’t remember a time when race wasn’t highly salient,” and keenly understood that “it wasn’t just about race. It was how systems dehumanize Black people.” This awareness was “always just a part of our life growing up,” shaping her preparedness to navigate racial incidents with a pragmatic mindset, “Well, this is what they do. This is how they move, and I have to move accordingly.” With almost five years of teaching experience in higher education, Nina currently works at a smaller liberal arts university in the South.

### **Themes**

In this section, I provide an analysis of four themes that are presented from the data. Data fall under two domains: (a) impacts of misogynoir; and (b) healing. These two domains are aligned with the research questions and are umbrella terms used to describe: Ways PWIs

manufacture and maintain inequities and poor campus climate for Black women, the effects of gendered racism, ways Black women construct strategies of resistance, and how Black women forge pathways to racial healing. Under domain (1) impacts of misogynoir, two themes emerged from coding transcripts: (a) campus climate; and (b) mind-body-spirit. The second domain of healing had two themes that emerged: (a) resistance; and (b) (re)covering self.

### **Domain 1: Impacts of Misogynoir**

This chapter highlights the personal narratives of each participant as a BWF working at and navigating a PWI. The participants were asked to reflect on their racial identity as Black woman faculty members, talk about the barriers and challenges they encountered, and name the material effects of racism and sexism on their health and wellness. Although each participant works at different institutional types and has distinctly different personal experiences and backgrounds, some commonalities linked their experiences together such as having similar coping and resistance strategies. Their stories shed light on the traumatic impact of gendered racism on Black women. In this section, the themes of (1) campus climate and (2) mind-body-spirit are discussed.

#### ***Theme: Campus Climate***

And the next day, I had a meeting with my assistant or associate dean, and I asked him questions about that . . . and he started yelling. He was an old white guy. He started yelling, and I waited for him to finish, and I said, “Are you done?” and he was like, “Yes,” and I said, “I don’t feel safe, and I want to leave.” (Lauryn Hill)

Campus climate refers to the oppressive practices and mechanisms that PWIs and academia use to harm Black women’s health and well-being by reproducing and maintaining systemic inequities and unwelcome climates. The participants discussed their experiences in the

academy as alienating, unwelcoming, racist, sexist, and stressful. These experiences are often the result of systemic oppression.

**The Only.** BWF are frequently the only one or one of the only few at PWIs. Being the only or one of the only few make Black women simultaneously more visible yet invisible. Being the only or one of the few positions Black women in academia an “outsider within” status (Collins, 1986). Similarly, hooks describes the marginalized position of women of color living and working on the margins in their professional career as being “part of the whole but outside the main body” (hooks, 1990, p. 149). Angela pointed out the harm and ethical violation that comes from being the “only” and the extra labor that Black women are asked and expected to do at PWIs because of it—commonly referred to as cultural taxation (Padilla, 1994). Cultural taxation describes the burden of additional responsibilities placed upon non-white faculty because of their identity. Angela reflected on the pressure she got from her university to lead their DEI efforts as a PhD student:

So, on the one hand, everybody wanted me to take on all this DEI work, and we were developing the DEI Committee, and I would not engage a student, even faculty of color. They are like, “Angela, you’re not involved in DEI activities. You’re not doing this or doing that.” Furthermore, Dr. P said, “Angela, why aren’t you helping us?” Well, because I have no power and no time, and I will be more powerful when I am an alumnus and a faculty person. So, as much as I would like to help you, stop asking the least powerful people on the campus to do the hard work. I understood that, and folks got mad at me. I was like, Look, I can’t be bothered because the work you are trying to do is important but institutional transformation should not be born on the backs of learners.

Angela's experience highlights how the lack of Black faculty representation on predominantly white campuses often leaves Black faculty vulnerable to requests to participate in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in addition to labor exploitation.

Furthermore, Angela was one of the few BWF at her previous university, "I was the only one in my department out of 3,500 faculty across four campuses." She elucidated:

I was personally unhappy. [The pandemic] illuminated a lot of very personal and professional unhappiness for me, and part of that unhappiness was as a Black faculty member—I was the only Black tenured faculty at the associate level on the entire Monterey Pine campus across the four schools. So, out of 3,516 faculty, I was the only one. So, I got put on every committee, right? I was supposed to be on a six-and-a-half-month sabbatical during the pandemic in 2020. One of the things that led me to leave Monterey Pine was that my sabbatical was completely breached. My Chancellor volunteered me to chair the anti-racism task force after George Floyd was murdered, and I had to be on the COVID-19 equity task force like I got voluntold for everything because there was nobody else. This is why I always talk about being the only one is unethical. Right? I say this to faculty members all the time. How you all experience life as a faculty member is very different from how I do. . . There is no ethical way to be an only, and I need more people to understand that.

Another aspect of being "the only" that Black women must contend with is the challenge to prove they have their job legitimately and not because of affirmative action or tokenism—one of the many negative consequences of marginalization.

Lauryn shared how she used her voice to push and advocate for herself to get support but was silenced by her white male dean. She recalled when she first realized she was a token hire at her previous institution:

Yeah, I had a postdoc, and my postdoc really sucked. I found out in the first—I am going to say a month—I was in a meeting where I discovered I was essentially hired as a token. I was stuck on stupid being like, “Is this what is being said while I’m in the room?” And the next day, I met with my assistant or the associate dean, and I asked him questions about that.

In this meeting, Lauryn advocated for the support she felt she “should be offered” to be successful and recalled:

He started yelling. He was an old white guy. He started yelling, and I waited for him to finish, and I said, “Are you done?” and he was like, “Yes,” and I said, “I don’t feel safe, and I want to leave.” White people can get belligerent when essentially, you are a Black woman.

Lauryn described the silencing she was subjected to when raising issues around disparate treatment. Like Lauryn, Billie shared her frustrations of being a Black woman who has had her abilities doubted and questioned and feeling compelled to “diminish my light” to make her white colleagues feel comfortable.

Derrick Bell (1990) referred to this as biculturalism—when Black women “feel[s] pressure to suppress one of her cultural identities, particularly her Afro-American identity” to exist in the dominant white culture (p. 473). Billie continued:

Yeah, I think the other [difficulty being a Black woman in academia] will be expectations—expectations of your colleagues and other faculty too. They hire you, so it

is a fascinating conundrum. They hire you because they feel that you are competent, capable, and the best person. You know that they will not hire you as a Black person if you are not competent, that is the first thing. But, say you are in meetings or a discussion, you still have to be mindful of not being a star. You still have to be mindful of making people feel comfortable and not feel like you are overshadowing them so they know you are good, but you cannot be that good in certain situations. They have hired you, but you have to downplay your strengths so that they can still feel good about it.

Billie further talked about the difficulty of walking a fine line in white spaces between her professional and personal life and the challenge of managing the tensions between two cultural worlds.

For me, that is a challenge because, as a Black woman, there are so many hurdles to traverse to get to that pinnacle. You do not want to downplay yourself for other people's comfort. You do not want to diminish your strengths so people can feel good about themselves. They have to feel good about themselves. It is a delicate dance, actually, to assert your power and strengths in a non-threatening way, but that still allows you to keep moving forward because if you do not do it the right way, you will step on toes, and people can make life miserable for you. And, of course, if you don't do it the right way, you will never elevate because you have not engendered your power to lift you to the place where you need to go because you are spending time diminishing yourself so that other people can feel good and you don't want to do that.

**Lack of Support.** All the participants shared stories of how their institution made the campus environment difficult for them to navigate and thrive. They all expressed common feelings of frustration and fatigue due to a lack of support from their institution, colleagues, or

supervisors. Nina, for example, did not receive adequate institutional or departmental support from her dean after relaying her concerns about the chair of her department—a white woman whom she felt did not support Black women.

I remember when I was talking to my dean at The University of White Oak, and I was like, you know, I think there's a racial element. I think you know she doesn't support Black women. He was like, "Well, you know. I wish you would have told me this earlier," and I was like but how could I do that as a junior faculty? And she's been chair? I think she has been chair for 15 years. So, I think that's clear. That sends a message to me that her behavior was condoned and appreciated.

Similarly, Angela shared observations of the blatant hiring discrepancies at her school. She had worked for the university for many years as an adjunct when a tenure track position opened. The university asked her to apply after she had secured a large research grant. She shared her frustrations regarding her university's disingenuousness and ulterior motive of diversifying its applicant pool:

I worked at the University of Monterey Pine as a faculty member. After I finished my PhD there, I started as a volunteer clinical faculty member, and then I joined the adjunct series. When I got my first quarter of a million-dollar contract, a tenure track job became open and available. I got asked to apply for it, not because they had any intention of giving it to me but because they needed to diversify the pool, which happens a lot at primarily white universities where searches can't move forward. I mean, I understand the intent behind it—they wanted enough Black people, enough women, or enough minorities to be part of the pool. But they only add a sentence decoration to be able to say that they had a diverse pool and then be able to offer the position to somebody else. So, I

was not offered the position. And you know, basically, I had to wait for that person to turn down the job before it was an offer to me. So, I was tenured at the University of Monterey Pine after six years of being an adjunct.

Angela's story highlights the "non-performative speech acts" universities engage in (Ahmed, 2006) that maintained her marginalization as a Black woman faculty. Ahmed (2006) suggested that "the speech acts that commit the university to equality are non-performatives . . . they 'work' precisely by not bringing about the effects that they name" (p. 104). In her case, Angela recognized that although she was asked to apply (we value diversity) for a tenure-track position, she was never meant to get it (we have no intention of changing).

Billie's experience supports her colleagues' experiences of institutional speech acts and inequitable hiring practices. She brought up another aspect of non-performative speech acts, specifically when universities tout diversity, equity, and inclusion language that serve as institutional performance:

White privilege is not something that we come up with in there. White privilege is what it is, and I think that when one has privilege for as long as one has had it, it's hard to see another person's perspective. You haven't walked in their shoes. So, I think academics are good at using certain language to show inclusivity, to show that they are welcoming, and all that. I mean, how do you sound inclusive? How do you sound like someone who's very equitable? Who's about bringing everybody in? Everyone can say that but when things hit the fan you see where people stand . . .

