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THE RIVERS OF LIFE: A PORTRAITURE STUDY OF THREE BLACK FEMALE
EDUCATIONAL LEADERS IN A LARGE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

By

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the

College of Education and Human Development of the University of Louisville

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership and Organizational Development

Department of Educational Leadership, Evaluation, and Organizational Development

University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

May 2021

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EDUCATIONAL LEADERS IN A LARGE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Cassandra G. Woods

A Dissertation Approved on

March 29, 2021

By the following Dissertation Committee

Dr. Mary Brydon-Miller (Chair)

Dr. Keith Davis

Dr. Geneva Stark

Dr. Teri Reed

DEDICATION

To God be the Glory

To Taylor, my light

To Karrington, my air

To Kevin, my heartbeat

My Lord, I can do all thing through Christ who strengthens me

Philippians 4:13

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To My God, My Lord and Savior – We did it! You never let go of my hand, even when the force of life’s waves loosened our grip. You prayed with me. You wrote with me. You stayed with me. None of this would be possible without you and for that, I am and will always be eternally grateful.

To My Participants, Nia Brown, Ivy Y. Glass, and Elizabeth Smith – Your rivers are the heartbeat of this dissertation. I am humbled by the courage, strength, and wisdom that your combined souls provided for the lighthouse that guides my spirit. Thank you for the tears, laughter, and everlasting sisterhood. Sharing this space with you has been both an honor and privilege that I will hold dear to my heart for a lifetime.

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ABSTRACT

THE RIVERS OF LIFE: A PORTRAITURE STUDY OF THREE BLACK FEMALE EDUCATIONAL LEADERS IN A LARGE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

Cassandra G. Woods

March 29, 2021

This dissertation is a qualitative portraiture study that explores Black female educational leaders' lived experiences and the way those experiences cultivate knowledge formation. This study uses Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework. Black feminist thought grounds this research study in advancing intellectual traditions, equal educational opportunities, and the ethic of personal accountability. Black feminist thought serves as an ideal theoretical framework to ground this research study because its utility in clarifying the unique way Black female educational leaders translate theory into action. (Loder, 2005; Lomotey, 1993; Tillman, 2008; Renix, 2016). The findings of this research study position Black female educational leaders at the nucleus of the knowledge validation process regarding declarations of expertise on implementing relevant pedagogical practices and policies that elevate Black and marginalized students' lived experiences. Through the creation of portraits, the actors in this research study produce a counternarrative that reflects the journey along the rivers of their lives.

Keywords: Black female educational leader, Black feminist thought, othermother, activist

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	vi
LIST OF TABLES	xi
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of the Problem	3
Purpose of the Study	6
Theoretical Framework of the Study	7
Research Questions	9
Significance of Study	9
Research Strategy	11
Delimitations of the Study	16
Limitations of the Study	17
Portraitist's Perspective	18
Definition of Terms	20
Summary	26
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	28
Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge Validation Process	28
Black Feminist Thought: Communal Ethics of Care	36
Black Feminist Thought: Applications of BFT in Research	41
Black Feminist Thought: Female Educational Leaders as Social Activists	45
Legacy of Black People in the United States: 19th century	48
Legacy of Black People in the United States: 20th century	52
Legacy of Black Educators as Community Builders: 21st Century	57
Legacy and Experiences of Black Educational Leaders: 21st Century	60

Experiences of Black Female Educational Leaders: Intersectionality	63
Experiences of Black Female Educational Leaders: Othermothers	67
Experiences of Black Female Educational Leaders: Black Feminist Caring.....	72
Experiences of Black Female Educational Leaders: Change Agents	74
Experiences of Black Female Educational Leaders: Identity Shifting.....	77
Implications for Policy Change and Action	81
Summary of Literature Review Findings	85
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	89
Portraiture: An Overview	89
Portraiture Methodological Design	93
Distinct Features of Portraiture	96
Rationale for Methodology	103
Theoretical Framework	105
Research Study Design.....	108
Preparing for the Relationship.....	109
Participants	110
Role of Researcher	111
Data Collection Procedures	114
Data Analysis Procedures.....	123
Provisions for Ensuring Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability	126
Communicating Findings	130
Ethical Considerations.....	131
Summary	133
CHAPTER 4: PORTRAITS	135
Counter-narrative: An Overview.....	135
Nia Brown: A Portrait	138
See My Face: Tranquil Waters	138
Hear My Voice: Moving Waters	152
Ivy Y. Glass: A Portrait.....	158
See My Face: Tranquil Waters	158

Hear My Voice: Moving Waters	169
Elizabeth Smith: A Portrait	186
See My Face: Tranquil Waters	186
Hear My Voice: Moving Waters	199
Summary	213
CHAPTER 5: COMPOSITE PORTRAIT	217
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS	243
Summary of Key Findings	244
Implications for Black Female Educational Leaders	249
Implications for Theoretical Understanding	2511
Implications for the Community	255
Considerations for Future Research	258
Final Thoughts.....	261
REFERENCES	264
APPENDIX A: LETTER OF CONSENT	283
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, PHOTO-VOICE & PHOTO- ELICITATION ACTIVITIES	289
APPENDIX C: EMERGENT THEMES FROM LITERATURE REVIEW	296
APPENDIX D: EMERGENT THEMES FROM ACTORS' PORTRAITS.....	297
APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP WORKSHOP # 1 – PHOTO-VOICE ACTIVITY....	298
APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP WORKSHOP # 2 – PHOTO-ELICITATION ACTIVITY	300
APPENDIX G: JAVIER HERAUD PEREZ'S <i>THE RIVER</i> (1960)	302
CURRICULUM VITA.....	307

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Study Participants.....	111
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

To Black Women

*Sisters, where there is cold silence, no hallelujahs, no hurrahs at all, no handshakes, no
neon red or blue, no smiling faces, prevail.
Prevail across the editors of the world who are obsessed, self-honeying and self-crowned
in the seduced arena.*

~ Gwendolyn Brooks (1953)

In her poem, *To Black Women*, the noted Black female poet, Gwendolyn Brooks, encourages Black women to prevail against all odds, no matter the barriers, and refuse to allow others to silence their voices. Black female educational leaders play a critical role in shaping thinking both inside and outside the walls of their school community, seeking to improve the lives and outcomes of their students and communities (Bass, 2012; Gooden, 2005; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Loder, 2005; Lomotey, 1993; Tillman, 2008). Even before Black people in the United States were legally allowed to learn to read and write, Black women committed themselves to advancing their race and gender through education. Yet, despite their essential role in the fight for equal access to education, Black women's contributions are often forgotten in the broad strokes of United States history (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

Prior to the United States Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that ruled segregation of public schools unconstitutional, Black women were pioneers in advancing social, emotional, and intellectual progress for Black children (Holmes & Hudson, 1994). However, after the United States Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, more than 38,000 Black educators either found themselves

unemployed or demoted to lower-level positions (Holmes & Hudson, 1994). As a result, White teachers and administrators primarily staffed schools serving Black children and Black communities. Though the ruling intended to establish equity among schools, its 65-year evolution has not only failed to create equity, it has created a system whereby Black women no longer experience plurality in their employment status as pivotal agents of change in schools, whether predominantly White or Black. The dominant role Black women have in society as biological mothers to children, non-biological mothers to the children of others, and mothers to Black communities shackled by oppression and disparity, has widely influenced the upward social, emotional, and intellectual trajectories of Black children in schools (Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015).

The lack of Black teachers and Black educational leaders is a legacy that remains a problem contemporarily. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2015-2016, there were 90,850 principals of public schools, of which 6,340 were Black females. Black females account for 12.3% of the overall female population in the United States, yet only account for 7% of school building principals' overall number. Though Black Female educational leaders account for a small percentage of the entire school and district administrator pool, the percent of racially and economically minoritized students in U.S. schools is increasing. According to Chen (2019), 49.7 % of the 50 million students who attend U. S. public schools are White, which is down from 63 % in 1997. As a result, the shift in school populations' racial demographics has contributed to a growing need for diversity of both physical and intellectual representation at the school leadership level.

In a democratic society, the educational school system serves as a pathway to that which is socially, politically, and intellectually acceptable. As a global institution that folds in new ways of thinking, knowing, and being into its daily practice, thereby creating pivotal agents of knowledge, schools help shape humanity. In consequence, schools, which are a primary conduit of the transference of knowledge, serve as the architectural fabric of society's intellectual tapestry and, as a result, transform abstract knowledge into concrete experiences for its members. Collins (2000) asserts that "very different kinds of thought and theories emerge when abstract thought is joined with pragmatic action" (p. 33). Divergent lived experiences among members of society become leverage for change, growth, and advancement when allowed to shift from that which is unknown to that which is known. Accordingly, an essential component of school is to develop creative and productive thinkers who become productive citizens in our world. Hence, when led by a Black female, this global instructional institution has the opportunity to provide students with levels of racial, gender, or social familiarity within constructs that might initially appear antithetical, particularly for Black and marginalized students. To that end, schools must remain mindful of the indelible opportunity to dismantle the ideology of systemic oppression and thereby integrate new knowledge as an unquestionably integral part of the societal relations of domination and discrimination.

Statement of the Problem

Black females have a rich legacy of advancing Black students' intellectual experiences and members of the Black community in a manner exclusive to their race and gender (Bass, 2012; Collins, 2000; Cooper, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Renix, 2016; Tillman, 2008). There are gaps in the existing body of empirical research related to the

voices and how the lived experiences of Black female educational leaders inform current educational practices and policies, particularly as it relates to the achievement of Black students (Brown 2005; Gooden 2005; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Tillman, 2005). Neither the voice, lived experiences, or authentic identity of Black females has earned a position of esteem in scholarly literature as the criterion that validates dominant ways of knowing, generation of knowledge, and knowledge claims, that are comparable to their White counterparts (Collins, 1990, 2000; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). In fact, according to Mastin and Woodard (2005), “findings of scholarly research have consistently supported that the images of Black women in the mainstream press, as a whole, are detrimental and stereotypical” (p. 265).

Black female educational leaders are charged with creating a culture for learning that elevates all children’s lives, particularly those from historically marginalized groups (Bass, 2012; Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2008; Loder, 2005; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015). According to NCES, 80% of educators in public schools are White, while 7% of educators presently in public schools are Black (2020). As a result, Black female educational leaders are tasked with leading schools that have a predominantly White staff, staff, whose mode of daily functions is a direct extension of their lived experiences and lived experiences that, in many cases, have allowed them to amass the benefit of white privilege. McIntosh (1990) states that these actions are, in many cases, a direct derivative of what he describes as an invisible weightless knapsack of metaphorical provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks. White children are born into a world where dominant ways of knowing are direct derivatives of their lived experiences, whereas Black and poor children are not afforded the same

opportunity. As a result, Black students' lived experiences involuntarily accompany a weighted backpack, a backpack loaded with disparaging intellectual and social experiences accumulated inside and outside school. Because Black female educational leaders confront numerous forms of discriminatory treatment based on race, gender, and class in their daily experiences, they are uniquely equipped to support and elevate Black and historically marginalized students' lived experiences.

According to Newcomb and Niemeyer (2015), Black female educational leaders are often called to lead schools primarily comprised of children from historically marginalized groups. Lomotey (1989) establishes a distinct characteristic that separates Black principals from their White counterparts. He asserts that Black principals are committed to including the Black community in the school experience in ways that manifest the belief that all Black students can learn. Barriers, such as systemic racism and oppressive ideology, suppress Black and historically marginalized students' intellectual advancement. Thus, the requirement of educators, Black, White, and Other, to infuse instructional policies and practices with culturally responsive pedagogy is pivotal. For Black female educational leaders to design instructional systems in their schools that accelerate the intellectual experiences for Black and marginalized students and, as a result, help build stronger communities, the knowledge validation process as we know it must be dismantled. If our schools, and as a result, our world are to become democratic places where all people, all experiences, and all ways of knowing are valued, the male-dominated Eurocentric perspective that validates both knowledge formation and knowledge claims must be transformed. As conduits of transformative experiences for those who are voiceless, Black female educational leaders' voices and lived experiences

must become criteria for knowledge generation, knowledge claims, and knowledge validation (Collins, 2000).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black female educational leaders in one of the largest urban school districts in the United States. For large urban school districts to advance the social and academic achievement for all students, particularly those from historically marginalized groups, Black female educational leaders' voices and lived experiences must be heard, understood, and celebrated in ways that inform empirical research and instructional policy generated in academic institutions. Black female educational leaders have a unique perspective, level of authority, and authenticated wisdom regarding how oppressive ideology intersects with and elevates one's lived experiences. This unique perspective is captured inside the rich layers of Black female educational leaders' narratives, specifically related to their ability to advance Black and marginalized students' intellectual landscape both inside and outside their school communities. Thus, Black female educational leaders' complex narratives can inform current practices and policies implemented in schools in ways that promote the achievement of all students, particularly those from historically marginalized groups.

This study informs institutional practice and policy by adding to the existing body of empirical research to generate new knowledge formation. According to Irvin (1988), both Black and White students benefit from the accurate portrayal of Black female educational leaders' narratives. It is inside the layers of these narratives, negative stereotypes perpetuated by ignorance, prejudice, and distortions in the media are

dismantled. Grounded in authentic, credible, and honest discourse, Black female educational leaders' voices and lived experiences may help eradicate the societal injustice currently plaguing Black communities in the United States.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Black feminist thought is a framework that illuminates the lived experiences of Black females in ways that contribute to the formation of a democratic society. Black female educational leaders contribute to this democratic society by incorporating Collins' four essential elements of Black feminist epistemology into their daily interactions that are: (a) lived experience as a criterion of meaning; (b) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims; (c) the ethic of caring; and (d) the ethic of personal accountability (Collins, 2009). Schools are a primary conduit for both the construction and demonstration of knowledge, particularly in a democratic society. Black female educational leaders demonstrate ethics of care both inside and outside of their school communities in unique ways that position personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy as central components to the knowledge validation process (Collins, 2000).

In response to common thematic outcomes revealed in the existing research literature such as isolation and experiences of microaggressions which Black female educational leaders encounter, Black feminist thought grounds the research in advancing intellectual traditions, equal educational opportunities, and the ethic of personal accountability. Advancing intellectual excellence by remaining accountable to provide equitable educational opportunities for members of the Black community frames Black epistemology. Black feminist thought serves as an ideal theoretical framework to ground this research study because its utility in clarifying the unique way Black female

educational leaders translate theory into action. (Loder, 2005; Lomotey, 1993; Tillman, 2008; Renix, 2016). Black feminist thought positions Black female educational leaders at the nucleus of the knowledge validation process regarding declarations of expertise on implementing relevant pedagogical practices and policies that elevate Black and marginalized students' lived experiences from that of a dominant oppressive reality to that of sustained intellectual advancement.

In addition, unlike feminist theory, Black feminist thought highlights the diversity, richness, and power of Black females' lived experiences in ways that illuminate their voices, faces, and narratives. Unfortunately, the faces, the voices, and the narratives of Black female educational leaders have gone unheard in the face of hegemonic systems of power (Harris, 2007). Harris further hypothesizes that though Black Feminist Thought and feminist theory conceptually possess commonalities of gender and existence within a hegemonic, patriarchal system, the subject of race serves to divide the two theoretical frameworks. Black female educational leaders often find themselves confronted with the oppressive reality of simultaneity brought on because of their race and gender (Harris, 2007). Black Feminist thought seizes the opportunity to elevate Black female educational leaders' experiences in ways that permit daily experiences to construct deeply layered narratives. Employing Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework for this research study provides an appropriate platform to hear Black females' voices historically silenced by dominant ideology and, as a result, answer the call for social justice that is currently sweeping the landscape of our country.

Research Questions

Challenges brought on by systemic racism are currently more salient. For this reason, a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of those deeply rooted and connected to the fight on both sides of the social and intellectual community, Black female educational leaders, is necessary. Hence, this study illuminated the lived experiences of Black female educational leaders and adds to the current body of empirical research by focusing on the following research questions:

1. How did the realities and lived experiences of these Black female leaders shape their career choices and paths?
2. How do these Black female leaders use their lived experiences to inform their interaction with students and adults with whom they work?
3. How do these Black female leaders understand the relationship between their roles as leaders within the educational system and the broader community?

Significance of Study

As shown in the literature review (Chapter 2), Black female educational leaders have a unique ability to use oppression as a motivation for institutional transformation, as evidenced in their commitment to using intellectual discourse as a source for social change within the Black community. However, the existing literature does not readily address the lessons that a study of the scholarship, resilience, and lived experiences of Black female educational leaders in a large urban school district can reveal, specifically related to Black and marginalized students' intellectual advancement. This study aims to remedy this disparity by illuminating how Black female educational leaders use their

lived experiences to elevate Black students' and members of the Black community's social and intellectual experiences.

Black feminist thought affirms that Black female educational leaders use their lived experiences as a source for knowledge generation, knowledge validation, and knowledge claims (Collins, 2000). Consequently, changing the rules that dominate the knowledge validation process is a charge that Black female educational leaders are tasked with routinely by the Black community. As an extension of their lived experiences, Black female educational leaders have an indelible opportunity to change Black and marginalized children's academic, social, and behavioral landscape both inside and outside of their school communities.

We are in the midst of one of the most politicized moments in United States history. In this context, a global pandemic and the Black Lives Matter Movement magnify pre-existing racial, health, and intellectual disparities. The limited value our country places on the lives of Black people and the Black community is revolutionizing our current reality. The trauma many students, families, and districts are involuntarily compelled to endure due to the Coronavirus pandemic is a reality all school leaders must face as they move toward creating new ways of knowing, new ways of being, and new ways of leading. Society will move through this time in history and develop in ways that make the world better. However, to do so, we must lean into the unique skill-set, knowledge, expertise, and experience of Black female educational leaders as co-authors of empirical research that inform future social policy and educational practice in ways that make the world a better place for everyone.

Research Strategy

Creswell (2018) describes qualitative research as an approach for exploring and reflecting upon the way individuals or groups make meaning of society's understanding of human problems. Creswell further notes that a qualitative researcher honors an inductive style, a focus on personal meaning, and the importance of reporting the complexity of a circumstance or lived experience (2018). As defined by Lawrence-Lightfoot (2016), portraiture is a methodology that documents the stories of individuals in a way that focuses on blending empiricism and aestheticism. Unlike other research methodologies that focus on weakness and pathology, portraiture focuses on documenting that which is strong, resilient, and credible. In the portraiture methodology, the researcher serves as the portraitist. The portraitist researcher seeks to capture the lived experiences of research participants' portraits designed and narrated by their voices (Magnum, 2014). Portraits are taken when attempting to capture the beauty, importance, and manifestation of human experience. For this reason, portraiture "begins by searching for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9).

Because of the desire to capture the good, the strong, and the beautiful layers intricately woven into the portraits (also known as narratives) in ways that authentically inform empirical research, I chose qualitative portraiture as the research strategy for this study of three Black female educational leaders. The portraits of a third-year principal of an urban middle school, a current assistant superintendent at the district level, and a retired principal who served at both the school and district level, grounded this research study in ways that illuminate their narratives. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis characterize the genesis of the portraiture methodology in the following:

Portraiture is a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraiture is distinct from other qualitative inquiries in its explicit focus on goodness. Portraiture very purposefully says we are going to try to understand what is worthy and strong in great detail to figure out ways of transporting those goods, that goodness to other settings, and transforming them as well. In trying to create what I call life drawings and trace the connections between individual personality and organizational culture, I wanted to develop a document, a text that came as close as possible to painting with words. I wanted the written pieces to convey the authority, wisdom and perspective of the subjects. Inevitably, I knew these would be documents of inquiry and intervention, hopefully leading toward new understandings and insights, as well as instigate change (1997, p. 4-5).

Portraiture is a qualitative methodology that creates discourse across boundaries and documents the life stories of individuals, schools' culture, and the relationship among the two (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Utilizing empirical research as an apparatus that identifies that which is inspirational and, as a result, disturbs the melancholic rhythm generated by hegemonic power structures is a goal of this research study. Utilizing portraiture as a methodology allows me, as the portraitist researcher, to delve into my participants' experiences in ways that are inviting, provocative, and dynamic. In addition, as the portraitist, I placed myself inside the portrait, not as a dominant figure, but instead on the edge of the frame observing the angles of my participants' experiences and thereby positioning my angle of

vision as a part of the final portrait. This transformative and ethereal experience that beautifully rests within the developmental stages of the portraiture methodology is best demonstrated through Lawrence-Lightfoot's autobiographical account below:

Her knowing hands moved quickly and confidently across the paper; her fingers a smooth extension of the charcoal. Her deep calm soothed me and made me feel relaxed. But what I remember most clearly was the wonderful, glowing sensation I got from being so fully attended to. There were no distractions. I was the only one in her gaze. My image filled her eyes, and the sound of the chalk stroking the paper was palpable. The audible senses translated to tactile ones. After the warmth of this human encounter, I was rendered in motion. The probing, layered, and interpretive experience revealed a portrait that expressed a haunting paradox of a moment in time and timelessness (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 5).

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis assert that at the heart of the empirical and aesthetic experience shared between the researcher and her participants is a primary condition, "a conversation between two active meaning-makers, the producer and the perceiver of a work of art" (1997, p. 29).

As the producer and perceiver of the art located within my participants' portraits, I collected data in a way that enables me to deeply understand their experiences as Black female leaders in a racialized educational context. The following sources of data provided support in identifying emerging themes: (a) structured grid with common themes; (b) semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions; (c) focus group workshops sessions that incorporate photo-voice boards and *Rivers of Life* methodology; (d) documents captured through photo-voice activities, i.e., actors' photographs that depict

different seasons in their lives; (e) documents captured through photo-elicitation activities, i.e., artists' drawings of images analogous to characteristics of a river, and the actors' written reflections about the chosen images; and (f) unstructured interview with open-ended questions. Incorporating the portraiture methodology as the research strategy for this study provided the space for my journey as the portraitist to intersect with my participants' journeys' elements in meaningful and pivotal ways.

As the portraitist co-constructing rich and complex portraits with my actors, I chose participatory research methods photo-voice and photo-elicitation to anchor the focus group workshops' work. Subsequently, the enlightening complexity of human experience both methods provided deepened the collaborative experience between the participants and me. According to Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001), photo-voice is a qualitative technique that encourages social justice and self-advocacy for community members. The literature reveals that though socially, intellectually, and politically silenced, Black female educational leaders' voices are positioned to accelerate the social landscape of the Black community (Collins, 2000; Reed, 2012; Scott, 2011). Similarly, Wang and Redwood-Jones further the discourse regarding the societal benefit of the photo-voice research method in the following way:

No matter how "ignorant" or submerged in the "culture of silence," every human being is capable of looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others. With the proper tools, anyone can gradually perceive their personal and social reality and contradictions, become conscious of those personal perceptions, and deal critically with them. Power accrues to those who have voice, set language, make history, and participate in decisions. Photovoice aims to test this

theoretical perspective in practice and to bring new or seldom-heard ideas, images, conversations, and voices into the public forum (2001, p. 561).

Like Wang and Redwood-Jones, Harper (2002) asserts that photo-elicitation is a participatory research method that allows the use of photographs to depict lived experience in ways that enable individuals to record their social world. When done in a deliberate and meaningful way, self-reflection and conventional elicitation methods produce visual statements that provide new human experience perspectives. To guide community members towards discovering a new view of their social existence, Harper (2002) makes the following assertion regarding the influence of images on human encounters that lead to meaningful discourse:

It is possible to use images as bridges between worlds that are more culturally distinct. I believe photo-elicitation mines deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews. It is partly due to how remembering is enlarged by photographs and partly due to the particular quality of the photograph itself. Photographs appear to capture the impossible: a person gone; an event past. That extraordinary sense of seeming to retrieve something that has disappeared belongs alone to the photograph, and it leads to deep and interesting talk. My enthusiasm for photo elicitation also comes from the collaboration it inspires. When two or more people discuss the meaning of photographs, they try to figure out something together. This is, I believe, an ideal model for research (p. 23).

Using photo-voice and photo-elicitation as participatory research methods enabled me, to fully engage in a collaborative journey with my actors in ways that transplant ways of

knowing into the time capsule of new experiences where we discover new ways of being. A detailed description of the portraiture methodology is included in Chapter 3.

Delimitations of the Study

A delimitation of this study is the purposeful selection of participants who have made an indelible imprint on my story's pages. As a Black female educational leader studying Black female educational leaders, the intersection of our lived experiences contributed to a portrait that captures lived experiences, pedagogical constructs, and institutional transformation. With portraiture, according to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), the researcher is seen not only in defining the focus and field of the inquiry but also in navigating the relationships with the participants, in interpreting the action, in tracing the emerging themes, and in creating the narrative told.

Another delimitation of this study is the parallel to the poor Black community that I grew up in and work in. As a Black female assistant principal in a large urban middle school located two blocks from the type of poor neighborhood I grew up in, the participants are likewise Black female educational leaders in a large urban school district. The participants' deliberate selection for this research study narrows the study's scope to a large urban school district located in the southeastern region of the United States and, as a result, reveal findings specific to this geographical region of the country. Although not all Black female educational leaders have the same lived experiences, the centralized location of this research study positions emerging themes to inform future practice and policy of educational institutions located in this region of the country.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation of this research study is the widely politicized social climate of the city and school district in which I am conducting the study. The societal injustice currently plaguing the Black community, in addition to the health disparities the Coronavirus has exposed, is presently more salient for Black, poor, and marginalized people. Because of the current non-traditional structure, which requires students to receive instruction from home, Black female educational leaders are charged with leading schools in a virtual setting. This setting has silenced the productive chatter traditionally heard throughout hallways in school buildings. As Black female educational leaders fighting against entrenched systems of racially charged discrimination during an unprecedented time in history, both the portraitist researcher's and participants' struggles with racial, gender, and health disparities could shape how the findings inform this study. Because of the racially charged and criminally unjust social climate with which the research study's timing intersects, the questions chosen for interviews in conjunction with the photo-voice and photo-elicitation activities potentially contributed to uncomfortable memories the participants did not want to address.