So, whether it's the students or whether its faculty, people's biases do come out. And then they say something to your face because that is how they are supposed to sound. But it does not mean that is how they think. They have a worldview, and they come into the

setting with that worldview, and it is only when they are with their closest friends, or when they are with their people, with people who they think is an ally where it comes out.

**Microaggressions.** The participants shared how they have been subjected to microaggressions and disrespect. Lauryn and Nina described examples of being discounted and marginalized in the workplace. Lauryn recalled an experience with a “mediocre white man” in her department and how she had to point out her worth because no one else did.

I worked with a white guy who was next door to me, and he was just so basic. He was super mediocre, and he definitely wanted to be a big fish in a small pond. So, I get why some people stay at certain institutions. However, he would always be just grandiose in department meetings. That whole year—I am just so proud of myself—I was consistent every time this man spoke. I always spoke up after to give him a taste of his own medicine because he would say, “I am going to do this. I am going to do that,” and I would have just already done it because they just do not believe that Black people are capable of anything, especially at a small institution. “I want to do blah blah blah!” and I would say, “I’m good, I did that last year.” So, I would always toot my own horn because nobody else ever did.

Nina reflected on a similar experience, one where a white man devalued and disrespected her leadership. However, unlike Lauryn, who gave herself credit, Nina’s navigational strategy was to “take notes” silently:

I have also had to deal with it (racism) from the people I am supervising. So, I am supervising this white guy, and I remember one of the first things he said to me was about a project I created from its inception. And one of the first things he said was, “Oh, this is

good, but you know, I'm glad they brought me in because I can take it to the next level.”

He would call me a manager on the project and not the director of it. He called me a *manager*. He told me another time, “I'm glad a Black woman is the face of this, you know. I think it is good.” So, it is like I kind of grin and bear it. But you take note, and then you make moves accordingly.

Billie touched on the disrespect that BWF sometimes get from other faculty and students.

She shared how she sets expectations for students to counter white notions of Black women:

A I got older, experiencing that [racism], I'd like to speak about it in terms of a Black woman faculty. First, I make it a point of having my students call me Dr. Holiday or Professor Holiday. The reason is that there is a different feeling for a student calling me Billie as a Black professor than a student calling my colleague a white professor, Karen. It is not going to be the same. It forces them to be respectful. It forces them to acknowledge your accomplishments. It forces them to acknowledge your stature. So, even if they say that with a sneer, they are saying it. And that is important and is one thing that I do. Experiencing my identity as well. You do that in terms of expectations among students as a faculty.

As the participants candidly shared their experiences of microaggressions and disrespect in the workplace, it became evident that the theme of labor was closely intertwined with the subtheme of microaggressions. These instances of discounting and marginalizing Black women's contributions and expertise within the academic industrial complex shed light on the broader issue of exploitative labor conditions that they face. Their narratives revealed the intersectionality of challenges faced by BWF, and how their labor is often undervalued and undermined in various aspects of their professional lives.

**Labor.** “Labor” emerged in the discussions, centered around the identification of time theft, workplace demands, and autonomy. Each participant shared experiences of exploitative labor conditions within the academic industrial complex (Tevis et al., 2020).

Lauryn highlighted time theft as a significant issue affecting her well-being including her physical and psychological health. Lauryn cited examples of unproductive meetings and the burden of justifying her presence and work at the university. She said:

I guess I am saying every barrier there is—I feel like I have experienced it—not to the degree that maybe others have, but in terms of time theft. I have to address everything. That means they have stolen time from us. So, for example, every time they would write a shitty evaluation of me, I would have to come back with ten pages with references.

Angela emphasized the disproportionate labor she faces as one of the few or only BWF at the institution, and how she established strict boundaries to manage her workload effectively. She gave an example of having to manage thousands of emails she receives per month. She uses “technology to help me compartmentalize, so I’m not constantly reacting to my inbox, which is a proxy for reacting to other people . . . I’m limiting my time to people who are only serious about wanting to do work.” She frequently must correct people who think she is too busy, saying that she is “structurally oversubscribed, not busy. . . There is not enough of me.”

Additionally, Nina expressed the impacts of lacking autonomy in the workplace, recounting instances where decisions were made about her without her input, treating her as an abstraction rather than acknowledging her as a worthy individual with concrete needs. She elaborated:

I mean, I think the challenges of how Black people, Black women, are often treated as abstractions—like pawns to be moved around in the ways that suit whomever the people

in power are. I know from my experience that decisions were made for me or about me and did not consider me and what I need. And so, I think that is the most challenging thing of just trying to navigate. I remember I told my dean that he treated me like an abstraction, but I am real, and there are concrete implications and consequences to things and actions taken on my behalf without my input.

**Positives.** Angela highlighted the contrasting hiring experiences between her previous and current universities. She praised her current institution, the University of Quaking Aspen, for following through on its commitment to actively recruit and retain diverse faculty as part of a faculty diversity initiative. Unlike the previous university she worked at, she pointed out that the University of Quaking Aspen “put its money where its mouth is,” and when “dating institutions,” Angela said she wanted to see which ones were “serious about—or more serious about the work.” Angela was offered a tenured appointment, a testament to the institution’s seriousness about diversifying its faculty and investing in retaining underrepresented faculty. She said:

I was offered a position at the University of Quaking Aspen as part of the faculty diversity initiative, so the provost decided to put money where his mouth is and decided that they wanted to actively recruit Black, Indigenous, and Latino faculty to lifetime appointments. I have a tenured appointment, not no “come be a visiting professor” and all that. This is to diversify their faculty. The provost will pay for the two of us to come and be here to develop new educational content in reproductive health rights and justice.

Nonetheless, Angela remains realistic about her goals, acknowledging that the utopia she envisions is yet to be realized. However, she wholeheartedly believes in her role as a catalyst for change, “Let’s be clear. The utopia I want to work in doesn’t exist yet, but it is my job to help

build it . . . I do so much work across so many domains because everybody wants a utopia. Nobody wants to build it, though.”

Nina shared that she stays in higher education because of the flexibility which allowed her to be home with her children after they were born. She also shared that she had an easier time than some other Black faculty which she attributed to “favoritism.” She added:

I will say, though, that I had really phenomenal mentors within my institution so far, and so I don’t know how much I would have struggled with that (challenges with workload or pay) because the mentors I had had a lot of institutional power. But I will also say, though, I have seen other Black women struggle in that area. . . . But, at the University of White Oak, there was favoritism, and they really liked me there. And part of it is I could smile and grin. . . . That is why they were so surprised when shit hit the fan when I left because I can play the role well. I know that afforded me this protection that I would see friends of mine not getting. You know, we would talk about it, like not getting the same pay ranges, not getting the same support because, you know, people didn’t like them as much. Maybe that is the piece—playing the game—one of the coping mechanisms I use is I can play the game really well in these spaces.

While some participants shared positive experiences at their universities, Lauryn described her postdoc and faculty experiences as less favorable yet acknowledged the trade-off was the flexibility that higher education allows. Although Lauryn believes “higher ed is fucked up,” she reflected on the autonomy in graduate school, the one positive quality she could identify: “Graduate School ruins you because you have full autonomy over your time. You just get really accustomed to the autonomy, and it’s hard to just sort of have hours that you have to work.”

*Theme: Mind-body-spirit*

But I feel like if, when Black women stay long enough in the academy, you just learn you can't trust people, you just know you can't. Nobody has your best interest. So that is the crazy-making part. You feel crazy because you're constantly being gaslit. (Lauryn Hill)

Mind-body-spirit refers to the embodied and material effects of misogynoir on participants' psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being or, in other words, the costs associated with their survival and capacity to thrive in higher education. The term mind-body-spirit is an umbrella term that encompasses Racial Battle Fatigue and the emotional/behavioral, psychological, and physiological stress responses (Okello et al., 2020). As a reminder, RBF is defined as "social-psychological stress responses (e.g., frustration, anger, exhaustion, physical avoidance, psychological or emotional withdrawal, escapism, acceptance of racist attributions)" associated with being a person of color and the repeated target of racism (Smith et al., 2007, p. 552).

**Racial Battle Fatigue.** Participants shared how being a Black woman in higher education impacted their mental and emotional health and well-being. They also shared experiences and perceptions of detrimental emotional and psychological impacts such as depression, feelings of distrust, feeling crazy, and an IDGAF attitude, as well as deleterious health effects such as weight gain, anxiety, and infertility.

Billie vocalized the material reality of RBF:

I think every Black person if they are honest with themselves, would say they experience RBF. There is just no way that you cannot be. It's like living while Black. You cannot live as a Black person in America or anything else without experiencing racial trauma.

Lauryn reflected on how working as one of the few or only BWF affected her mental health. While she has worked at her current institution for five years and eight total as a faculty member, she noted:

Only recently have I really tried to process how working at [a predominantly white institution], or being a token or one of a very few Black people at an institution . . . How do I explain it . . . It really fucks up my sense of self because I often have existential experiences about being a Black body. For example, if I walk into my department meeting or any meeting and am the only Black person, people perceive me in a certain way. So, they put upon you what they think you should say, what you will say. They will invite you to say shit they would not. You are just this thing; you are being manipulated to be a Black woman, whatever that particular person or organization thinks you should be. And so, it is a constant struggle to think about my authentic self—how to be my authentic self in spaces designed never to allow you to do that.

As Lauryn described how higher education makes her feel “crazy,” she acknowledged her mental health struggles with depression:

For me it has been crazymaking [being a BWF at a PWI]. I definitely had bouts of depression. I have thought more than I think any person should have to think about their race, and knowing that so many people of color, especially Black and Indigenous folks, I believe we think a lot about it to the point where yeah, I often have to take a break from work.

Lauryn elaborated on the mental toll she experienced after being blamed for feeling “crazy”:

I find myself to be a high-functioning, depressive person. So, I feel like to a certain degree, I have, you know, I have a threshold, but when I meet that threshold, I'm just not good at my job. I noticed that in the last meeting I had with my chair. I was like, "Kiss my ass—like you say stupid shit to me. You can kiss my ass." She thought I was joking, and at the end of this meeting with two colleagues, she was like, "Listen, I am going to continue to play devil's advocate." And I just thought I had no emotional capacity. I can't. I can't regulate my own emotions. I remember saying, "Karen, the devil doesn't need an advocate. But you do you . . ." I feel like when Black women stay long enough in the Academy, you learn you can't trust people; you know you can't. Nobody has your best interest. So that is the crazy-making part. You feel crazy because you are constantly being gaslit.

Like Lauryn, Billie described feelings of distrust toward colleagues due to their misguided assumptions and stereotypes of Black people as a threat:

People will underestimate you, for instance. So, you work even harder because of the expectations. However, the other thing that has happened to me is that I found people very threatened by me, making me more distrustful. So in terms of how it may be just mentally my outlook, people may need to prove to me that they are trustworthy because I am more hesitant going into relationships which has impacted my ability to trust. It also has impacted me in terms of working harder because I do not want them to say, "See, that is what I expected of this [Black] person."

Lauryn's and Billie's narratives highlight the psychological and emotional complexities of navigating gendered racism and the resultant racial battle fatigue. Billie's experiences resulted in justified hypervigilance—always worried about how her non-white colleagues see her.

Lauryn spoke about the impact of her work-wife leaving their institution due to racism and of the profound grief and loss she felt:

They just made work so hostile for my work wife and her actual husband that they left the institution. So, I struggled so much in the fall. Part of it was like her being gone—but because we literally did everything together, I spent the quarter half as smart and half as good because I did nothing alone. I do nothing alone.

Lauryn further shared her thoughts about how the stress of existing as a Black woman in academia lands in her body. Given the history of oppression of Black women's wombs, Lauryn's experience is consistent with today's ongoing health disparities for Black women. She disclosed:

I think many Black women have the same experience as women of color, where one of the first things the Academy will steal from you is your fertility, which, I think, has a lot to do with how stress manifests in the body. So many other women that I know have fertility issues, and part of it is like we do wait longer to have children, but I believe that in my case, I had fibroids because of the stress of this job, which meant that last year I had to have a hysterectomy. So, then I had a hysterectomy, and I definitely attribute that to this job. I know many women who cannot have kids because of this job. So those, to me, are the two biggest things like, mental health and reproductive health. That is often what I see amongst other women of color.

Angela brought up the deadly physical toll racism has on Black people:

The toll it [racism] takes on individuals like I am utterly convinced that my life will be shortened because of weathering and just being a Black woman in the world. It is the potential loss of human resources and human capital—the amount of time I have to spend

correcting people or engaging folks around racism—like, I am human just like you. It is exhausting. It is ridiculous. It is a waste, all driven by fear and hatred.

Her experience highlights racism as a public health crisis and the concomitant weathering effects and the fact that racism is deadly.

Similarly, when Billie spoke about her feelings of distrust, she also named the physical impacts of RBF on her body:

In terms of my outlook, it has taken a while to open up in that way, and in terms of physical health, weight gain has happened because of stress. That happens to all of us when we are highly stressed and have not balanced the work issue with our personal life issues, which has an impact. That is something that I think I need to address, distrust and lack of optimism.

Participants described the psychological mindset they needed to survive in institutions of higher education as a BWF. Lauryn shared that her survival strategy is “a lot of my professional persona is to really not care. That’s how I embrace and reclaim my agency.” Billie described the psychological casualties of working at a PWI that touts rhetoric of diversity, equity, and care:

Yes, I am distrustful. Yes, I am cynical. Yes, I am pessimistic because people attend these trainings to address diversity. However, they are not changing their work. They are doing it because it is a box they must check because they are told to do that by their department. Then they come back saying that they have done it [diversity training]. I don’t know what needs to be done to get to that point, but I’m not buying into the notion that people’s core values change just because they espouse them.

Feeling responsible for educating white colleagues led to feelings of fear, anger, and fatigue for Billie. (Re)traumatization also occurs in the re-telling of stories. “It is (re)traumatizing for me to continue to discuss these things repeatedly. It’s not for you because you are not experiencing it.”

Billie elaborated further:

How do you tell people nicely so that they are not “offended” and so they do not “go there”? They don’t understand. And then the battle fatigue is also trying to educate white folks, you know, about the experience of being Black, of what we are experiencing right now, and how they are not helping, or how they can help. And how I experience this (re)traumatization when I have to be the one who is called in to address certain tensions that are occurring because of race? Nevertheless, [I am] the Black person who perhaps has that lived experience. They expect you to do it. It happens all the time.

Nina described some of the physiological responses she experienced:

I think in the moments when it is happening, like when there are significant moments like with the white guy who is a big problem, or dealing with the issue with my chair, who was terrible. It is these kinds of experiences you feel when you have any conflict, you know, like the mind racing and just feeling overwhelmed and trying to figure it out. But it is not necessarily a day-to-day thing where that happens. It is like chess but with academia.

The participants’ narratives highlight the how systemic oppression, racism, and sexism impact their health and well-being.

## **Domain 2: Healing**

In this section titled Healing, I discuss two overarching themes: 3) Resistance and 4) (Re)covering self. Participants were asked about their thoughts and experiences of (racial) healing in higher education.

### ***Theme: Resistance***

I just often felt like white people were trying to control me, and sometimes I would have to make it a game to survive. (Lauryn Hill)

Resistance was one of the overarching themes that emerged from the data. All the women reported using some form of resistance at their institution. They articulated a keen awareness of power structures and the need for strategic approaches to survive and navigate within the Ivory Tower, and they shared stories of how they pushed back against systemic oppression, racism, and sexism. Resistance looked like, for example, speaking up and confronting racist or unjust people, practices, and policies; carving out spaces and time to connect with friends and family outside of the institution; or focusing on self-care. Their narratives provide examples of how participants perceived and responded to systemic oppression, racism, and sexism, how they constructed strategies of resistance for themselves, and highlighted their sense of agency and demonstration of personal power. Resistance also requires that Black women understand academia and universities well and use that knowledge to take strategic actions to successfully navigate for their survival.

Lauryn spoke about the importance of advocating for herself:

I have always addressed shit when it happens, like within 48 hours. You know, they tell me you can't co-teach. I mean, I had to have the provost come down three times and say, "yes," meaning you can do that, so essentially what happens at my institution is that if I

ask for something, if this Black body asks for something, people always want to say no or come up with a reason why I can't have it, and I will always say, what is the policy, precedent, or procedure that prevents me from having access to that thing or whatever? And there never is because my union rep said, "Of course, there never is." After all, I have seen white men ask for half as much and get twice as much.

Using anger as a form of resistance was prevalent among participants. Participants spoke of feeling righteous anger and utilized their anger in different ways. Some participants emphasized how they had to suppress their anger and code-switch to say things so that white people could receive them. Billie and Nina emphasized this navigational strategy when working with white students and colleagues.

Billie spoke of her frustration with being unable to vocalize anger to white students to counter their stereotypes about Black women:

And so, you recognize that you have to counter that delicately, certainly feel angered by that. But that cannot show up because it is part of the education that you are giving students. So, the education that you are giving students as a Black person is very different than just general education of the curriculum.

Similarly, Nina spoke of the burden of speaking in a way that white people "can receive it." Regarding diversity and equity concerns, Nina said:

I have felt obligated to speak up and address these things because otherwise, they don't get it you know what I'm saying? However, it can be hard to speak up in a way that can be received, even when I want to speak up in anger, having to temper myself and make sure it can be received. Yeah, just that it can be received. And you know it is an added burden.

Angela explained that her responses to racism and misogynoir are twofold:

My two primary reactions are heartbreak and anger . . . My sadness or my heartache comes from this place of when I expect people to do better. Or when people espouse that they want to do better, but then they do something that just really is simply wrong. I'm heartbroken first, and then I move to anger.

Angela shared that she uses her anger as motivation to take action. In one instance, Angela fought for a colleague to have his Visa reviewed after the University did not renew it. "I got angry. I wrote everybody and cussed them out because that is how I engage anger." She elaborated further, "I think Audre Lord was right. I think Octavia Butler was right. I think that hooks was right—again, I come up in a tradition of Black Feminism, and anger is an appropriate response to racism." Angela's righteous anger has helped fuel her motivation to "build the utopia [she] wants to live in."

Nina has also leaned into her anger. While discussing whether she has experienced racial battle fatigue, she said:

I don't have RBF, but I am definitely irritated and angry. I lean into my anger. It is more just anger and frustration. But, for me, what I think about a lot, and it is one of the reasons why I speak up when I do and push back, and in the ways that I try to do it is like—I could have it a lot worse. This is the result of people, Black women, and Black people pushing back that I can sit in these spaces to do this. So, it is like, who am I to say, "Oh, this is too much. I'm done." You know?

Lauryn spoke powerfully and directly about the visceral reaction behind her resistance to white supremacy. She described a powerful way she responded to racism at work at her current institution "with attitude":

I was already finding it weird to be a Black woman in higher ed. So, I wore a black band on my arm every day. Part of it was that I needed to do that to protect my psyche, and it was a thing that some people were doing, and what it meant was that you were standing in solidarity with freedom fighters all over the world. And, because that institution was so weird, only one person ever asked because they didn't want to hear shit from me. I just always had an attitude because they had an attitude. Another thing I also did at that place was I never, I rarely ever sat in a meeting. People would often invite me or instruct me on where to sit, and it just felt very visceral that I had to have control over my own body. So those are weird examples. But in the context, I often felt like white people were trying to control me, and sometimes I would have to make it a game to survive.

All the women identified having to prioritize themselves, physically and emotionally, as resistance. Tactics such as emotional disengagement from the academy, spending time with family and friends, working with friends, speaking up, or leaving an institution were used to resist and cope with gendered racism.