Due to the guidelines of social distancing enacted by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in response to the Coronavirus pandemic, the frequency of and manner in which data was collected for this research study is yet another limitation. Interviews occurred in a virtual setting, which in some ways limited the physical environment's ability to appropriately set the stage for authentic, uninterrupted, and engaging dialogue among me and the participants.

Although qualitative research's context-bound nature presents disadvantages for some, it analyzes non-numerical data and provides space for the specificity of

experiences in ways that honor voices historically silenced. Portraiture allows for the flaws in qualitative research by permitting the portraitist researcher's visibility and explicitness as the research instrument (Magnum, 2014). Though other forms of empirical research identify this level of subjectivity as a limitation, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis assert, "the identity, character, and history of the researcher are obviously critical to the manner of listening, selecting, interpreting, and composing of the story" (1997, p. 13).

Additionally, Hackmann (2002) counters researchers who criticize the appropriateness of the portraiture methodology in educational research through his assertion that portraiture is a "viable methodology for stimulating educational change and reform by helping practitioners solve real problems in educational settings (p. 51). The portraiture methodology's qualitative use to blend artistic expression with scientific precision is both challenging and uplifting. As a method of research designed to utilize in-depth narratives to create new ways of knowing, Hampsten's (2015) research identified three primary limitations portraitists encounter as they provide relevant insight to social science research which are, introducing a method new to narrative inquiry research, creating believable portraits, and finding an appropriate readership. According to Hackmann, the portraitist identifies convergent themes across both she and her participants' experiences in ways that seamlessly incorporate the portraitist's perspective into the final portrait (2002).

Portraitist's Perspective

Caged Bird

*A free bird leaps on the back of the wind and floats downstream till the current ends
and dips his wing in the orange sun rays and dares to claim the sky.*

*But a bird that stalks down his narrow cage can seldom see through his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing.*

~ Maya Angelou (1983)

In Angelou's poem, she describes two juxtaposed phenomena; a bird whose lived experience is characterized as light, airy, and filled with freedom, and a bird whose lived experience is characterized as shackled, caged, and riddled with oppression. As a poor Black girl who grew up in one of the most impoverished areas of town and was bussed to a predominantly White school, Angelou's analogy of a caged bird metaphorically dances across the pages of my life story. My school experience, particularly elementary school, conjures emotions of isolation, pain, and anger at the injustice that defined my overall school experience. My voice was muted daily by the institutional systems that further cemented my cerebral inferiority to my White classmates. My face invariably lurked among the microscopic shadows of my teachers' sight because I was invisible to them. My very existence occupied a sinister place in my teachers' classrooms to an eight-year-old poor Black girl from a poverty-stricken area of the inner city. Though I was a voracious reader, I was put in the lower academic track for all of my classes. Although I remained at the same school for all five years of elementary school, my counselors and principal never knew my name, voice, or story.

Throughout elementary school, which was located in a part of town Black people were not welcomed, and into middle school, I was never honored or acknowledged for anything positive. It was not until the 7th grade that I had a Black female teacher with whom I am still in contact today. Because of the oppressive lived reality I experienced in school up until I had my first and only Black female teacher, I must remain mindful of my portraitist's perspective during the research study to refrain from diminishing my

participants' experiences. As a Black female assistant principal in a large urban middle school comprised of a predominantly White staff, I continually face the challenge of convincing staff members that my pedagogical discourse is rooted in an in-depth knowledge of curricular constructs, particularly as it relates to elevating the achievement of Black and marginalized students. As a Black female educational leader studying Black female educational leaders, I remained vigilant in recognizing my reflexive bias as I honored and crafted my participants' portraits.

Definition of Terms

For this research study, several terms must be defined within contextualized parameters. Therefore, I will define critical terms below to help the reader fully participate in and understand the findings of the study:

Actors – Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) refers to the participants in a qualitative portraiture study as actors.

Black Female Educational Leader - For this study, Black female educational leaders refer to a Black female that is currently leading a school as a building level principal, has led a school as a building level principal, and supports schools through her work at the central office level.

Black Feminist Caring - Bass (2012) defines Black feminist caring as the unique way care is shown by Black females in the Black community. In addition, she further describes Black feminist caring as a way Black female educational leaders embrace the social responsibility to advance Black children's social and intellectual experiences both inside and outside of their school communities.

Change Agent - Newcomb and Niemeyer (2015) define change agents as educational leaders who make decisions based upon the community, political, and social impact the decision will have on the lived experiences of members of the Black community. For this study, a Black female educational leader is a change agent who transforms her school community and the Black community in ways that create equitable and elevated lived experiences.

Community Othermother - Mack (2016) defines Community othermothers as ‘fictive-kin’ who assist biological mothers in the responsibilities of short or long-term care for other members of the Black community. In Black feminist research, a woman who assumes the care of other people’s children formally or informally is considered to be a Community Othermother (Collins, 1990; Mack, 2016; Mawhinney, 2012). For this study, a Community Othermother is a Black female educational leader who supports and advances Black families’ and marginalized students’ ability to navigate societal challenges brought on by the intersection of race, gender, and class.

Dominant Group - Collins (2000) defines a dominant group as a group of people who attempt to objectify the subordinate group. This is done by controlling the subordinate groups’ reality, identity formation, and knowledge acquisition source. Though elite White men are not the sole oppressors of Black and historically marginalized people, they are the predominant group in the Academy, which is currently responsible for defining that which is considered valid and credible knowledge. For this study, the dominant group refers to the Eurocentric and male-dominated social institutions that legitimate expertise in the United States, primarily comprised of elite White men.

Dominant Ways of Knowing - Collins (1990) defines dominant ways of knowing as the way knowledge, wisdom, and experience shape dialogue and criteria for meaning between dominant and subordinate groups. Dialogue between individuals creates systems of connectedness between people. For this study, dominant ways of knowing refer to how Black female educational leaders challenge the knowledge validation process generated by elite White men. Additionally, this research study uses this term to manifest Black female educational leaders' lived experiences as credible agents of the knowledge validation process that inform empirical research of what it is like to be Black and female instead of non-Black females informing empirical research in an unauthenticated manner.

Fictive Kin - Mawhinney (2012) described the origin of the 'fictive-kin' relationship between Black women and Black children as that which occurred when children and biological parents were separated at auction, which resulted in Black women adopting mothering responsibilities of orphaned children. For this study, the fictive kin and othermother relationship Black female educational leaders have with Black students and their families as they advance the intellectual experiences of members of the Black community are interchangeable.

Goodness - The portraiture methodology elevates the concept of *goodness* as a thoughtfully crafted and centralized focus on discovering perfection within the realm of imperfection.

Hegemonic Power Structures - Power structures used by the dominant group to manipulate, limit, and suppress the subordinate group from experiencing intellectual, economic, and social progress. For this study, hegemonic power structures are

academic, economic, and social systems used by elite White men as tools to further oppress Black, poor, and historically marginalized groups of people.

Intellectual Advancement - hooks (1994) refers to intellectual advancement as the intellectual freedom of and the ability for Black and marginalized people to grow and experience new ways of knowing, living, and thinking based upon their fortitude and commitment to improvement. For this study, intellectual advancement refers to Black female educational leaders' commitment to supporting Black students and members of the Black community in ways that elevate their lived experiences above the ramifications of oppressive ideology.

Intersectionality - Crenshaw (1989) describes intersectionality as the manner different aspects of identity come together in ways that enable unique forms of discrimination, that unlike White women and Black men, only confront Black women. The triple-discrimination Black women encounter is based upon their race, sex, and class.

Knowledge Validation Process - The process by which the generation of new knowledge and knowledge claims are defined. For this study, the knowledge validation process refers to the process that establishes the way knowledge is validated among Black female educational leaders as they use lived experience as a criterion of meaning, use dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, and ground their interaction with others in the ethic of caring and personal accountability (Collins, 2009).

Photo-elicitation - Harper (2002) defines photo-elicitation as a participatory research method that involves the researcher's use of photographs, in addition to words, during an interview to elicit discourse. Harper further states that the difference between interviews using images and text and interviews using words alone lies in the ways

individuals cognitively respond to these two forms of symbolic representation. According to Harper, the parts of the brain react differently to visual information than verbal information. Thus, images evoke more profound elements of human consciousness than do words alone. For this study, the photo-elicitation method was used during the second focus group workshop. I showed the participants a photograph of various components of a river and descriptions of that component, i.e., calm waters, murky waters, turbulent waters, etc. The participants then drew their own linear yet divergent river that represents various seasons of their life stories that align with the images presented, i.e., a time when things were calm, murky, turbulent, etc. Additionally, participants attached written reflections to their river, thus re-constructing their authentic depiction of their *Rivers of Life*.

Photo-voice - Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001) define photo-voice as a participatory action research method where participants use their cameras and photographs to document the reality of their lived experiences in ways that encourage critical thinking. Wang and Redwood-Jones assert that the use of photo-voice methods in qualitative research creates space for pivotal social change by supporting the creation of powerfully visual images that enable people to assess their community's strengths and concerns. For this study, the photo-voice method was used during the first focus group workshop, where I asked the participants to take or bring pictures that represent their lived experiences in various stages of their lives. During the focus group workshop, participants created and discussed their photo-voice boards based upon the story they want the pictures to tell.

Portrait – In the portraiture methodology, the portrait also referred to as the *aesthetic whole*, is the final narrated document representing the participants' life stories.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe the final research portrait as the result of a seamless synthesis of rigorous procedures that unite in an expressive aesthetic whole.

Portraitist – In portraiture, the portraitist is the researcher who conducts the study. Unlike other forms of empirical quantitative, phenomenological, and ethnographic methodologies that require the researcher to remain on the outskirts of her participant's narrative, Lawrence-Lightfoot asserts the importance of the portraitist sketching herself into the context and doing so at an early point in the portrait. The portraitist uses her voice in a profoundly empirical and aesthetic way to craft the multi-dimensional narratives of her participants.

Portraiture – A type of qualitative research that purposefully seeks out that which is strong, resilient, and good in unique ways that manifest human experience. The portraiture methodology is the first social scientific methodology that explicitly blends art and science, blurs the boundaries of aestheticism and empiricism, and crafts a final portrait grounded in five core tenets, which are context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and the aesthetic whole.

Rivers of Life - Ortiz Aragón and Hoetmer (2020) defines this participatory action research methodology as a process that employs the systemization of experience used to systematically reconstruct and interpret a past shared experience. For this study, the symbolic use of the components of a river such as calm, turbulent, crystal clear, murky, etc., provided participants with visual parallels between the various conditions and

currents of a river and various conditions and currents of their life journeys, also known as the *rivers of their lives*. Utilizing this metaphor to frame the participants' experiences supported the convergence and reconstruction of emergent themes. Through reconstruction, diverse individual interpretations emerge that, upon combining with others' interpretations, allow participants to understand and even theorize from their experiences more deeply.

Shifting Strategies - Robertson (2013) defines shifting strategies as the various approaches Black female educational leaders utilize as they toggle between the distinct identities they engage in related to their appearance, communication style, and behavior while at work. For this study, shifting strategies Black female educational leaders employ refers to shifting their appearance to fit in, shifting their behavior to disprove stereotypes, shifting their perception by remaining mindful of their surroundings at all times, shifting the pain to suppress negative feelings associated with bias, and shifting their language to match the setting.

Social Activist - Baylor (2014) defines a social activist as a person who engages in social justice endeavors in transformative ways that focus on human dignity and intellectual advancement. For this study, social activists refer to Black female educational leaders who facilitate critical discourse about race, gender, and academic inequities experienced by members both inside and outside of their school communities.

Summary

In summary, there is a long-established tenure of hegemonic power structures that serve as sources of knowledge validation among members of the academy. However,

generative research that documents the resilient, complex, and creative utility of Black female educational leaders' narratives as a means of informing the knowledge validation process, has not been as frequently documented. The existing literature does not readily address the lessons that a study of the scholarship, resilience, and lived experiences of Black female educational leaders in one of the largest urban school districts in the southeastern region of the United States can reveal. As a result, the lack of empirical research that uses the portraiture methodology to illuminate the narratives of Black female educational leaders is a compelling rationale for his study. Hence, the purpose of this research study is to provide social science theory with both iterative and generative experiences that are revealed in the portraits of three Black female educational leaders and as a result, inform the implementation of effective institutional practices and policies of a large urban school district.