Lauryn defied the controlling image of the Superwoman/strong Black woman trope (Collins, 2000; Patton, 2016) by refusing to give up her time, asking for course releases, taking medical leave as needed, and asking for reparations. Lauryn has always spoken up and advocated for herself and clarified:

I have always asked [for what I wanted], so my first year, I was like, "Y'all asked me to do too much, so I'm going to need another course release." And at the time, my dean was like, "Sure" because I went in with my Union Rep. And that promise was made to me in front of my Union Rep., and then it was reneged on because my dean was like crazy, and he just had this whole thing about like, "I've hired you so you just need to be grateful."

Pushing back against Black women tropes and the racist expectations that Black women are Superwoman and can do it all, Nina recognized early on in her career that she was not willing to sacrifice her health or time to the academy after seeing one of her mentors, a Black woman who was “a beast in her field” and who had “given it her all,” speak on an all-white male panel. After the discussion, her mentor proudly told Nina that she had personally sacrificed her kids and marriage for the job to “get to these spaces and be part of these conversations.” Nina thought, “Fuck that. I am not sacrificing my marriage. I am not sacrificing so I can sit on a panel with some random white men. And I am not sacrificing my health for a paper seven people may read.” However, prioritizing her health and well-being made her question whether she did “academia the right way because I’m not staying up every night ‘til 2 am writing a paper no one is going to read. That is just not my story.”

Nina reflected on the need to resist the “many ways academia tries to make you think this is your life” by always reminding herself that “this is a job, not my identity.” She added:

When I start thinking about it as my identity, it gets really heavy and weighed down and can get overwhelming. But, at the end of the day, this is just a job that gives me a paycheck. I say that to say it is just like constantly reminding myself that this is a job—they will fire me. None of these institutions care about us like they are trying to eliminate tenure in many places . . . I have always had that mentality that they are not here for us. And this is a job. Let’s collect our check and keep it moving. So yeah, that’s the mentality.

Lauryn spoke of the importance of putting herself first and reclaiming her time. “I will always put me and my family first. I have taken compassionate leave once.” She is on a six-

month leave for her mental health “because people, you know, don’t take a break.” Lauryn commented on her reduced teaching schedule:

If you can figure out how to navigate [higher education] in a way where you have your sanity, where you can stay . . . the way I have navigated my institution—I have never taught more than four classes, and I fought really hard for that.

Whereas her colleagues taught 3–3–2, Lauryn explained:

That is eight classes. I am never going to be that bitch you know, and half of my courses have always been co-taught with a white person who is going to be doing more than me, or I will trade a class for a one-credit class you want me to support. So, if you want to be on that hustle, you can have it. I don’t have the drive to be like an uber-academic or be at an R1.

Unlike Lauryn and Nina, Billie struggled to reclaim her time and identity outside academia.

We need to research our wellness, on who we are as individuals outside of academia and develop that in terms of balancing that. While I hope that I can leave my work—I don’t. That’s the problem. I hope I can walk away from it and spend time *just being*. But I feel that when I am just *being*, I am thinking about my work, and that is not healthy. You have to be able to dissociate yourself from that and then find the balance of your core. I think the problem is that we almost see our identity bound up in the work we do in every single way. Even when we leave the classroom, we return to the research. It is bound up there. Even if we leave the research, we are part of these committees that are bound up there, so we never get a chance to find out who we are separately, and you know, it is continual. It started in high school. We moved on to undergraduate. We moved on to

graduate school. This has been your core, and we do not know we are separate from academia because that is where we spent most of our lives. And it is so hard to find that thing outside of that so that we can identify who we are, separate from that. What makes us who we are and the vibrant, healthy, adult we are outside of the research? So, it is a work in progress.

When dealing with the “explicit foolishness and racism” at the University of White Oak, Nina decided to leave the prestigious Research One University after securing another job.

My chair was just a terrible, terrible white woman, and that is the other thing, growing up knowing how these systems work, and how white people can often work, are people who are so entwined with these systems—like I am not going to wait around for you to treat me right. I see how you are. I see how you move, and I am going to move accordingly. Like you know what I’m saying? I do not have this belief that it is up to me to change this fucked up system you created. That is not my job. So, what I did, though, with the University of White Oak is when shit came to light about what she (the chair) was lying about—I sang like a canary—but it was after I had signed a contract for another job.

Expanding her resistance beyond the confines of traditional academic circles, Angela harnesses the full potential of social media platforms as a dynamic and far-reaching avenue for her advocacy. Her utilization of these digital spaces aligns seamlessly with the overarching theme of resistance that emerged from the women’s narratives.

Just as they spoke of the need for strategic approaches to challenge systemic oppression, racism, and sexism within the Ivory Tower, Angela extends this spirit of resistance to the virtual realm. Her bold and assertive presence on social media mirrors the women’s commitment to speaking up against unjust practices, policies, and people. Through her online activism and truth

telling, Angela not only confronts these challenges head-on but also creates a space for herself to connect with like-minded individuals and promote self-care in a space that transcends the boundaries of the physical institution. In doing so, Angela exemplifies how digital platforms have become an essential part of the toolkit for women navigating academia, a testament to their adaptability and determination in the face of systemic obstacles.

***Theme: (Re)covering Self***

The concept of (re)covering self embodies the healing practices practiced by the participants, allowing them to mend their spirit and regain a sense of wholeness in the face of marginalizing experiences within higher education. Each participant had their unique definition of healing and explored whether they had experienced healing within their academic contexts. Through intentional actions such as building communities inside and outside the university, seeking therapy, speaking authentically, engaging in chisme [gossip], or leaving their institution, they crafted for themselves *healing as praxis* (hooks, 2005). These self-care practices restored their mental health, physical well-being, and emotional equilibrium. Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, is best known for his influential work on critical pedagogy and the concept of conscientization. While Freire (2018) did not explicitly write about “healing as praxis” or “healing as practice” as distinct concepts, his ideas on education and social change can be related to the broader theme of healing and transformative action. Furthermore, while Freire’s work primarily focuses on education, his ideas can be applied to broader healing and social transformation contexts. By encouraging critical consciousness, dialogue, and collective action, Freire’s philosophy offers a framework for healing as praxis or practice, whereby individuals and communities engage in a transformative process that addresses the root causes of suffering and works towards holistic well-being and social justice.

The women engaged in a range of healthy self-care techniques, including attending therapy sessions, taking long walks, spending time with friends and family, and engaging in chisme, even deciding to leave the university if necessary. Several participants emphasized the importance of finding community, particularly with other people of color, and highlighted the support and camaraderie they found among Black women.

Among the participants, Angela and Billie, both in their 50s, shared their values and beliefs regarding their commitment to academia. Angela openly discussed aligning her values and actions, emphasizing the importance of doing what is right, even if it comes at the expense of her professional career. She shared:

I have done so many things in my career that everybody told me I would ruin my career if I did them. And it is sometimes just the right thing to do. Yeah, so you have a lot of cowards that do not want to admit to themselves that they are cowards, and they are not comfortable and do not want to be uncomfortable.

With Angela's "why" as a constant source of motivation, she remains committed to academia and fighting for equitable change. Her values and actions are intricately connected. When asked how she continues to contribute to building a more equitable world, Angela responded:

Well, I am a professor. I am a teacher. That is my job, just like I am a nurse, right? I believe in meaningful work. I don't believe in environments that are not serious about doing it. From where I see it, the work of our time is to help create people in the world who understand this existence. It is not a dress rehearsal. You do not get any do-overs. As Maya Angelou told us, the impact you make in the world is like the right you pay for being on the planet.

Moreover, Angela strongly opposed the idea that education should be subject to misinformation and disinformation, “not on my watch.” She actively rejects any untrue narrative, drawing from Black feminists who have taught that there are multiple futures and perspectives:

“I am running around trying to explain our educational structures to people and get a shared understanding of why we are here. There is only one narrative that is untrue.

Black feminists taught us years ago that there are multiple futures and ways of looking at things. There is no one narrative. So, you have to reject all that ridiculousness. Also, I am transparent about the fact that there is no utopia anywhere. If there were, I would be there.

Angela emphasized the importance of surrounding herself with individuals genuinely dedicated to “meaningful and transformative” work. She intentionally limits her time and energy to those who share her vision for change while rejecting opportunities that do not align with her values. Her approach to creating a supportive and empowering environment involves collective strategies and a strong sense of community, as she firmly believes that progress is never achieved alone.

On the other hand, Nina felt a sense of responsibility and gratitude towards her ancestors for their sacrifices which allowed her to occupy academic spaces. She expressed her views:

. . . Because I am just like, you know, my ancestors were legitimately [en]slave[d] like they were getting killed in these streets so I can be in this tower, speaking up in a faculty meeting about some foolishness. I am trying to keep that perspective. My anger and frustration are valid and real at this moment, but also it could look a lot differently if it were not for the people speaking before me. I need to continue in that same tradition in the ways that I can.

Nina's deep connection to her ancestors, particularly her acknowledgment of the sacrifices they endured to pave the way for her presence in academic spaces, was a profound source of inspiration and motivation in her journey of (re)covering self. She recognizes the deep history of oppression and struggles Black people face, and this awareness drives her commitment to continue their legacy of resilience and resistance. Her anger and frustration are grounded in the reality of contemporary challenges, but she channels those emotions into a broader perspective, one that honors the courage and strength of those who came before her. Through her work in academia, Nina endeavors to uphold the traditions of her ancestors, contributing to the ongoing struggle for equity and justice. Her connection to her roots is a powerful reminder that (re)covering self is not merely a personal endeavor but a collective responsibility that bridges generations and fosters a sense of veneration for the spirit of the ancestors.

Lauryn shared her perspective on healing, emphasizing the importance of reciprocity and institutional accountability through reparations. She reflected on her current situation and stated:

That is an interesting question for me to answer right now because what it looks like for me now is that I'm not there [academia]. And I think that is hard for some people to understand because we are so socialized in capitalism. But right now, I know myself to be a good faculty member because I'm not fucking on that campus, but they will pay me full status, full pay. I don't know how to say it, but that is their privilege. They get to keep me on the monthly payroll after everything I have been through. I should keep a tally of just all the bullshit, all the *bullshit*. That is what it looks like to me right now. I did meet with a graduate student yesterday, and that was lovely. I had a lovely interaction with that student. I think I can support that student in their intellectual endeavors because

they can do the same for me. There is reciprocity; for me, it looks like just having minimal interactions with my white colleagues and the white institution.

Nina also emphasized the importance of institutional accountability for healing to take place. She expressed her perspective on the University of White Oak and academia, explaining:

I think for healing to take place, there needs to be accountability. That is how I see it if I think about the University of White Oak for things. I think the problem with accountability in academia is that there is fundamentally never any accountability.

Nobody is ever held accountable. They might try to make you feel better [about racism], but they never hold the perpetrator accountable, and I think I have had to learn that and let go of it. I don't know if this sounds weird, but it is like this expectation that there will not be healing within academia. This is not a space where we're going to come to like a collective space of humanization and justice because it is just not built for that. So, instead of expecting it, I need to make moves accordingly to make sure I am in a good space for myself and my family. But, like in academia, it [justice] could not occur how it is set up because it requires accountability.

Both Lauryn and Nina highlighted the need for accountability within institutions and acknowledged the limitations of academia in facilitating collective healing and justice. They emphasized the importance of making choices that prioritized personal well-being and familial connection.

For Lauryn, friendships and chisme hold healing power. Thelma Trujillo (2020) described chisme as participating in dialogue and sharing stories: "Sitting down to spill the tea is a time to discuss, deconstruct, challenge, criticize, and dissect ideas, issues, traumas, and

histories . . . to remind ourselves that who we are and what we have to say matters” (Trujillo, 2020, p. 55).

Nina also mentioned the role of chisme in her life, describing it as a means of venting about the absurdities of academia with friends who understood and shared her experiences. These informal conversations provided an outlet for discussing their challenges while navigating academic spaces. Lauryn’s perspective on chisme highlighted its significance as a means of support and healing in her academic life. For her and her girlfriends, chisme served as a way to vent and discuss their challenges while navigating academia. It allowed them to openly “discuss, deconstruct, challenge, criticize, and dissect” their traumas and experiences (Trujillo, 2020, p. 55). Lauryn offered this perspective:

I found those women so healing because they see me as a person first. It is very easy to center this job. These women ask, “Oh, do you want to go to the library together? Do you want to have coffee?” So that is healing—I found people who are like, “Do you just want to hang out?” You know what I mean? Do you want to hang out and then not talk about work? We will always allow chisme because we believe that chisme saves lives, so we will happily chisme all day. It is a Spanish word that is translated to mean gossip. I mean, women just talking to other women. Thus, you often share information like staying away from that male advisor, doing this, or doing that. It is like the invaluable, important kind of shit-talking that people can and will do to each other in the academy. We use that information to stay safe.

Lauryn emphasized the importance of building connections and fostering reciprocity with other women as essential aspects of her healing journey. She stated:

Much of my healing has just been being connected to other women . . . it is other women, and I cannot stress this enough—I don't send emails alone. I co-teach often across different disciplines, so that will usually be with a white person, but I don't teach alone. I don't write independently. I think I only have one single-author publication. It was my very first publication, and then I knew, why would I ever do this shit on my own.

In Nina's and Lauryn's stories, we witness the profound healing power of connections and chisme. As Thelma Trujillo (2020) aptly described, chisme is more than gossip; it is a platform for dialogue, sharing stories, and engaging in discussions that deconstruct and challenge various aspects of life. For both Nina and Lauryn, chisme served as an essential outlet for venting and discussing their challenges within the academic world, allowing them to dissect their experiences and traumas openly. Lauryn's reflection on the importance of connections with other women echoes the sentiment that healing often comes from connecting to those who genuinely see us as individuals beyond our roles in academia. The act of co-teaching and co-writing and the rejection of the solitary path exemplify the significance of reciprocity and the strength that emerges from collective support. In their journeys, we find a reminder that healing is not just an individual process; it is deeply intertwined with the connections we build and the stories we share, reinforcing the idea that "chisme saves lives."

In line with the works of bell hooks (1989) and Patricia Collins (2000), several participants in the study emphasized the profound significance of self-definition and the urgent need to resist the silencing of Black women's voices. Angela, drawing from Black feminist tradition, articulated her unwavering commitment to embracing her true self without concern for dominant society's judgment. With an air of confidence and self-assuredness, she asserted, "I am who I am. Clearly. I mean, I transitioned to natural hair (gestures to her medium-length coiled

hair), you know, in the nineties. So, I have always been who I am, and I have always understood power.”

Angela’s powerful declaration reflects the essence of the Black feminist movement, which is deeply rooted in the empowerment and liberation of Black women. Central to this movement is the resolute call for embracing one’s authentic self and challenging the externally defined, controlling images of Black women (Collins, 1986; hooks, 1990; Lorde, 1988). Angela’s decision to wear her hair natural and be “who [she] has always been” becomes an act of self-affirmation, pushing back against systemic oppression.

Similarly, Lauryn’s narrative echoed the sentiments of resistance and empowerment found within the study’s participants. Unapologetically, she recounted a job interview experience where she repeatedly broached the subject of white supremacy. In doing so, she left no room for ambiguity about her values, beliefs, and commitment to racial justice. During the interview, she made it a point to mention:

white supremacy, like no less than 50 times, because I would never want people to get confused about who they are about to hire because I also know I could show up a different way they would like. You know, I could go to an interview with straight hair.

Lauryn’s bold approach to the job interview was an act of defiance against the forces that silence Black women’s voices. Her refusal to conform and her audacious commitment to self-expression exemplified the power of Black women to disrupt the status quo.

The participants consistently emphasized the significance of family as a vital source of strength and healing. They highlighted the support they received from their loved ones, demonstrating the crucial role that family connections played in their lives. For instance, Billie

found solace and support primarily from her children, stating that they were instrumental in providing her with the support she needed.

Nina, on the other hand, expressed gratitude for the support she received from her husband, who offered her a valuable “reality check” and a fresh perspective as a middle school teacher. She highlighted the importance of having spaces with girlfriends to engage in conversations transcending academia, race, and racism. Nina acknowledged the need to cultivate a multifaceted identity beyond academia, recognizing the importance of disconnecting from work and engaging in activities unrelated to her profession.

The role of institutional support and the presence of supportive mentors emerged as important facets of the healing process. Angela felt supported by her current institution, a prestigious research university that actively recruited her. Notably, she was asked to head several departments and highlighted her involvement in a diversity hire initiative, wherein the university tangibly demonstrated its commitment to recruitment and retention of minoritized faculty by allocating resources. They “put their money where their mouth is.”

Similarly, Nina acknowledged the remarkable fortune she has had to have supportive white mentors. Reflecting on her academic journey, she emphasized the profound impact these mentors have had on her professional growth and development:

With regard to academia, I have just had phenomenal mentors, you know, hands down just good people—and not just in the way they teach me about things, but mentors in the fact that they go to bat for me. They put their money where their mouth is, which has been transformative for me in academia. In graduate school, the advisor I switched to (she was a white woman who) looked out for me, advocated for me, and gave me the

space to grow. So yeah, when there have been missteps, I can speak up, and they listen to my voice. And so, I have been really fortunate, making academia a lot more tenable.

The presence of institutional support and the invaluable guidance of supportive mentors contributed to the well-being and flourishing of two participants within academia. Angela's experience within her university exemplified a commitment to materialize its professed ideals. At the same time, Nina's encounters with her white mentors underscored the positive impact of advocates who lend their knowledge and actively listen to and amplify Black women's voices.

Billie emphasized the significance of fostering community and connection with individuals with similar experiences and backgrounds as a crucial healing component. She highlighted the importance of seeking out these spaces and mentioned affinity groups as a valuable resource. Specifically, she said the Black Faculty affinity group brought together Black faculty members from her university's campuses. This collective served as a platform for collaboration, research opportunities, and social events, providing a supportive environment for the Black faculty to connect. Billie's mention of affinity groups highlighted the importance of intentional efforts to create spaces where Black women can come together, share resources, and support one another. These communities provide an avenue for professional growth, collaboration, and social and emotional well-being. Being in a community with others with similar backgrounds and perspectives fostered a sense of belonging and validation, ultimately contributing to her healing process. In this environment, Billie could freely express herself, voice her concerns, and share her stories without fear of judgment. Billie shared:

So, I think that experience is healing. I think the opportunity to participate with other Black faculty in a shared space, engage in discussions about the things common to us and what matters to us, and speak in a way that allows me to breathe is healing. You do not

have to hold your tongue or watch your words. That is also very comfortable. That helps with healing because it feels like sometimes, when you are in a PWI setting, it is like, you are always holding your breath because you can never say what you want to say and be what you want to be.

Billie's reflections on the healing power of community and shared spaces resonated with many participants in the study, highlighting the importance of solidarity and support networks for Black women in academia. The Black Faculty affinity group she mentioned was a platform for professional collaboration and a source of emotional sustenance. It provided a haven where these women could be unapologetically themselves without the constant hypervigilance needed to navigate the oppressive structures and expectations prevalent in PWIs. This environment allowed them to share experiences, strategies, and stories, creating a sense of belonging that contributed to their healing.

Nina expressed that leaving the prestigious Research One institution she was a part of profoundly impacted her overall health and well-being for the better. She realized the allure of the institution, which had a "level of celebrity attached to the name within academia," had entangled her. However, conducting a self-inventory and reassessing her priorities, she recognized the importance of stepping away for her own sake.

Nina's decision to leave the prestigious institution she was a part of revealed the transformative potential of prioritizing one's well-being over the allure of a prestigious name within academia. Her choice to step away, acknowledging the toll such an environment took on her, was a radical act of self-care and liberation. It underscores the idea that healing often involves recognizing when it is time to move on from spaces that no longer serve one's personal

and professional growth, aligning with the principles of empowerment and self-definition within the Black feminist movement.