This qualitative portraiture study provides an opportunity to step inside the frames of three Black female educational leaders' portraits in ways that both empirically and aesthetically inform practice and policies enacted in a large urban school district. Additionally, this research project enables my participants' portraits to inform systemic practices that elevate the lived experiences of Black and marginalized students, and thereby heed the societal call currently pleading for transformative healing, social growth, and intellectual advancement. Chapter 1 provides the contextual and theoretical framework that undergirds my study. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the existing literature as it relates to the theoretical framework, Black feminist thought, the legacy of Black people in the United States, and the experiences of Black female educational leaders. Chapter 3 discusses in detail the portraiture methodology, the research design,

and the data collection process. Chapter 4 and 5 frame the transformative discourse that shapes the participants' portraits. Finally, Chapter 6 discusses a summary of the findings, implications, and final thoughts.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review begins with discussing the theoretical lens that frames this research study by exploring how Black female educational leaders generate new constructs of knowledge. This review also examines how this theoretical framework positions Black female educational leaders as community Othermothers, social activists, and change agents. The review continues by examining the historical legacy of Black people and how they used their scholarship, resilience, and lived experiences to advance the Black community's intellectual landscape. Finally, this review concludes by examining how the literature frames Black female educational leaders as political and social agents of change both inside and outside their school communities.

Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge Validation Process

Schools are a primary conduit for both the construction and demonstration of knowledge, particularly in a democratic society. When all voices are heard and valued, egalitarianism thrives. As a result, the ideology of domination subsides, albeit the ideology of supremacy extends far beyond intellectual boundaries put into place by members of the dominant group. Constructs that shape oppressive ideology are contextually multidimensional and therefore minimized in veracity when discussed unilaterally, specifically, when attributing all oppressive behavior to elite White men. The

process whereby knowledge is validated is primarily controlled by the dominant culture, which includes but is not limited to elite White men. Although the literature conjoins the continued oppression of Black people with superiority ideation inherent in White people, this study does not seek to explore that ideology. Instead, this study aims to illuminate authentic sources of knowledge construction that extend beyond dominant ways of knowing, explicitly related to the lived experiences of Black people as a criterion of meaning, knowledge claims, and knowledge validation.

The conceptual framework of Black feminist thought seeks to create an intellectual space wherein Black females have choices and are empowered to act in ways that contribute to societal, institutional, and intellectual transformative experiences, particularly in the lives of historically marginalized individuals. As a critical social theory, this theoretical framework honors the interplay between the generation of knowledge, and Black females' lived experiences. Collins asserts:

The distinction between knowledge and wisdom and the use of experience as the cutting edge dividing them has been the key to Black women's survival.

Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate. For most Black women, those individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts, are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences. Thus, lived experience as a criterion for credibility frequently is invoked by U.S. Black women when making knowledge claims (2000, p. 257).

Black feminist thought positions Black female intellectuals at the knowledge validation process's nucleus regarding declarations of expertise on Black women's lived experiences.

Black female educational leaders contribute to this democratic society by incorporating Collins' four essential elements of Black feminist epistemology into their daily interactions: (a) lived experience as a criterion of meaning; (b) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims; (c) the ethic of caring; and (d) the ethic of personal accountability (Collins, 2009). Similarly, Black feminist thought is generated through epistemological constructs of knowledge embodied by Black women rooted inside the space of their lived experiences (Mastin & Woodard, 2005). Anna Cooper, one of the first Black feminists who founded the Colored Women's League in 1892, believed that the progress of Black women resides within the hands and lived experiences of Black women. This belief, which serves as the cornerstone of Black feminist thought, has remained a conduit for developing knowledge between members of the Black community. The authentic dialogue generated between people joined by everyday experiences, creates feelings of connectedness, a sense of belonging, and genuine relationships that are an essential aspect of knowledge validation within the Black community (Collins, 1989; Daniels et al., 2020; Dean & Porter, 2015; Dillard, 2000). The meaningful discourse between all people generates new knowledge in ways that define creative thinking and purposeful living. However, for intellectual curiosity to transform into authentic ways of knowing, knowledge transference must be absent of restraints imposed by race, gender, or education level.

To elaborate further, Collins (2000) describes the accumulation of this knowledge as a multidimensional process whereby social institutions politicize the knowledge validation process, an enterprise controlled primarily by elite White men. During the early 19th century Maria Stewart, one of the first prominent Black feminist-abolitionists, encouraged Black women to use their knowledge to become both empowered and powerful. In her speech delivered in 1833 at the African Masonic Hall in Boston, Massachusetts, she encouraged her audience to embrace this new way of thinking:

We possess a natural independence of soul and feel a love of liberty between our breasts, someone of our sable race would have testified it...and compelled me to turn their attention to knowledge and improvement; for improvement is power...make yourselves useful and active members of society (1833, p. 50).

Collins affirms that for Black females to engage in discourse that elevates their status to active members of society, they must root their intellectual psyche in the two primary criteria to validate knowledge. First, experts must convince the scholarly community controlled by elite White men that the claim is justified for knowledge claims to be accepted. Second, in order for each community of experts to be deemed credible, the larger population in which the community is situated must share the same belief system (2000).

The knowledge validation process that Collins speaks of manifests through Black females' lived experiences in contemporary America. They stand on the shoulders of intellectual scholars such as Paule Marshall (1959), Lorraine Hansberry (1959), Toni Morrison (1970), and Ann Shockley (1974). Though temporarily obstructed by oppressive ideology, the rich legacy of intellectual progress has continued to gain

momentum into the 21st century. According to Collins, this momentum is generated by Black women. Ethics of care fuels it with an emphasis placed on each individual's uniqueness, the appropriateness of emotions in dialogues between and among people, and the capacity to develop and maintain empathy for others (2000). Black feminist intellectual traditions grew out of Black women's desire to acquire ownership and understanding of how their pursuit of intellectual freedom influenced their oppressors' continued domination attempts. The shared belief that Black "women have been neither passive victims of nor willing accomplices to their domination" is one that functions as both a political and epistemological foundation of the social construction of Black feminist thought (Collins, 1989, p. 747). The purpose of Black feminist thought is to create intellectual platforms for Black women to resist oppression in both practice and ideology.

To speak to the veracity of Black feminist thought, the work of prominent Black female activists that has been historically documented in research literature since the early 19th century, share characteristics with this theoretical framework (Angelou, 1969; Chisholm, 1970; Collins, 2000; Cooper, 1892; Harper, 1893; Truth, 1850; Wells-Barnett, 1899). In addition to the anecdotal legacy written about and left by these prominent Black female activists, Shorter-Gooden initiated one of the largest research projects to date in 2002 on and about Black females entitled *The African American Women's Voices Project* that examined the impact of racism and sexism on Black women in America (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Jones and Shorter-Gooden documented the narratives of more than 388 Black women in their *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*, where they examined the lived experiences of Black women and despite the ongoing

requirement of responding to and coping with racial and gender stereotypes, bias, and mistreatment, concluded about Black women:

They have assumed a prominent place in the culture of our times both in the United States and abroad. They have etched anew the cultural landscape with their courage and vision. There are so many brilliantly talented, beautiful, deeply thoughtful and intelligent Black women who are shaping our world today and doing everything possible to make it a richer and better place (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004, p. 2).

Furthering this discourse, Baylor (2014) asserts that dominant groups repress critical social theories generated within oppressed non-dominant groups. Black women's lived experiences create new ways of knowing and being for other Black women to share intellectual experiences, thus contributing to the knowledge validation process. Wing (1997) responded to her first reading of a journal issue devoted to the thoughts of Black female law professors with, "as a relatively new, young academic, I was struck by the beauty, strength, and power of the words of my sisters, words that had never been gathered together in a single place" (p. 2).

Additionally, Black feminist thought examines discourse generated by the relationship between Black female intellectuals' lived experiences and how their expertise influences the knowledge validation process. However, merely discussing Black feminist intellectual traditions goes beyond analysis using standard epistemological criteria. Instead, it involves challenging the social construct that defines intellectual discourse itself (Collins, 2000). Understanding the common themes of the interlocking nature of oppression, the power of self-definition and self-value, and the importance of

cultural and communal ethics of care offers further insight into the Black feminist's epistemological framework (Collins, 1986). Black female intellectuals do not rely solely on oppression prompted by race, gender, and class to base their resistance. Instead, the focus shifts to dismantling the inaccurate depiction of Black women that, in many cases, drive these systems of oppression (Baylor, 2014; Berry, 1982; Collins, 1986; Cooper, 1892; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Wing, 1997).

White members have not readily accepted black female intellectuals who work within the academy as credible knowledge construction agents. Nonetheless, Black females' creative reversal of oppressive systems meant for their intellectual detriment into transformative movements intended for others has earned them an *outsider-within* status among some members within the academy. Additionally, Collins (2000) characterizes the *outsider-within* status in her assertion that although Black female educational leaders have successfully met all credentialing standards required to become members within the academy, they are still viewed as outsiders who are not qualified and welcomed. As a result, the interlocking nature of oppression has created a unique reality for Black females, particularly those in educational leadership. Collins captures this unique source for creativity in the following way:

For many Afro-American female intellectuals, "marginality" has been an excitement to creativity. As outsiders within, Black feminist scholars may be one of many distinct groups of marginal intellectuals whose standpoints promise to enrich contemporary sociological discourse (1986, p. S15).

Black female educational leaders engage in sociological discourse with members both inside and outside of their school communities in ways that authentically inform both the

knowledge validation process and ways of knowing (Collins, 2009). However, illustrations of how this discourse shapes Black women's accurate narratives are not readily documented in the existing scholarly literature.

The underdeveloped dogma that focuses on the ideology of domination generated through negative stereotypes of Black women has historically controlled research literature in ways that make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of injustice appear to be organic, routine, and inescapable parts of everyday life (Andrews & Roberts, 2013; Collins, 2000; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Mastin & Woodard, 2005). Throughout American history, portrayals of Black people furthered the notion of them as intellectually inferior to White people. Demeaning stereotypes such as "Mammy, Aunt Jemimah, Savage, and Jezebel" characterized Black women's oppressive reality during the 19th century (Boskin, 1986; Goings, 1994; Jewell, 1993). Plous and Williams (1995) conducted a study to determine if Black people's negative perceptions persisted more than 100 years after the US Civil war. They found that negative stereotypes of Black people regarding innate intellectual ability prevailed in contemporary American society. In the minds of White people, Black people were thought of as servants, cooks, maids, butlers, and field hands, and it is this mindset that has continued to prevail over time and, as a result, creates societal challenges in the experiences of Black people (Higginbotham, 2013). According to Fanon (1967), such an extreme psychological response originates unfortunately in a White society from the unconscious beginning in early childhood, to associate "blackness" with "wrongness." Fanon further states that such unconscious mental training that is impacted by comic books, cartoons, and cultural media, instills and

affixes in the mind of the White child, society's cultural representation of Black people as villains (1967).

Black female intellectuals are central to Black feminist thought, which reframes Black womanhood's portrayal as grounded in resilience, scholarship, and strength, instead of the reverse. In contrast to society's cultural representation of Black women, the power of Black females' self-definition and self-value is rooted in the authentic imaging of Black women by Black women in ways designed to replace externally derived images (Collins, 1986). Cooper echoed this ideology in her book *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* with:

Now the fundamental agency under God in the regeneration, the retraining of the race, as well as the groundwork and starting point of its progress upward, must be the Black woman (Cooper, 1892, p. 28).

Cooper's words, which parallel another common theme that reinforces the work of Black feminist thought and is constructed in the research literature, is the importance Black women place on cultural and communal ethics of care (Baylor, 2014; Collins, 1986, 2000; Farmer, 2016; Vandenberg-Daves, 2014; Villarosa, 2018).

Black Feminist Thought: Communal Ethics of Care

Black female educational leaders epitomize communal ethics of care through their work in their schools and Black communities. According to Collins, as one of the core tenets of Black feminist thought, the ethic of caring "suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process" (2000, p. 263). To illustrate this core tenet, The BlackFemaleProject, a non-profit organization that celebrates Black women who thrive at work, elicited Black female

leaders' opinions. Their online survey, which assessed the way Black female leaders demonstrate ethics of caring, included questions such as, how do I see myself in those who came before me, how do I see myself in those coming behind me, and what do I want people to feel when they leave an interaction with me (Stroud, 2014). Collins asserts that a factor that distinguishes Black females from other dominant groups is their commitment to building an authentic relationship that improves the experiences of their biological children, children in their extended families, and children in the Black community (2000).

Along the same vein, Black feminist thought provides a backdrop to understanding the lived experiences and impact of multiple forms of oppression on Black female educational leaders as they advance the cognitive landscape of Black students. Black female educational leaders who are acutely aware of the inherent discriminatory treatment they receive from others based upon their race and gender are uniquely positioned to create institutional systems that eliminate Black and marginalized students' barriers. However, the institutionalized systems, such as schools' continued exposure to cognitive systems of thinking that represents the dominant group's standpoint and interests, challenge Black students' mastery of this connection (Collins, 1990).