Similarly, Lauryn acknowledged that healing for her meant “get[ting] out of higher education.” She described her job as “just trash” and strongly desired to “transition to something else that values what I bring.” By recognizing the need for change and actively exploring alternatives, she demonstrated a commitment to her well-being and liberation (hooks, 1990). Lauryn’s realization that she needs to exit higher education because her job does not value her contributions further illustrates the importance of self-determination and redefining success. Choosing to leave reflects a dedication to her well-being and a courageous step toward liberation from an academic system that often neglects and renders invisible the value of Black women’s work.

Angela and Lauryn found therapy to be a valuable and essential tool in their healing journeys. Angela has faced hurtful criticisms and attacks for her outspokenness on issues of anti-racism and social justice as a public scholar and figure. When asked how she copes with these challenging experiences, she emphasized the effectiveness of talk therapy, maintaining physical fitness, and leading a fulfilling life. Angela shared her perspective on therapy, stating:

I live as a Black woman in the world, and throughout various points in my life, I have found talk therapy to be incredibly beneficial. It has helped me develop essential skills and a better understanding of myself.

Angela expressed her appreciation for the benefits of talk therapy, but she does not solely rely on it. She actively prioritizes physical fitness as part of her overall well-being. Additionally, she leads a rich and fulfilling life surrounded by love, friends, and family. Social connection comes naturally to her, given her extensive support network, but Angela also has a pragmatic outlook

on life: “I’m lucky to be a well-loved person and have many friends and family. Social connection is not a problem for me, but, like, I’m also a very pragmatic person.” Angela’s multifaceted approach to maintaining her well-being reflects her strength and determination in the face of adversity, allowing her to continue her important work in the realm of social justice and equity.

Lauryn openly shared the importance of regular therapy appointments, especially during her time at Douglass Fir. She explained, “Ever since I have been at Douglas Fir, I have gone to a therapist once a week. I also have a psychiatrist because I have been on and off meds to help regulate my mood.” Being candid about her mental health journey, Lauryn detailed the practices she has found essential for healing and survival:

I do have a whole regimen that I have found necessary, not just to thrive but even to survive. It might sound sad, but I also did it in graduate school. It is therapy and acupuncture every week. In graduate school, I did get cranial sacral every week, but I get it now every so often. I do get a massage every two weeks. And I try to, you know, move my body . . . Yeah, I find that really healing.”

Angela and Lauryn’s willingness to share their healing practices highlights the significance of mental and physical well-being and how these practices have been instrumental in their healing journey through academia and life. Regular therapy and other healing modalities have played a crucial role in supporting their mental health and overall well-being.

Participants were asked how they defined healing and whether they experienced healing in academia. Billie underlined the importance of looking inside oneself and dealing with discomfort, pain, and anger to heal:

I think the only way we can heal is to look inside and deal with some of the messiness that goes on – that is causing the dis/ease. So, we have to look at the dis/ease inside. And so, when I say dis/ease, we have to look at what is causing us pain, what is causing us to feel unsure, what is causing us to feel even just the pessimism of whatever—we have to look at that. And that is hard because then you have to look at the source and figure out how to work with that. Then you have to reflect on where that comes from and how that is affecting you. For me, and I'm not really looking at this intellectually, I'm saying this in a real way I need to not only look inside but reflect on the source of the discomfort, of the pain, of the anger of the whatever, and then figure out how do I put that in its place, so that it doesn't disrupt my life. I think we all have to do that. Reflect and then reevaluate in terms of how you move forward. So, for me, introspect, reflect, and then evaluate how to move forward, and then move it forward. And then give yourself grace. But the space to heal. You have to figure out what that looks like and then give yourself that space.

Lauryn's perspective on healing delved into the profound and challenging nature of this transformative journey. She aptly characterized it as difficult and messy work that requires intention and consistency over time highlighting the inherent complexity and the unpredictable twists and turns that come with it.

Furthermore, Lauryn believed healing is an ongoing process and can be exhausting, especially when combined with the demands of academia and constantly living in one's thoughts:

I would say healing is really hard messy work that happens over time with intention and with consistency because you can never be healed. Also, it is constant. I say to my

therapist a lot that I get why people don't go to therapy because it's not easy to tell on yourself and hold the mirror up all the time. I think for me I find it particularly exhausting because I'm already in higher ed, so you're constantly just living in your thoughts. And then, when you leave and go to therapy, it's like, okay, now I have to do this whole other set of work. I find healing tiring.

This portrayal emphasizes that healing is not a linear path, but rather a process filled with ups and downs, moments of clarity, and times of confusion. Lauryn's assertion that one can never be completely healed highlights the notion that healing is an ongoing, lifelong endeavor. It is not a destination one arrives at, but a continuous process of self-discovery, growth, and self-improvement. In describing the healing process, Lauryn maintained vulnerability and honesty as she shared the energy and work required.

Similarly, Angela offered a distinct perspective on the concept of healing, one closely intertwined with the idea of thriving. In her view, healing and thriving are interconnected, forming a spatial and temporal process that necessitates active cultivation:

Healing, just like thriving, is a spatial and temporal process that must be actively cultivated. So, I don't think about myself as needing to heal from things because I'm self-aware enough. This is where therapy is very healthy. For me, it's more about what does it mean to thrive? What does it mean to push oneself beyond one's fear? That's where I'm at now.

So now I'm 53, and one of the gifts of aging I've found is clarity. And so, as I get clearer about who I am, who I want to be, about the power I have in my life, and how I want to yield it—one thing that I do not want to do is always to be reacting to other people because to me it's such a defensive stand. And again, I'm like a goofy, optimistic person.

So, the idea I'm reacting to somebody else's mental energy that I can't even be bothered with—to me, it's not necessarily so much about healing because healing means harm is happening, and there is some redemptive path to dealing with that.

But for me, it's more about what does it mean to thrive? What does it mean to non-apologetically hold on to my humanity in every interaction, in every discussion, and in every piece of work I put into the world? What does that mean? I'll give you some principles around what that means in my life. I don't do anything that is not fun. I mean, if my telomeres are shortening every day and my clock is ticking, I don't have time to waste.

Angela's self-awareness is a crucial element in her approach, as she emphasized the role of therapy in maintaining mental health. For her, the focus shifted from the idea of healing, often associated with addressing harm and finding a redemptive path, to a broader consideration of what it means to thrive. As she shared her experience as a 53-year-old woman, Angela found that aging has brought the gift of clarity. With this newfound clarity, she aspired to understand herself, her desired self-concept, and the power she wields in her life, emphasizing a proactive approach to living. Angela did not see herself as needing to heal from past experiences; rather, she focused on thriving, pushing herself beyond her fears.

Nina's perspective on healing underscores the holistic nature of the journey. To her, healing is an ongoing process that involves a vital element of accountability. She stressed the importance of accepting things for what they are, rather than fixating on unrealistic expectations of how they should be. Nina offered her thoughts of giving oneself time and space to process emotions and cautioned against seeking shortcuts:

I think it's a process, and accountability is part of it. And the ability to accept things for what they are and not what they should be, and then just again move accordingly of just like realizing like things, because what gets stuck with healing is when you think things should be different. It's like, you know, you just have to accept like this is what it is, and give you space. Give yourself time to just process through the feelings, there are just no shortcuts.

Nina defined healing as a process that involves accountability and accepting things as they are rather than how they should be. Her insight highlights the potential roadblocks to healing, which often result from a failure to embrace this acceptance. Nina's advice is rooted in the idea that one must recognize and acknowledge the current state of affairs, even if it is not ideal.

Lauryn was the only participant to express that she has experienced healing in academia through her friendships with women who share similar values and politics. She shared:

Yes, I have experienced healing in higher education because of the women that I have relationships with. They heal me. I'm healed in the presence of them. Yeah. And I mean, they are often women with whom I have similar politics with and similar values. I think the most important thing is the same values, and so like, I only have friends who want to know me first as a person. So those women I found so healing because they see me as a person first, and do not center this job.

As Lauryn offered these in-depth self-reflections about friendships, she underscored the importance of networks of genuinely supportive women colleagues, some of whom offer mentorship and leadership. Lauryn's perspective highlights how these relationships have not only provided personal healing but have also contributed to her professional growth and well-being within the academic environment.

Nina, on the other hand, stated that she has not found healing in higher education. Instead, she said she has already healed by making peace with the toxic Ivory Tower, contradicting her earlier framing of healing as an ongoing process:

No, I mean, I think I've healed from the academy because it is in this sense of the issues that have come up, I have made peace with it, but I don't think the University facilitated that. It was a matter of I can't hold on to this because it's making me lose sleep. It's making me stressed out. I have a family friend who says when you hold on to anger and resentment, it's like drinking a bottle of poison and expecting the other person to get sick. And that's literally what it has been like with me and academics when I'm really mad and angry. It's like they're still moving on their jolly way. So, I need to figure out a way to let go of this shit because I'm the one losing sleep right now, like I'm the one crying and being upset. But then again, that's just the space to process because I have every right to be angry, and I have every right to be upset, and I can't shortcut it so. Yes, like academia hasn't healed me. It's just been my own process like any time.

Here, Nina's viewpoint provides a twist on the concept of healing in the context of higher education. Her statement challenges the idea of ongoing healing by suggesting that she has already reached a point of resolution within herself. While her earlier perspective portrayed healing as an ongoing process, she now reveals that her healing is rooted in the personal decision to make peace with the racism, sexism, and anti-Blackness of academia. Nina's thoughts emphasizes that the university itself did not actively facilitate her healing, but rather, it was a conscious and introspective journey. She highlights the emotional toll that holding on to anger and resentment can take, likening it to drinking poison and expecting someone else to suffer. In choosing to let go of this negativity and process her feelings, Nina recognized that she has every

right to be upset and angry, and her healing has been a self-driven effort. Her shift in perspective underlies the multifaceted nature of healing, where it can be both an ongoing process and, for some individuals like Nina, a realization that personal peace can be found through introspection and emotional release.