Like Collins, bell hooks' *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom* (1994), further illuminates how Black female educational leaders demonstrate ethics of care, a core tenet of Black feminist thought. Through her research, hooks reinforce the notion that Black feminists' classrooms are the most radical spaces of intellectual freedom to which Black students are exposed and can experience liberatory growth. According to hooks, the Black educators in her life viewed their opportunities to

teach as fulfilling a mission that provided her with the only aspect of true freedom, an education. Hooks expands upon this with, “my teachers made sure they knew us. They knew our parents, our economic status, where we worshipped and what our homes were like” (1994, p. 2). When educators pedagogically infuse a connection between academic and lived experiences into their practice, both students and teachers can fully participate in the reciprocal process of empowerment inside classrooms. Hence, “professors who embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply” (hooks, 1994, p. 22).

Black female educational leaders’ involvement in the Black community contributes to an ongoing climate of empowerment that fuels its members’ social, political, and intellectual progress and earns them the coveted title of community Othermother. Mack (2016) defines community othermothers as caregivers who adopt the parental role in relationships with children they serve in institutional structures such as schools, communities, or social service agencies. Community Othermothers’ commitment to building authentic relationships “with children and other vulnerable community members are not intended to dominate or control. Rather, their purpose is to express ethics of caring and personal accountability in ways that bring people along” (Collins, 2000, p. 193). Noddings furthers the discourse surrounding the way women display ethics of care as she asserts:

Women approach moral problems by placing themselves as nearly as possible in concrete situations and assuming personal responsibility for the choices to be

made. An ethic built on caring is essentially feminine...an ethic of caring arises out of our experiences as women (2003, p. 8).

Noddings' observation illustrates the unique juxtaposition Black female educational leaders' lived experiences have with those of marginalized students they are charged to lead as well as members of the Black community.

Moreover, honoring the voices, lives, and intellectual experiences of marginalized individuals is another core tenet of Black feminist thought. Woods (2020) illustrates this in her study where she conducted interviews with university presidents, professors, and students to discuss the initiatives they are putting into place in response to the unsettled racial climate currently sweeping our country, as they prepare to welcome students to their campuses for the 2020-2021 school year. Students' voices, students' needs, and a deep understanding of students' lived experiences emerge as critically essential factors to utilize as a source of direction for future curricular choices, practices, and policies (Woods, 2020).

The way Black female educational leaders honor students' voices in schools has a direct impact on the level of achievement of students, mainly when there is a high concentration of students who have been historically marginalized. Chenoweth and Theokas (2013) conducted a qualitative study that examined the dispositions of 33 principals of high performing high poverty schools. Over 75% of the students in the principals' schools were Black and qualified for free or reduced lunch. Although disproportionate achievement outcomes exist for students who have been historically marginalized, the students in these principals' schools outperformed other students at schools considered more affluent. Chenoweth and Theokas revealed that the principals

shared four characteristics as essential components of their leadership styles: (a) they grounded their work in the unwavering belief in students' potential as they distinguished excellence and mediocrity; (b) they put instruction as the center of their managerial duties; (c) they focused on building the capacity of all adults; and (d) they continuously monitored what strategies led to success and what lessons could be learned from failure. The principals in Chenoweth and Theokas' study embody a core tenet of Black feminist thought as foundational to their daily practice, which is the elevation of intellectual experiences for Black and marginalized students as a means of institutional transformation. Black females have a long-standing history regarding the importance they place on education, including intellectual pioneers such as Nannie Burroughs, who campaigned vigorously for Black women's education, and Johnetta Cole, the first Black female president of Spelman College. Collins states, "these women saw the activist potential of education and skillfully demonstrated ethics of care as they used the Black female sphere of influence to foster the definition of education as a cornerstone of Black community development" (2000, p. 210).

Black female educational leaders demonstrate ethics of care both inside and outside of their school communities in ways that position personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy as central components to the knowledge validation process (Collins, 2000). Collins asserts that "knowledge claims made by individuals respected for their moral and ethical connections to their ideas will carry more weight than those offered by less respected figures" (2000, p. 265). As producers of educational research, the academy members are responsible for assuming personal accountability when making claims about validating authentic constructs of knowledge. Scholarly research centered

around the plurality of critical thought and perspectives of Black female educational leaders, particularly as it relates to the achievement of Black children, and finds its way into educators' practice, provides critical insight for policy-makers, stakeholders, and educational leaders.

Black Feminist Thought: Applications of BFT in Research

Black feminist thought is a framework that illuminates the lived experiences of Black females. As a result, Black feminist intellectual traditions are interwoven throughout different areas of research and have been used in various forums as a framework that examines the utility of systems implementation designed to both support and understand the experience of Black females. Daniels and his colleagues conducted a study that utilized a central tenet of Black feminist thought, which uses lived experience as a criterion of meaning to help them understand the intersection between the lived experiences of five Black female students before entering college compared to those that occurred during college. Black feminist thought asserts that the most effective way to understand another person's lived experiences is to share the experience in "two modes of knowing: one located in the body and the space it occupies and the other passing beyond it" (Collins, 2000, p. 259). Findings from Daniels et al., revealed that the Black female students benefited most when their lived experiences intersected with other Black females. Influences of role models and media contributed to four identity development stages for the five Black female undergraduates. These four stages are personal foundations, pre-collegiate socialization, collegiate socialization, and articulation of identity (Daniels et al., 2020).

Another illustration of Black feminist thought's use in research is evidenced in McDonald's work that involved studying 88 Black females whose ages ranged from 18 to 89 on the distinct dimensions of their gender, ethnic identity, and their consciousness (McDonald, 2006). Findings from their narratives revealed that though oppressive forces occasionally cause Black females to exert conscious and unconscious discriminative behavior towards one another both inside and outside the world of academia, "the cultural solidarity and trust among and between Black women" is virtually indestructible (McDonald, 2006, p. 4). Numerous research studies have been conducted examining the experiences of Black women in the science, technology, engineering, and math fields (STEM), another area for which tenets of Black feminist thought can be applied (Borum & Walker, 2012; Delaine et al., 2018; Ko et al., 2018; Malcom & Malcolm, 2011; Ong, 2011; Visintainer, 2020). Ko et al. (2018) conducted a research study that focused on assessing the social factors that contribute to Black women in higher education's decision to continue pursuing or consider leaving the STEM field based upon the challenges brought on by discriminatory intersectionality of gender, race, and class. Their study focused on three primary research questions: (a) how have these challenges played a role in their struggle in higher education; (b) how have these challenges played a role in their persistence in higher education; and (c) how have "counterspaces" which are defined as "safe spaces" for Black women outside of White male-dominated areas, played a role in their persistence in the STEM field. Common themes that emerged throughout the research process among the study participants were experiences of isolation, experiences of microaggressions, and counterspaces as havens.

In response to common thematic outcomes revealed in the existing research literature, such as isolation and experiences of microaggressions which Black female educational leaders encounter, Black feminist thought grounds its work in advancing intellectual traditions, equal educational opportunities, and the ethic of personal accountability. Advancing scholarly excellence by remaining accountable to provide equitable educational opportunities for members of the Black community frames Black epistemology. If the construction of knowledge is to occur in ways that accurately depict Black women's lived experiences, Black women have to remain at the helm of its knowledge claims. To extend this thinking, Thompson (1998) conducted a study where she assessed the degree to which psychological literature and theories of caring are rooted in ideology primarily generated by White individuals. Part of her research centered on analyzing what she called "the theory of colorblindness" and how instructional practices in schools encourage young children to perceive race. When a young Black boy who had drawn a White researcher in purple was asked what color he would like to be drawn, he responded with, "I'm brown, so do me brown, everybody's talking about I'm black, but I'm really brown. It's okay. You can color me any color you want, but I'm brown for real" (Thompson, 1998, p. 523). Based upon Thompson's findings, she encourages theorists, teachers, and policy-makers to "see" the race of children and, as a result, implement contextual practices of caring in schools that take into account the perspectives of non-White individuals and poor cultures.

Generating psychological research that illuminates the way Black female educational leaders impact Black students is most accurately done when the authentic voices and lived experiences of Black female educational leaders author the research

literature. Black feminist epistemology positions Black females as central agents of knowledge who believe in the unique use of dialogue and connectedness when assessing knowledge claims (Collins, 2000). The degree of connectedness established between Black female educational leaders and students occurs through honest and reciprocal dialogue. According to hooks (1989), “dialogue implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination” (p. 131). Andrews and Roberts acknowledge the importance of the perspective of Black female educational leaders regarding the way dialogue and connectedness shape accurate ways of knowing within the Black community in the following:

What is more important than sharing the narratives is that they be crafted responsibly and critically. The reclamation of Black educators’ actual identities, and the reconstruction of their designated identities are needed...we must acknowledge that although White people in the United States have and continue to have limited exposure to Black teachers, due to long-standing de jure and de facto segregation in our communities and schools, Black educators are qualified, resilient, and committed to educating the youth of our nation (2013, p. 91).

Black female intellectuals further the epistemological standards that legitimate knowledge in the Black community in ways that are unique, authentic, and non-Eurocentric and, in doing so, highlight new ways of knowing for the community as a whole (Collins, 2000).

Black Feminist Thought: Female Educational Leaders as Social Activists

Black feminist thought examines the challenges Black women face as part of a larger frame, which is the utility of engaging in social justice endeavors in ways that focus on human dignity and intellectual advancement (Baylor, 2014; Collins, 2000; Farmer, 2017; hooks, 1994). Generative research has been conducted on the advantage that educational leaders have regarding cultivating mindsets in their school buildings, mindsets that are contextually grounded in critical theory, and the advancement of social justice platforms (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2008; Collins, 2009; Lomotey, 1989; Mansfield, 2014). Teachers often facilitate critical discourse about race, gender, and academic inequities in schools, a platform for which educational leaders are charged with establishing. Jean-Marie and Mansfield conducted a study where they examined how female leaders create platforms in their schools for high levels of discourse that disrupt educational inequities experienced between students. The question that guided their research was, “How do school leaders engage in courageous conversations to transform beliefs and practices concerning educational inequities and engender equity to enhance learning for all students?” (Jean-Marie & Mansfield, 2015, p. 819). Building upon the work of Linton and Singleton (2006), Jean-Marie and Mansfield concluded that for educational leaders to engage in authentic and courageous conversations, they must possess three characteristics. These characteristics consist of: (a) passion, which is the level of connectedness and energy educators bring to social justice work in their commitment to school and classroom equity transformation; (b) practice, which refers to the essential individual and institutional actions taken to educate every student to his or her full potential effectively; and (c) persistence, which is the long-term time and energy commitment to remain focused on equity to close the achievement gap.

Singleton (2015) contends that for educational leaders to eliminate educational inequities and, as a result, close achievement gaps, they must develop cultural systems in their schools that provide all educators with the space and climate to discuss race openly and honestly. Black feminist thought positions Black female educational leaders as social activists whose activism occurs in two primary dimensions: the struggle for group survival within existing social structures and the struggle for institutional transformation (Collins, 2000). Suggesting an alternate route to discovering the universal truth of what is, grounds the work of Black feminist thought. Collins discusses the theoretical conceptualization of Black feminist thought and the way it intersects with social activism in the following:

I place Black women's subjectivity in the center of analysis and examine the interdependence of the everyday, taken-for granted knowledge shared by African American women as a group, the more specialized knowledge produced by Black women intellectuals, and the social conditions shaping both types of thought. This approach allows me to describe the creative tension linking how social conditions influenced a Black woman's standpoint and how the power of the ideas themselves gave many African-American women the strength to shape those same conditions (2000, p. 269).

The social and political relationship Black female educational leaders have with hegemonic structures of power and domination are explored in Black feminist thought. To that end, Black feminist thought, which is grounded in subjugated knowledge of domination, positions Black female educational leaders as unique agents of change

committed to the intellectual advancement of Black students and members of the Black community (Collins, 2000).

In summary, Black female educational leaders embody the experiences that accrue from being both Black and female. Black feminist thought articulates the experiences created by the convergence of the two. Collins asserts:

Race and gender may be analytically distinct, but in Black women's everyday lives, they work together. The search for distinguishing features of an alternative epistemology reveal that some ideas described as characteristically 'Black' often bear resemblance to similar ideas claimed by feminist scholars as characteristically 'female.' The significance of Black feminist epistemology lie in its ability to enrich our understanding of how subordinate groups create knowledge that fosters both their empowerment and social justice. Black feminist thought allows African-American women to explore the epistemological implications of transversal politics where one has no need to decenter anyone in order to center someone else. (Collins, 2000, p. 269)

Knowledge emerges through lived experiences that inform the creed by which humanity thrives. Honoring the voices and lived experiences of Black female educational leaders provides scholarly communities with empirical constructs of knowledge regarding ways to engage and elevate the experiences of individuals whose lives have been influenced by oppressive ideology.

Historical and politicized representations of oppression have created spaces in Black female educational leaders' lived experiences in ways that have grounded the utility of their activism for marginalized communities. In order for the Academy to

experience optimum benefit regarding practice and policy development grounded in empirical research, the literature must do the following regarding Black female educational leaders: (a) use their lived experiences as a criterion for meaning; (b) use their voices through dialogue to assess knowledge claims; (c) observe and learn from the way they demonstrate ethics of caring; and (d) use them as agents of knowledge (Collins, 2000). This research study does not attempt to position Black female educational leaders as unilateral recipients of oppressive ideology. Instead, it provides existing literature with a first-hand account of how Black female educational leaders share their situated knowledge within broader knowledge levels, thus elevating Black students' lived experiences and members of the Black community. Black feminist thought is an alternative epistemology that challenges whether what has been thought to be true is actually true. The existence of a "self-defined Black women's standpoint using Black feminist epistemology calls into question the content of what currently passes as truth and simultaneously challenges the process of arriving at the truth" (Collins, 2000, p. 271).

Legacy of Black People in the United States: 19th century

While this review of the literature does not serve to provide a detailed history lesson about Black abolitionists or distinguished historians, it will illustrate how Black people have consistently persevered in their pursuit and attainment of educational excellence. Historians have documented the legacy of Black people in the United States since the early 19th century. Black abolitionists James W. C. Pennington and Williams Wells Brown were two of the first authors who captured Black people's stories during a time when slave owners governed their lives. Pennington's (1841) *The Origin and History of the Colored People* chronicled the journeys of slaves and disputed the notion

that Black people were inferior to White people. Brown (1863) described *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, as a work that encompassed the stories of Black men who refused to allow slavery and racism to impede their intellectual development. The words of eminent abolitionists are likewise echoed in William's (1883) *History of the Negro race in America from 1619 - 1880*, which further illuminates the powerful legacy of excellence both created and sustained by Black people. Franklin (1985) recounted in his work *George Washington Williams: A Biography*, words written in 1869 in a letter seeking admission to Howard University noting, Williams had a "burning desire to seek an education and be of service to people," which speaks to his commitment to intellectual development (pg. xxi).

Despite the commitment to the intellectual development of Black people, before and during the Civil War, most southern states ruled it illegal for slaves to learn to read and write and developed legislation between 1800-1835; legislation which made it a crime to teach enslaved Black people to read or write (Anderson, 1988). For Black people, education served as a link to freedom from domination. Although reading and writing were both dangerous and against the law for enslaved Black people, the desire to learn outweighed the risk. According to Lusane (1992), teaching took place under sub rosa conditions in "churches, deserted railroad cars, abandoned shacks, under the moonlight, and virtually anywhere relatively secure" (p. 11). Anderson (1988) posits that as slave masters' efforts to repress slaves' desire for literacy increased, slaves became more resolute in linking their quest for education with their attainment of freedom.

The belief in learning, self-improvement, and universal education as a way to achieve and maintain a status of freedom defined the mentality of Black people in ways

that were observable during the late 19th century. Anderson (1988) recounts the lives of slaves struggling to learn in brutal and oppressive conditions and secreting to the woods to learn the words in spelling books. In addition, he described the thoughts of a secret school of slaves as:

Every window and door was carefully closed to prevent discovery. In that little school, hundreds of slaves learned to read and write a legible hand. After toiling all day for their masters they crept stealthily into this back alley, each with a bundle of pitch-pine splinters for lights. (p. 281)

Like slaves, Black soldiers also desired to learn how to read. Northern Union army officers described Black soldiers as treating learning to read as a sacred act (Anderson, 1988). According to Anderson, during the time period immediately following the Civil War, a White chaplain of a Louisiana Black regiment wrote, "I am sure I never witnessed greater eagerness for study, the colored take more interest in education than the Whites" (1988, p. 282), as the White chaplain reflected on his observation of Black soldiers' intellectual ambition.

In opposition to Black people's desire for intellectual advancement, the White male-dominated entertainment industry continued to exploit Black people. In 1828, Thomas Rice, a White entertainer, observed a physically disabled Black slave in Louisville, Kentucky named Jim Crow sing and dance and, as a result, created an image for the entertainment industry that depicted Black people as unintelligent, submissive, and inferior. Higginbotham asserts:

The Jim Crow minstrel shows demeaned and degraded blacks, while uplifting whites, through song, dance, and acting. The shows created several stereotyped

characters, including the happy plantation slave and the inept, corrupt, and foolish northern urban free black. Every skit, song, joke, or dance reinforced these images. Black minstrel characters in southern slave plantation settings were given endearing names like Uncle Remus and were portrayed as happy, healthy, obedient, and excessively loyal to their white owners, while the white masters were portrayed as compassionate, benevolent, and fair-minded...these portrayals had an insidious effect, condoning public mockery and denying the humanity of blacks. (2013, p. 86)

This prejudicial portrayal of Black people poured over from the entertainment industry to the intellectual community. Jim Crow's name became associated with the laws mandating racial segregation in all public facilities, including schools and libraries, in the United States.

Still, in opposition to further oppression, with the end of the Civil War and growing support of a new era where Black people were free, groups such as the Freedmen's Bureau (1865) and the Peabody Education Fund (1867) provided educational aid to Black people in ways that diminished their continued oppression in the South. The concept of being educated and free began to grow as a natural progression among Black people (Anderson, 1988). Nonetheless, White people controlled access to resources that provided intellectual freedom for Black people. The access to and attainment of resources that improved literacy among Black people further created disparities between Black and White people's intellectual advancement. In *Following the Color Line*, Baker (1908) described the experiences of Black people as they attempted to access Atlanta's public library with, "leading Negroes asserted that their people should be allowed

admittance, that they needed such an educational advantage even more than white people for buying the books” (p. 35). However, Black people continued to be restricted from obtaining resources, such as library books, that advanced their literacy level.

Distinctions between both appropriate and permissible facilities for Black people in the post-Civil war period continued to emerge in 1896 when the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of Plessy in the *Plessy vs Ferguson* court case by deeming racial segregation constitutional which as a result, legalized the separation between Black and White people. Consequently, the disparities of intellectual progress between Black and White people expanded. Racial segregation, through physical separation, became the method by which to deny Black intellectual freedoms (Higginbotham, 2013). Nonetheless, the deeply rooted belief in the importance of education to eradicate oppression continued to be the creed that grounded Black people’s lived experiences, despite White men and women’s concerted efforts to impede their progress at every turn.

Legacy of Black People in the United States: 20th century

Regardless of the historical time period, the commitment to education served as the legacy Black people have honored generation after generation. Moving toward the 20th century, this legacy gives context to building a free school system developed by ex-slaves during the Civil war and Reconstruction period. Though mostly underground and antithetical to the South’s views on public education, free Black people who were literate took the lead in shaping various Black intellectual thinking elements and their impact in the Black community (Anderson, 1988). Although not prevailing, some White people began to voice their appreciation of Black people’s intellectual fortitude and resilient spirit, despite the ongoing acts of discrimination confronting them. Myrdal (1944), a

Swedish social scientist whose research culminated in *An American Dilemma*, surmised that Black people possessed a sincere and almost religious faith in education and would stop at nothing to obtain intellectual freedom.

Myrdal's words continued to echo as historical accounts of Black peoples' lived experiences and legacies progressed with the scholarly literature that captured it. An example of the scholarly literature that captured it was Franklin's, *From Slavery to Freedom* (1947), which became one of the most widely reproduced historical representations of Black people's lived experiences as their legacy progressed from enslaved to that of free. The publication of nine editions of Franklin's work, which spans from its original publication in 1947 to its latest in 2011, once again demonstrates the legacy and commitment of Black people to intellectual development. Although embraced historically, Franklin had his critics. Greene (1948) criticized Franklin's notable work as titled inaccurately. In Greene's review of Franklin's work, he stated that the title should have been *From Freedom to Slavery* as Black people began free, contributed to flourishing states in Africa, such as Ethiopia and the Songhay Empire, and in the 15th century after the age of Discovery, experienced a change in status to that of a slave. Albeit forms of slavery existed in parts of the world as Franklin duly noted, Greene's commentary speaks to Black people's tenacious and resilient spirit, despite continued onerous and discriminatory treatment from White people.

As the level of intellectual development grew for Black people, so did their demand for equal access to comparable educational facilities. Disproportionate outcomes brought on by separation, mainly related to schools and academic resources, intensified for Black people. In 1928, Anderson Brown, along with other Charlestown residents,

filed a lawsuit against the Charlestown Independent School District (*Brown et al. v Board. of Education of Charleston Independent School District*, 1928) in response to the Charlestown School District's continuous efforts to deny Black people access to the public library. After multiple appeals, the Supreme Court eventually ruled in Brown's favor; however, despite the Supreme Court decision, Black residents were not given unrestricted access to the library and instead had to wait at the front desk until the materials they were requesting were brought to them (Bailey, 2009).

Along the same vein, governments dominated by elite White men segregated education systems to separate Black people from White people. Segregated educational facilities were unequal and on average Black schools received half the funding of White schools (Higginbotham, 2013). Nonetheless, in the events that led up to the ruling of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) that ruled segregation of public schools unconstitutional, Black people mirrored their ancestry's commitment to educational advancement. This historical ruling was the culmination of a thirty-year endeavor of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to eliminate the unequal educational opportunities confronting Black people (Green, 2004). To further illustrate the commitment of Black people in pursuit of academic excellence for Black children, Mae Mallory continued the work of Black leaders as she challenged the New York City school board's zoning policies contending that Black children were required to remain in segregated schools that were inferior to those attended by White students (Farmer, 2016). This determination and commitment to excellence harken back to the times in which Black people learned in secret and further illuminates the cumulative

beliefs of Black people in learning and self-improvement passed from slaves to those who had been freed (Anderson, 1988).

While the NAACP's momentum was building to support Black people's intellectual advancement, societal systems rooted in discriminatory practices were also. Due to progress made by Black people during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the time in history when approximately 82,000 Black educators were responsible for the education of two million Black children, was replaced with systems created by elite White men that resulted in more than 38,000 Black educators' job loss (Holmes & Hudson, 1994). In response to massive job losses, shifts in educational resources, and discrimination in education, housing, and employment, Black people established self-sustaining Black towns in an attempt to minimize contact with and reliance on unsupportive governmental agencies as a means of combating discriminatory treatment (Higginbotham, 2013). Allensworth, California, Mound Bayou, Mississippi, and Nicodemus, Kansas, are three examples of these developed Black self-sustaining towns. Higginbotham described the town in Allensworth, California with the following:

Started by Colonel Allen Allensworth in 1906, after he retired as an army chaplain, the thriving community grew to over four hundred residents and included a bakery, lumber yard, restaurant, livery stable, and blacksmith shop. (2013, p. 106).

The lack of employment and educational opportunities for Black people necessitated innovative responses to White people's continued attempts to dominate and minimize the lived experiences of Black people.

Businesses owned by White people refused to hire Black people for employment. Still, Madam C. J. Walker, the first Black female self-made millionaire, built a hair and beauty empire that employed thousands of Black women. Banks owned by White people refused to lend money to Black business owners. Nevertheless, Black churches supported the Black community by funding building and loan organizations, newspapers, and restaurants. Inventions and patents garnered by Black people such as protective headgear for firefighters, lubricators for automatic machines, and telegraphic devices used to communicate, were rejected by White people, even though these were life-enhancing mechanisms. Be that as it may, Black inventors remained relentless in their pursuit of excellence, which resulted in the National Patent Office awarding thousands of patents to Black people (Higginbotham, 2013). Black people have a legacy of using the unjust treatment from White people as motivation to both achieve and advance in ways that manifest resilience, determination, and scholarship in their lived experiences and, as a result, accelerate intellectual advancement for members of the Black community.

Although the NAACP and Black entrepreneurial spirit supported Black people's intellectual advancement, the loss of Black role models in education continued to impact Black students' achievement. According to Buck (2010), due to the decrease in Black educators serving as role models of academic success, many Black children were even more alienated from the school environment now than they were during the 19th century. Though this is not the only factor contributing to the lack of Black teachers, Black educational role models' loss contributed to a chain of negative educational experiences for Black children (Buck 2010; Madkins, 2011). According to Holmes and Hudson (1994), the attempt to desegregate American public schools created the momentum for

this shift, which resulted in Black students being bused to schools where the majority of the students were White. This created a ripple effect that resulted in Black teachers' job losses who had previously served as role models for Black students.

Additionally, during a ten-year timespan from 1975-1985, the number of Black college students who majored in education declined by 66%. Of those Black students who had chosen teaching as a major, over 21,000 were denied admission. Similarly, between 1984 -1989, another 21,515 Black educators were either demoted to lower-level positions or removed from schools completely (Holmes & Hudson, 1994). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 232,000 Black teachers accounted for 8% of the teaching force, while Black students accounted for 16.4% of the K-12 student population (1991). That being the case, although the percentage of Black students was double that of Black teachers in schools, the Black community became the insulation for Black students as they defied discriminatory treatment from White people and pursued academic excellence.