Angela's perspective on healing and thriving within academia is rooted in the principles of curiosity and wonder. She views these as guiding lights that not only fuel personal growth but also act as a safeguard against becoming entangled in unnecessary frustrations:

If I can't be curious and if I can't wonder about stuff, then something is not right because then I'm probably reacting to some ridiculousness. So, for Black people, I always say, especially early career folks and students, justice and joy have to be the goal. Anything beyond that is bullshit because otherwise, you will constantly be frustrated.

Angela's outlook serves as a reminder of the importance of maintaining a sense of inquisitiveness and appreciation for the world around us, as these qualities can help us approach challenges with a constructive mindset.

Moreover, Angela drew attention to the value of justice and joy as the ultimate goals for Black people in academia, stating that anything beyond that is irrelevant. By framing these as non-negotiable objectives, she makes a powerful statement about the need for healing within the academic space, especially for Black people who face unique challenges and obstacles. Angela's call to consider justice and joy as paramount goals signifies the need for healing within academia and her assertion that anything beyond justice and joy is irrelevant underscores the need for prioritizing the well-being and advancement of Black people in academia. Angela advocates for a transformative shift in the academic landscape, highlighting the importance of not only recognizing and rectifying injustices but also creating an environment where individuals can

experience genuine joy and fulfillment. Her perspective calls for healing that is rooted in justice, emotional well-being, and progress for Black people in academia.

### **Summary**

This study explored the experiences of Black women faculty in higher education, focusing on their healing practices and praxis within PWIs. The study addressed two main questions: (a) How do BWF members experience healing on college campuses? And (b) What are the (im)possibilities of (racial) healing in higher education? I interviewed four participants and analyzed the collected data using the methods described in Chapter 4 to identify significant findings related to their experiences at PWIs. Four key themes emerged from the interviews highlighting the impacts of misogynoir and the healing practices employed by the participants to find and restore a sense of wholeness: (a) campus climate; (b) mind-body-spirit; (c) resistance; and (d) (re)covering self.

The first theme, “campus climate,” focused on the overall atmosphere and environment of the institutions. This theme shed light on the challenges and opportunities for healing within the institutional context. The women’s stories of marginalization, silencing, exploitation, lack of a critical mass, and hypervigilance vividly corroborate the pervasive existence of institutional norms, policies, and procedures that harm BWF at PWIs. Their narratives provided firsthand perspectives on the racism and racialized sexism they experienced, exposing a disheartening contemporary reality. As bell hooks (2010) astutely observed, despite the increasing number of Black women entering the ranks of professors, they are still often regarded as intruders in academia, perpetually positioned as outsiders and pushed to the margins. By naming the everyday practices that silence and marginalize BWF, the participants fostered a critical

consciousness that demands “tangible consideration” (Griffin, 2016, p. 366). Their experiences underscore the urgency of dismantling oppressive structures that perpetuate these injustices.

The second theme, “mind-body-spirit,” recognized the holistic nature of healing experienced by these BWF and acknowledged that misogynoir inflicted wounds on all dimensions of their being. Therefore, definitions of healing cannot be confined to solely to intellectual or emotional aspects but must encompass physical and spiritual restoration. The women named the material effects of racism and misogynoir, elucidating how these negative impacts manifested in their health and overall well-being. Their accounts align with existing literature on the detrimental effects of racial microaggressions and Racial Battle Fatigue, substantiating the need for healing interventions.

In response to the oppressive structures and practices within higher education, the third theme, “resistance,” illuminated the multifaceted strategies these BWF employed to challenge these systems. Through advocacy, community-building, and the reclamation of their narratives, the participants actively asserted agency and engaged in activism as integral components of their healing journey. These acts of resistance exemplified their resilience and determination to foster personal and collective healing, thereby striving for transformational social change.

The fourth theme, “(re)covering self,” centered on the participants’ journeys of self-discovery, self-care, and self-affirmation. This theme showed how these women empowered their voices, reclaimed their identities, navigated multiple roles and responsibilities, and prioritized their well-being amidst challenging institutional environments. (Re)covering self underscored the importance of self-empowerment and self-love, an essential element in the healing process of BWF (hooks, 1990; Lorde, 1988). By prioritizing their well-being, these BWF

affirmed their worth and demonstrated resilience, enabling them to thrive despite their adversities.

## Chapter 6: Discussion

### **Why Healing?**

These four Black women, like many of their academic counterparts, have clearly suffered RBF in their academic contexts. A powerful example of RBF was Lauryn's telling of how systemic oppression, racism, and sexism have impacted her. Her declaration, "How do I explain it? It really fucks up my sense of self because I often have existential experiences about being a black body," exemplifies the pervasive and profound effects of *spirit murder* which permeates bodies, psyches, and minds as evidenced by Lauryn's candid account of feeling driven to madness by the academy's gaslighting that attributed her fragile mental health to her own shortcomings. "Spirit murder" is characterized by Love (2019) as a "gradual demise, a withering of the spirit, a decay orchestrated by racism to belittle, shame, and annihilate people of color" (p. 2). All the participants provided many other vivid examples of the detrimental impacts of *spirit murder* on their well-being (mind-body-spirit) throughout the interview, including weathering (Angela), hypervigilance (Billie), anxiety and depression (Lauryn), and an IDGAF attitude (Nina).

### **Diverse Conceptions of Healing**

After detailing the impacts of misogynoir, the women were invited to talk about (racial) healing. Findings from the theme (Re)covering self encapsulates the healing practices and praxis (Freire, 2018) each participant used to mend their spirit and regain a sense of wholeness. As previously noted, the participants each offered distinct perspectives on racial healing in higher education. Billie's interpretation involved safe spaces (Collins, 1986) and being in affinity with other Black women where she was in community with others who shared similar backgrounds and perspectives. Cultivating safe spaces that offer relief from violence serves as a place of

healing, love, and resistance against white supremacy (hooks, 1990), a tradition passed down from enslaved ancestors who gathered in the *hush harbors*. Angela envisioned healing aligning with her principles and championing equitable change. Her viewpoint underscored the idea that healing is not solely about addressing past harm but also encompasses a proactive journey of self-discovery, empowerment, and living life to the fullest.

For Lauryn, whose physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being has been deeply affected, healing translated to distancing herself from the Ivory Tower, reflecting a commitment to personal well-being and liberation from spaces that do not align with her values and aspirations. Institutional accountability and reciprocity were also facets of healing. Nina viewed healing as intrinsically linked to “institutional accountability,” a notion she deemed elusive within academia. In her view, healing resides outside this context, prompting her to make strategic decisions accordingly. She identified healing as an ongoing process but asserted that she has already achieved healing from the academy through pragmatic acceptance and letting go (of expectations). These varied perspectives showcase the breadth of interpretations of healing.

### **Healing Is What I Say It Is**

Billie, Angela, Nina, and Lauryn each put forth distinct—and differing—interpretations of healing. Their divergence underscores the subjectivity inherent in the concept of healing, which is contingent on individual perspectives. Healing is self-defined. However, self-definitions can be problematic, particularly when Black women do not believe they have experienced RBF. In describing her experiences of (racial) healing in higher education, for example, Nina denied that she suffers from RBF, “I don’t have RBF, but I am definitely irritated and angry.” Anger and irritation are core facets of RBF, or the psychological, emotional, and physiological toll of fighting against racism (Smith et al., 2007). As a Black woman, I honor Nina’s framing here. Her

experience with racial harms powerfully illustrates misogynoir's vast impact and range. However, my personal and professional experience is that Black women cannot escape the matrix of oppression and exhibit signs of RBF. Indeed, Nina names being angry because of racism while essentially denying that she is angry because of racism. Similarly, Nina's definition of healing as a process that involves accountability and accepting things as they are rather than how they should be does not resonate with me. She goes on to say that while she has not found healing in higher education, she has "already healed by making peace" from the academy.

Multiple meanings add complexity to the question of what healing is due to a lack of a common understanding—and this is likely exacerbated by a research limitation; I simply did not follow up with Nina on these potentially contradictory framings. With this research limitation caveat in mind, participants imbued healing with personal significance rooted in their unique academic journeys. Given the absence of a monolithic Black woman experience or interpretive stances, this diversity of experiences underscores the intricacies of healing and the need for ongoing exploration and discourse within higher education.

### **Shared Threads of Healing**

Despite individual differences and understanding of (racial) healing, participants shared common healing threads, such as cultivating friendships, seeking familial support, engaging in therapy, advocating for change, speaking truth to power, and having joy. Guided by the legacy of their ancestors, these four Black women saw themselves as stewards of a heritage that extends beyond them, empowering subsequent generations and fostering strength within broader communities. Drawing inspiration from ancestral wisdom, these four women navigated hostile campus environments, negotiated departmental challenges, and withstood misogynoir, discrimination, and silencing, demonstrating resilience. Moreover, these women ultimately

“embod[ied] a historical and spiritual reserve that [can] transform oppression into expressive strategies for healing and for care” (Davis, 2011, p. 177).

### **Elevating Resilience and Resistance**

As cited earlier, I find hooks’ (1990) explanation of racial healing useful in reminding us of the need to cultivate action to heal:

[It’s] really about us as black people realizing that we have to do more than define how racism ravages our spirit (it has certainly been easier for us to name the problem)—we have to construct useful strategies of resistance and change. (p. 227)

These women asserted a refusal by evoking their ancestors and channeling their inner Nikole Hannah-Jones. Throughout the interviews, I listened to badass stories of resistance against the dehumanization and violence they encountered in academia. Effective resistance required them to know who their enemies were and how they moved—but it also meant that they had to be concerned with their own physical, emotional, and spiritual sustenance.