Legacy of Black Educators as Community Builders: 21st Century

According to the NCES (2020), 80% of teachers currently in public schools are White, while 7% of teachers currently in public schools are Black (2020). Thus, the majority of non-White students are taught by teachers who are of a different race. Tillman (2008) asserts that Black teachers who share racial, ethnic, and low-income backgrounds with Black and marginalized students are uniquely positioned to accelerate students' intellectual experiences in authentic and meaningful ways. Black people account for 13.4% of the overall population in the United States. Although this is almost double that of Black educators in schools, Black people's desire to carry on the legacy of

educational excellence among the Black community continues to inspire Black educators' work. According to Madkins (2011), Black people who have recently decided to become teachers expressed a desire to work with young people and give back to their Black communities. Walker (2001) identified five principles in her essays on Black teaching that capture Black educators' beliefs about their roles. The five principles Walker identified are that teachers develop a relationship with the community, commit to professional ideals, care about their students, relate the curriculum to students' needs, and connect to the community. According to Tillman (2004), these principles illuminate Black teachers' dedication and commitment to both the Black community and Black children's academic excellence.

In addition, advancing the intellect of the Black community through mentorship is another crucial factor that shapes the experiences of Black educators in the 21st century. For many Black educators, particularly Black female educators, the idea of mentoring extends beyond the classroom setting. Baylor (2014) found that Black female educators build on a tradition of sisterhood and motherhood in the Black community as they mentor one another. Her work's further findings revealed self-actualization, socio-political awareness, and mothering of the mind as three culturally relevant components that materialized during her participants' mentoring experiences. The Black social and cultural experience is unique, as Black people are the only ethnic groups "forcibly brought to America for the sole purpose of labor exploitation through racial slavery" (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 207). This unique experience has provided a platform that empowers Black people to lean on their community in ways that position them for excellence. Ladson-Billings (2000) refers to community experiences to help students

identify the strength of a culture. In some cases, Black educators share cultural backgrounds and linguistic experiences with students that further emphasize the vital role educators play as they continue to provide opportunities for students to view themselves as capable and responsible members of their communities (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Baylor (2014) summarizes this epistemological stance of Black women in the following:

Black women educators have traditionally taken their concern for Black education beyond the classroom in addressing larger societal issues as they related to academic achievement and community upliftment. Acknowledging the capacity for empathy validates knowing by putting yourself in the shoes of someone else to gain an understanding of their experiences. When individuals believe the listener is empathetic, they are more likely to share the wholeness of their experiences. (p. 38)

As school and community leaders, Black female educational leaders' lived experiences serve as valuable apparatuses that advance the Black community's cognitive landscape. The knowledge that comes from experience provides communities with a process of socialization that enables them to confront and thereby dismantle systemic oppression.

Because of their unique experience with defeating multiple forms of oppression, the knowledge Black female educational leaders share with members of the Black community creates an upward trajectory of social, intellectual, and economic mobility that create new ways of knowing and being for Black people (Collins, 2000). Black women's quest to redefine political activism and, as a result, accelerate growth in the Black community was made evident through Newcomb and Niemeyer's (2015) research as they examined the similarities among Black female principals' utility in purposefully

seeking out schools to lead that were located in urban environments. They found that many of these leaders chose this environment due to their race and class experiences. In addition, they found common descriptions of Black female leaders as emerging themes. These themes are Black female leaders as community builders, Black female leaders as change agents and activists, and Black female leaders as caring leaders (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Loder, 2005). When students believe adults in their schools genuinely care about them, their motivation to excel academically increases (Bass, 2012; Byas & Walker, 2009).

Legacy and Experiences of Black Educational Leaders: 21st Century

Educational leaders help shape the climate and culture for learning in their buildings, mainly related to the hiring process. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2017-2018, there were 90,850 principals of public schools, of which 6,340 were Black females (2016). Black females account for 12.3% of the overall female population in the United States, yet only account for seven percent of school building principals' overall number. Bartanen and Grissom (2019) found that Black principals increase the probability of hiring a Black teacher by five to seven percent and that having a Black leader decreases Black teacher mobility by two to five percent. In turn, Black educators' increased exposure to Black students has increased Black students' math achievement by three to five percent (Bartanen and Grissom 2019).

Increasing the achievement of Black students, particularly those in historically lower-achieving schools, is a challenge Black female educational leaders embrace. During the early leadership tenure of Black educational leaders, they are frequently called to lead predominantly Black schools (Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015). Lomotey states that

Black principals of schools where the majority of the student population is Black share a commitment to the education of all students, confidence in the ability of all students to do well, and compassion for and understanding of all students and the communities in which they live (1993). Similarly, Tillman (2004) analyzed the existing literature on Black principals. Tillman found four consistent themes among their perceptions of their work, which are the resistance to ideologies and individuals opposed to the education of Black students, the academic and social development of Black students as a priority, the importance of cultural perspectives of the Black principal, and the development of a leadership style based on interpersonal caring (2004). Though the choice to lead some of the most challenging urban schools in the United States may appear daunting for some, Black female educational leaders have continued to respond to the call (Loder, 2005). However, the lack of research on the quandary Black female leaders inhabit due to oppressive issues brought on by racism, sexism, and classism, prevents scholars' and policy-makers' ability to learn from their lived experiences (Allen, Jacobson, & Lomotey, 1996; Bloom & Erlandson, 2003).

Black female educational leaders pivot between the dual oppression of Black people and the oppression of women (Lyman, 1998; Myrdal, 1944). Loder (2005) further expands upon the lack of understanding regarding the duality of this oppression as she observes, "this contingent of urban school leaders remains under-researched, limiting scholars' and policymakers' knowledge of their unique leadership dilemmas and orientations that are distinguishable from their male and female counterparts " (p. 299). Black females who lead schools play integral roles in creating a culture for learning that elevates all children's lives, particularly those from marginalized groups. However, they

are typically only one of a few Black female educational leaders in both their schools and amongst their professional groups. Although challenging, Black women have achieved visibility by creating ways in which their social and academic work are exposed to members of the Black and White community as they work to elevate the lived experiences of Black and marginalized children (Collins, 1996).

In an effort to elevate the experiences of members of the Black community, Black women have focused primarily on educating Black and poor children throughout our history. However, although Black female educational leaders identify with Black students in ways that are individual and unique, their expertise is not universally respected (Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015). Lomotey (1993) describes the execution of their knowledge as both bureaucratic, and ethno-humanist in that Black principals are not only concerned with students progressing from grade to grade; they are concerned with the individual life chances of their students as well as the overall improvement of the status of Black people. Evidence of this is the cultural bond they have with their students. Lomotey argues that Black principals contend that academic success is not enough; instead, what is necessary is an education about one's culture, life, and where Black students fit into both our society and the world.

In summary, Black female educational leaders have contributed to the pursuit of Black children's academic excellence through their commitment to the Black community members both inside and outside of their schools (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Black women continue to evolve because they have focused on those things that make them stronger rather than those that make them different. Though defining Black education as a means of empowering a Black community to assert the community's diverse needs and

concerns has been regarded as threatening by members of the dominant group, doing so has created a platform upon which Black female intellectuals legitimize others as agents of knowledge (Collins, 2000).

Experiences of Black Female Educational Leaders: Intersectionality

November 4, 2008, witnessed a first in U.S. history - the United States elected a Black man as the 44th president. Although both Barack and Michelle Obama earned their place as leaders of our country based upon their educational and social accomplishments, race, and in Michelle's case gender, worked against them for the duration of their time in the White House (Reed, 2012). Race and gender have likewise continued to contribute to Black female educational leaders' reluctant acceptance by members of the dominant culture (Jean-Marie et al., 2009).

A vast amount of research discusses the exhaustive plight of Black people brought on by the oppressive practices of others (Battle, 2016; Collins, 1990; Cooper, 2014; Richardson, 1987; Segrave, 2008; Williams, 1883). However, the reporting of how Black female educational leaders meticulously use these experiences to improve and elevate members' lives in both their professional and personal communities has not been as readily documented (Brown 2005; Gooden 2005; Tillman 2005). Albeit there are merit and space for that type of social inquiry, this research project serves to create a different portrayal than Black women's historical narrative. The inaccurate portrayal of Black women's lived experiences is often based upon contextual connotations generated by elite White men (Cooper, 2014). Examples of Black females countering the false narrative generated by elite White men of their lived experiences, though not readily recorded, have always existed. According to Hoose (2009), in 1950, three out of every

five Black females worked as maids for White families, which further shifted the perception of Black women as resilient and robust to that of unintelligent and subservient.

In an effort to shift the narrative and continue the work of educationally evolved Black female pioneers such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Madame C.J. Walker, and Mary McLeod Bethune, all of whom achieved notoriety and honor despite societal disparities in Black female representation, Claudette Colvin carried on this rich legacy when she likewise used her intellect differently; a way that revolutionized the United States of America. On March 2, 1955, Claudette refused to give up her seat to a White person during an afternoon bus ride home, a decision mirrored by Rosa Parks nine months later that, as a consequence, changed the course of American history (Hoose, 2009). Both Claudette Colvin and Rosa Parks were Black women seen as intellectually inferior by the White people demanding their seats on the bus, in both the literal and figurative sense of the term. However, their intellect is, in fact, the catalyst that mobilized a national movement within and among the Black community. Though all of these women encountered oppression brought on by intersectionality, the historical legacy of excellence has continued to manifest itself in Black female leaders' lived experiences today. Similar to these Black women whose intellect changed the course of history, Kamala Harris' election as the first Black female vice president of the United States is further evidence of the call for the paradigm to continue shifting.

As Black female educational leaders continue shifting the narrative by interrupting underdeveloped portrayals of their resilience and intellect, they must remain acutely aware of how intersectionality influences their lived experiences. According to Collins, the work embedded in the tenets of this critical social theory "aims to empower

Black women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions” (2000, p. 22). Crenshaw (1989) describes intersectionality as the unique type of discrimination that only confronts Black women, unlike White women and Black men. The double-discrimination Black women encounter based upon both their race and sex is appropriately described in Crenshaw’s analogy:

Black women can experience discrimination in any number of ways. Consider an analogy to traffic through an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection may flow in one direction and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions, and sometimes from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination, or both. (p. 149)

Oluo (2018) discusses the unique challenge Black women face due to a lack of understanding from other people of how Black females incorporate intersectionality into every component of their lived experiences. She further expands Crenshaw’s discourse by defining intersectionality as, “the belief that social justice movements must consider all the intersections of identity, privilege, and oppression that Black women face in order to be just and effective” (2018, p. 74).

Although the intersection of race and gender accelerates societal reluctance regarding the acceptance of Black female intellectuals, Black female educational leaders remain devoted to dismantling oppressive ideology emboldened by illegitimate intersectionality ramifications. Bringing about an institutional transformation that

changes “discriminatory policies and procedures of schools, the media, and other social institutions” is a factor that distinguishes Black female educational leaders from others (Collins, 2000). Reed (2012) examined the intersection of race and gender in a qualitative study and its influence on Black female principals. Using Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework, she found that Black women have redefined political activism due to racial and gender oppression as they consistently challenged structures “intended to destroy a race of people in less overt ways” (Reed, 2012, p. 43). Reed further asserts that because of challenges brought on by race and gender, characteristics that Black female leaders embody are historically undervalued (2012).

Challenges brought on by intersectionality influence Black females’ leadership styles in distinct ways. Black female educational leaders incorporate their emotion and compassion into their work in ways that enable them to cultivate meaningful relationships while navigating arduous circumstances needed to bring about change (Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Reed, 2012). According to Tillman (2004), the study of Black female educational leaders is frequently cloaked in categorical descriptors such as *women* and *minorities*, which does not account for the unique encounters Black female educational leaders have with challenges brought on by their race, gender, and class. To this end, Black female educational leaders successfully navigate the uncharted terrains grounded in racial and gendered inequities while advancing the intellectual landscape for Black and marginalized students in unique and creative ways (Brown, 2005; Dillard, 1995; Loder, 2005; Reed, 2012; Tillman, 2004).

Experiences of Black Female Educational Leaders: Othermothers

Genuinely caring for people, mothering, and “other-mothering” have served as components of the Black community’ since the passing of the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, giving Southerners the right to capture slaves who had escaped in the North (Vandenberg-Daves, 2014). During this time, it was common to forbid Black women to care for their biological children so as a survival mechanism used during slavery, Vandenberg-Daves explains:

African American women were breadwinners both during slavery and, for the vast majority, after slavery. Like other nineteenth-century women who combined “productive” and “reproductive” labor out of necessity, they created traditions of shared care that contradicted the privatized maternal ideals of the middle class.

An often-hidden tradition among women with few resources, especially women of color, was what Patricia Hill Collins has called othermothering the practice of caring for children who were not biologically one’s own” (2014, p. 38).

Additionally, Mack (2016) defines Othermothers as ‘fictive-kin’ who assist biological mothers in the responsibilities of short or long-term care for other members of the Black community. Like Mack, Mawhinney (2012) described the origin of the ‘fictive-kin’ relationship between Black women and Black children as that which occurred when children and biological parents were separated at auction, which resulted in Black women adopting “mothering responsibilities of orphaned children” (p. 215). In Black feminist research, a woman who assumes the care of other people’s children, formally or informally, is considered to be an Othermother (Collins,1990; Mack, 2016; Mawhinney, 2012).