All the women engaged in powerful acts of resistance as a coping tool and mechanism for healing. For instance, much like Nikole Hannah-Jones referenced in the introduction, Nina chose to walk away from her abusive relationship with the Ivy League she worked at due to “explicit foolishness and racism.” Nina chose her well-being over prestige, opting to move to a more supportive Black community and teach at a smaller liberal arts college for her mental health and well-being. Billie pushed back against the “master narrative” that Black women are not of the university by insisting that her students address her as Dr. Holiday or Professor because it “forces them to be respectful even if they do not mean it.” Angela wielded her respected scholar-practitioner status to confront power structures and speak truth to power through conferences, social media, and university roles. Angela said she had an abundance of supportive friends and

family and prioritized activities that bring her joy. Lauryn’s triumph was “reclaiming her time” by taking leave and never working alone, thus asserting her autonomy and self-valuation as a capable scholar. These tales of defiance against racism, sexism, and classism amplify the significance of healing, particularly within academia.

### **Attainability of Racial Healing**

The findings underscore the potential for attaining racial healing within higher education. This potential is exemplified through Lauryn’s personal experience of racial healing, which she described as being in relationship with other women with whom she shares “similar politics and similar values.” While three participants explicitly stated their lack of racial healing during their academic tenure, the remaining participant—Lauryn—painted a different picture. For Lauryn, healing was synonymous with connecting with fellow women, engaging in chisme, bolstering mental well-being, and advocating vocally by speaking truth to power. Ultimately, she describes healing as not being in academia. Although participants perceived healing as an ongoing process involving self-care, introspection, addressing pain and anger, seeking therapy, relying on familial and friendship support, advocating for institutional accountability, and even leaving the university environment, Lauryn’s experience stands out. Lauryn’s connection with other women offered a path to healing, finding solace and authenticity within safe spaces akin to homeplaces (hooks, 1994).

Angela defined healing as thriving, adopting a forward-looking stance, and focusing on being her authentic self. Billie viewed healing as an ongoing journey intertwined with work-life balance and self-definition. Lauryn’s experience of finding healing in higher education underscores that meaningful connections and support from like-minded individuals can foster healing sanctuaries within the academic landscape. The experiences of these women thus vividly

illustrate the intricate nature of healing and the diverse routes individuals can pursue toward healing. These narratives also underscore the paramount importance of community, connections, and personal evolution in effectively addressing the challenges confronted by Black women faculty (BWF) within higher education. The accounts offered by the participants serve as a testament to the messy, non-linear, multifaceted, and personalized nature of the healing process. This complexity is deeply interwoven with the intersections of race, gender, academia, and personal histories. Each woman's journey toward healing is characterized by her distinctive struggles, adaptive strategies, and sources of empowerment.

### **Conclusion**

I always thought our survival tactics allowed us to move through this world and thrive as Black people in America. Upon closer examination, however, it is possible that our healing tactics got us through—drawing strength from community, kindness, music, food, culture, and love. This perspective offers a profound reimagining of the sources of strength and resilience that sustain Black women in their journey towards well-being. Shifting from seeing survival tactics as the sole driving force to recognizing the transformative influence of healing strategies reframes the narrative significantly. This shift acknowledges the undeniable historical context of adversity yet highlights the proactive and empowering nature of the healing approaches employed by Black women because they know that the Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house (Lorde, 1988).

My research journey has not only been an academic pursuit but also a profoundly personal one, pushing me to delve into my own healing process. Over the past three years, I grappled with fear, anxiety, and self-doubt on numerous occasions. The challenges of navigating the devastating landscape of COVID-19, witnessing the heart-wrenching killings of Black bodies

while simultaneously juggling two, sometimes three jobs and parenting two older children weighed heavily on my shoulders. Beginning my EdD program during the onset of the pandemic added an extra layer of difficulty to my academic journey.

During this period of self-discovery, I felt a connection to the stories of the Black women in my study. I realized that there were parallels between their experiences and mine. These shared experiences fostered a sense of solidarity and empathy, making me realize the strength that can be drawn from community and collective healing. It was equally enlightening to acknowledge the unique aspects of our individual journeys, moreover, highlighting the rich diversity of Black women's academic experiences. Lauryn's insight into the healing power of Black women coming together, akin to sitting around a "kitchen table," deeply resonated with me.

After the first year of the EdD program, I reached out to the two other Black women in the program to establish a Sista Circle in the spirit of Critical Sisterhood Praxis (CSP) (Reynolds, Botts & Pour-Khorshid, 2021). In their article about spiritual reclamation in the academy for women of color, Reynolds et al., offer a healing praxis they call Critical Sisterhood Praxis. They write:

We offer CSP as both an intervention and protection, meeting at the intersection of collective mirroring, radical healing, and spiritual restoration, to decenter whiteness and re-center Black and Brown girl joy through a shared struggle toward wholeness. (p. 15)

Meeting with other Black women was an incredibly valuable and transformative experience. Our gatherings, which took place at the end of each quarter (breaking bread at a restaurant), served as a lifeline in the challenging journey of pursuing our doctoral degrees. These meetings were not just casual get-togethers but intentional spaces for support, understanding, and healing. Our CSP

AKA Sista Circle created spaces “to name and disrupt the[se] continuations of terror that manifest themselves at each phase of our schooling and careers” (Reynolds et al., 2021, p. 15).

hooks (1993) wrote about this in her book, *Sisters of the Yams*:

As black women come together with one another, with all the other folks in the world are seeking recovery and liberation, we find the will to be well affirmed, we find ways to get what we need to ease the pain, to make the hurt go away. (p. 152)

One of the most significant benefits of our gatherings was the opportunity to share our struggles and triumphs. We could openly discuss our unique challenges as Black women doctoral students in academia, from navigating complex academic hierarchies to confronting biases and microaggressions. Sharing these experiences allowed us to validate each other’s feelings and concerns, reaffirming that we were not alone in our struggles. In addition to providing a platform for sharing our difficulties, our Sista Circles were a space for genuine commiseration. We vented our frustrations, expressed our fears and anxieties, and leaned on one another for emotional support. We created a safe space to be vulnerable without judgment and to be our authentic selves. Commiserating with my fellow Black women in the program was cathartic and allowed me to release pent-up emotions, relieving some of the stress and emotional burden I carried.

Moreover, our gatherings were also a source of inspiration and motivation. We celebrated each other’s achievements, whether significant milestones or small victories. These celebrations served as a reminder of our resilience and determination. Hearing about one another’s successes motivated us to keep pushing forward, even when the academic journey seemed impossible. It was a beautiful cycle of support where we uplifted and encouraged one another.

Staying connected to my sorority sisters from Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated proved to be a lifeline. We prioritized checking on each other, attending community events, sharing

meals, and celebrating each other. Without the unwavering support of these close friends, I would not have successfully navigated this doctoral program's challenges.

Billie's struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance mirrored my own experiences. In the final six months of the program, I was fortunate to step away from my side hustle, thanks to the generous financial assistance from my sister and brother-in-law. For years, I had juggled an overwhelming number of responsibilities, adversely affecting my health and eventually leading to an anxiety disorder.

Angela's emphasis on finding joy in life resonated with me. Like her, I made a conscious effort to cultivate joy through meaningful friendships and community connections. Furthermore, I identified with Nina's assertion that the university does not inherently promote healing for Black women; instead, one must actively choose to heal. Throughout my doctoral journey, I engaged in weekly therapy sessions with a Black woman therapist who helped me manage the tumultuous emotions, including anxiety and depression, that I grappled with. Though I did not exercise as frequently as I would have liked, I made it a point to go on regular walks with one of my girlfriends every week, a simple yet vital self-care ritual.

Ultimately, my research has reinforced the critical need to prioritize self-care. In the context of higher education, prioritizing self-care often appears at odds with the well-being of Black women, feeling like we are in a "place of dispossession and slow death," as Dumas (2014) astutely described. These personal experiences, both as a Black woman graduate student and faculty member in a predominantly white institution (PWI), have exposed me to what Love (2019) and Williams (2005) aptly termed "spirit murder." These experiences have set me on a profound journey of healing that encompasses my mind, body, and spirit.

In bell hooks' (2005) eloquent words, "Black women deserve to have multiple paths to healing, multiple ways of thinking about spirituality, multiple paths towards recovery. When we choose to heal, when we choose to love, we are choosing liberation" (p. 174). This quote beautifully encapsulates the profound lesson I have learned through this research—that healing is a deeply personal and liberating choice. Healing can offer a multitude of paths to recovery and empower Black women to confront and overcome the challenges of academia and life beyond the academic realm.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

### QUESTIONS

My research is looking to expand understanding of racial healing as it pertains to BWF working at PWIs. I want to know how Black women faculty *Survive, Resist, Overcome, and Heal* from violence and hostility enacted by Predominantly White Institutions. This study explores the experiences of BWF at PWIs guided by the questions: How do BWF experience (racial) healing on college campuses? What are the (im)possibilities of such (racial) healing in higher education?

#### 1. Educational Journey (Identity/experience)

- Please tell me about your educational journey. How did you become Dr. X?
- Why did you decide to go into higher education?
- How do you think about and/or experience your racial identity as a Black woman? In your educational journey?

#### 2. Barriers/challenges/impacts

- What are some of the challenges you face as a Black woman faculty member?
- How have racism and sexism (\*misogynoir), impacted your health and wellness?
- Living while Black can lead to \*Racial Battle Fatigue. Have you experienced RBF? What has that been like for you? Examples?

#### 3. Healing as praxis and practice

- Imagine yourself as a fully balanced and healthy faculty member; What does that look like? What are you doing to look like that?
- How/where have you found support, both personally and in your career?
- Are there people, places, or organizations you turn to help you survive, resist, overcome or heal from these experiences? Do these include any form of spirituality or faith, or related activities/practices?
- How do you define healing?
- Have you experienced healing in academia? How/in what ways?
- Is there anything else you would like to say?

\* **Misogynoir** is a term coined by Moya Bailey that is a combination of *misogyny*, the hatred of women, and *noir*, meaning Black.

\***Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF)** has been operationalized as the psychological, emotional, and physiological toll of fighting against racism. **RBF is defined as** “social-psychological stress

responses (e.g., frustration, anger, exhaustion, physical avoidance, psychological or emotional withdrawal, escapism, acceptance of racist attributions)” (Smith et al., 2007, p. 552) associated with being a person of color and the repeated target of racism.