Mack further asserts that the importance of Othermothers' role in the Black community is pivotal, as they support Black families' ability to navigate societal challenges brought on by the intersection of race, gender, and class (2016). Contrary to the narrative generated by the dominant culture that the Black family structure is no longer intact, Collins (1999) asserts that though the Black family's structural dynamic differs from that of White families, it nonetheless is strengthened by strong kinship networks. According to Collins (1999), Black families, both biological and fictive-kin, exhibit five common strengths. These strengths are: (a) a strong kinship bond that offers support during difficult times; (b) a strong work orientation; (c) the ability to exercise flexibility in roles to meet the multiplicity of challenges they encounter; (d) a great achievement orientation; and (e) a strong faith and religious orientation. Additionally, Black female educational leaders' experiences as Othermothers often stem from their own childhood experiences of nurturing their siblings or fictive kin within kinship networks and, as a result, become integral components of their daily personal and professional practices (Collins, 2000).

Baylor (2014) describes Black female educational leaders as "community othermothers" who navigate the nexus of their work around conceptions of transformative pedagogical practices rooted in social activism and members' intellectual advancement in both their personal and professional communities. As Baylor depicts the parallel imagery of the role that Black female educational leaders have to that of biological mothers of Black children, she asserts:

Traditional motherhood views in the Black community assume the responsibility for all the children of the community. These responsibilities involve caring for the

emotional and/or physical well-being of the child, including assisting the biological mother who may not have the resources or mental well-being to care for her child alone. (2014, p. 36)

Black female educational leaders' understanding of and commitment to reaching back and maintaining a meaningful connection between the school and the community influences their commitment to improving Black children's overall well-being. In Lomotey's discussion of Black and White principals' distinctions, he states that Black principals are committed to including the Black community in ways that manifest the belief that all Black students can learn (1989). Based upon a qualitative study that assessed community perceptions of principals, Jones (2002) observed that, "leaders of color look to the community to assist in their efforts to change the academic and social climate of the school" (p. 9).

Because of the role of the Othermother, Black female educational leaders hold a distinct position, both inside and outside of their school communities, to create transformational systems that eliminate barriers created by racial disparities that affect the academic, mental health, and well-being of Black children. Thus, they are equipped to elevate Black children's lived experiences who, for numerous reasons, are not raised by their biological mothers. Mack (2016) asserts that Othermothers assume the role of advocate for Black children labeled at risk in schools because of the significant disparity between their circumstances and needs. She further attributes the importance of Othermothers as advocates for Black children's schooling needs to challenges that face the Black community such as poverty, incarceration, violence, lack of educational attainment, and health disparities. When Black biological mothers are not able to raise

their children for reasons attributed to discriminatory treatment, Black female educational leaders' roles as Othermothers become even more pivotal; mainly while Black students are in school under her charge and care. Through the systemic design of intellectual practices in schools that purposely disrupt cyclical structures of oppression, Black female educational leaders are enabled to influence new ways of thinking and knowing among members of the school and Black community and, as a result, elevate the lives of all with whom they come into contact.

Systemic oppression impedes every facet of Black peoples' lives regarding the intersectional impact of social, intellectual, and health disparities. Black female educational leaders have an indelible opportunity to address health disparities while elevating the social and intellectual experiences of Black people. Health disparities between Black and White people add weight to social inequality, which adds weight to every facet of the lived experience of Black people. Through a case study design, Villarosa (2018) exposed disparities between Black and White women regarding Black women's mental health when she examined the parallel between Black women's lived experiences and the effect of societal and systemic racism on their mental health. Akin to the Antebellum period in American history, when Black children were separated from their parents during slavery auctions, Black children's fate in the 21st-century risks being orphaned by societal and systemic racism. During her interviews with doctors, Villarosa found that Black mothers lose their biological children at a rate of almost three times that of White mothers, a burden that becomes a mental health crisis for women in the Black community (2018). This reality involves Black female educational leaders as they serve as a bridge between academic excellence and eradicating societal inequality for the Black

community. The presence and commitment of Black female educational leaders both inside and outside of school communities to disrupt the cycle of mental, health, and intellectual disparities Black people encounter will lead to life-long and germane solutions for everyone, particularly Black children. Collins and David contend, “an overview of racial disparities will help put the current research agenda into perspective. Disturbances rooted in our social and governmental institutions are preventable, however, for Black women, something about growing up in America seems to be bad” (2007, p. 1194).

The chronicled and disparaging narrative of Black women illuminates David and Collins’ assertion. Conversely, this research project aims to dismantle that narrative by replacing it with one that exhibits how Black female educational leaders use this false narrative as motivation to infuse resilience and strength into their lived experiences. Hence, this further speaks to the importance of the Othermother’s role, which Black female educational leaders assume for Black and marginalized children. In this pivotal role of school and community leaders, Black females design institutional systems that yield equitable experiences for all children both inside and outside of their school communities, thus contributing to the elimination of health, intellectual, and social disparities. Our country is in the midst of crisis, a health crisis brought on by COVID- 19, a social crisis brought on by extreme racial disparities, and an economic crisis brought on by massive job losses. Because Black female educational leaders confront layers of these health, social, and financial crises in their lived experiences, they are better equipped than their White counterparts to use their personal and professional narratives as tools for

knowledge claims and validation that move all people, particularly those historically marginalized, through this space in history.

Experiences of Black Female Educational Leaders: Black Feminist Caring

Inhabiting the role of Othermother is evidenced in Black female educational leaders' incorporation of institutional systems that reflect the way care is shown by Black women in the Black community, also known as Black Feminist Caring (Bass, 2012). In addition, accepting the social responsibility to advance Black children's intellectual experiences further separates Black female educational leaders from their White counterparts. Bass conducted a qualitative study where she examined the operationalization of Black feminist caring (BFC) as used by Black female principals in real-world urban school settings (2012). Bass defined Black feminist caring as the type of care displayed toward disadvantaged youth who, in many cases, are the oppressed groups for whom Black female principals champion. Bass (2012) states that, "In many ways, this genuine form of caring is provided by adults and educators who themselves have suffered from acts of discrimination and oppression and are sensitive to social injustice because of their own personal experiences" (p. 74). Black female educational leaders ground their work in practices that show they care about the students in their schools in authentic and engaging ways. As a result, they have remained diligent in advancing the intellectual freedom of Black children both inside and outside of their school communities despite the discriminatory barriers created by a White-dominated society (Loder, 2005). In Bass' study, when asked how she defines the way she shows her students she cares for them, one of the Black female principals responded:

I actually see myself as the Othermother, and I realize, in some of the households, they don't have mothers. And I take on that role, but I believe that my kids put me in that role as well, and so they're looking for the guidance and the structure that a mother would give if she was in the home. So I do take on that role, and I gladly take it on. (Bass, 2012, p. 80)

Black feminist caring further epitomizes delineating factors that separate Black female educational leaders from their White counterparts. Thus, Black female educational leaders honor and embrace how Black people's intellectual advancement serves as a powerful tool of inspiration, empowerment, self-definition, and fundamental belief among members of the Black community (Collins, 2000).

Bass found that Black feminist caring (BFC) is a powerful and influential force toward positive change and is likewise a critical component in educational leadership (2012). Black females who choose careers in educational leadership do so based upon their lived experiences that, in many cases, emerged from personal arenas where oppressive ideology caused them to pursue excellence relentlessly, thus enabling them to care for others in authentic and meaningful ways (Collins, 2009). Collins states that these personal arenas manifest through the onerous assignment by the dominant culture of outsider-within status. She further states that this duplicitous status is evidenced by the covert way professional, private, and interactive systems of race, gender, power, and social class institutions exclude and limit the mobility of Black female leaders (1986). Although Black females who are educational leaders have achieved a space "within" the Academy, because their lived experiences do not universally account as viable sources of knowledge construction, they are still seen as outsiders. However, this assignment

connects Black female educational leaders to historically marginalized people's lived experiences and, in consequence, generates a deeper level of caring and commitment to Black students and families.

As a result of the assignment by elite White men of the outsider-within status, Black women are in a unique position to see multiple oppressions that lead them to seek and implement strategies of institutional transformation into their leadership styles (Byas & Walker; 2009; Collins, 1990). Black women employ their experiences as marginalized members of society as they champion for marginalized children in their school community, which moves them beyond school leaders to social, political, and community activists. Collins (1990) asserts that, "being one of the few groups negatively affected by multiple forms of oppression, Black women have developed an enduring interest in not just resisting racist and sexist laws and customs, but in changing a broad segment of the rules shaping American society" (p. 217). As Black female educational leaders change the rules generated by the dominant group and infuse multi-layered forms of care into school practice and policy, Black students' lived experiences will have an opportunity to eclipse systemic oppression.

Experiences of Black Female Educational Leaders: Change Agents

In addition to occupying the roles of Othermother, social, political, and community activists, owning the role of a change agent for historically marginalized groups is another distinction that separates Black female leaders from others. Newcomb and Niemeyer define change agents as educational leaders who make decisions based upon the community, political, and social impact the decision will have on the lived experiences of members of the Black community (2015). Dillard (1995) further expands

this as she describes the work of Black female educational leaders as a contextual activity grounded in “transformative political work” (p. 560). Black female educational leaders incorporate policies and practices in their daily work that change the system in ways that meet people’s social, emotional, and intellectual needs both inside and beyond their school buildings (Dillard, 1995).

Brooks (2009) further sustained Dillard’s position in her qualitative study when she examined how a Black female principal’s leadership style transformed an impoverished Black community in a crime-ridden and drug-infested part of Detroit, Michigan. Based on the principal’s lived experience as a single mother, she was better able to identify many of her students’ and families’ challenges. According to Brooks, as principal, she changed how her staff communicated with parents and created a partnership between local businesses, politicians, and law enforcement to bridge the gap between the school and the community (2009). Similarly, Newcomb and Niemeyer extended the discourse created by Brooks’ study. According to Newcomb and Niemeyer, the principal reduced the amount of violence and rate of unemployment in the community by designing school policies that directly partnered with parents and community members, such as “hiring parents as school aides and encouraging staff to talk with parents and counsel them on developing relationships outside of their community” (2015, p. 789). Newcomb and Niemeyer observed the following about the principal:

She embraced parent advocacy by coaching parents on how to advocate effectively on behalf of their children and the school and model that behavior.

Parents came to accept that their voices were respected, expected, and needed to ensure that their children received a quality education. These actions, which

prompted more positive attitudes about the school, increased enrollments, and the school's designation as a neighborhood school resulted in increased interest by middle-class parents to return to the neighborhood. A partnership with the bank to offer favorable loan rates and conditions for lower-income first-time homebuyers and small businesspeople accelerated the re-gentrification. The result of expanding partnerships and community engagement included a reduction in the percent of students that qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, an increase in the average family incomes, a growing business community, and an increase in residential property values. (Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015, p. 789)

This Black female principal's actions epitomized how Black female educational leaders transform organizations in ways that advance every facet of the community both inside and outside of their schools.

Furthering this discourse, Fuentes (2013) conducted an ethnographic study where she examined an inverted, bottom-up, democratic approach to urban school transformation where Black and Latino communities were the driving force behind educational change. Fuentes discovered that Black and Latina women convert both racial and social identities into a political strategy to help them care for and serve as champions for the communities' children (Fuentes, 2013). Creating intellectual space and visibility for those historically seen as invisible inspires Black female educational leaders' work as they embrace and strive to elevate the lived experiences for members of the Black community. Collins further expands this description of Black female educational leaders as she describes "their determination to use their education in a socially responsible way" as a means to position them to be political, social, and community activists (Collins,

2000, p. 189). Black female educational leaders use their lived experiences to champion for members of the Black community in ways that likewise advocate for and advance academic excellence. Haddix et al. (2016) state:

In our experiences as former Black girls and as Black women educators and scholars, we have found that Black girls remain unseen and their literacies unacknowledged...we honor Black girls' literacies by recognizing that we have rich, historical literacy practices that enabled us to strive and thrive throughout history. (p. 385)

Black female educational leaders engage in uplifting interactions with students and members of the Black community in ways that change the social landscape of their realities that stem from systemic oppression to lived experiences that reach and surpass academic excellence. As a result, Black female educational leaders are uniquely positioned to be agents of change in the Black community and thereby illuminate historically silenced voices.

Experiences of Black Female Educational Leaders: Identity Shifting

The Academy, which is primarily comprised of elite White men, is one of the universal conduits of empirical research that informs credible sources of knowledge. Changing the rules that dominate the knowledge validation process is a charge Black female educational leaders are tasked with routinely by the Black community. They have an indelible opportunity to change the children's academic, social, and behavioral landscape in their schools. As Black female educational leaders seek to change this narrative, they are called to shift between multiple identities while at work, identities that require them to conform components of their personal and professional selves to that of

the dominant culture. These identities include but are not limited to that of a Black female in a profession dominated by White people, a female leader in a profession dominated by White men, a caretaker for their biological children and the children of others, and a change agent for historically marginalized groups both inside and outside the school community.

Another experience Black female educational leaders have with identity shifting occurs when they are called to make distinctions between the authentication of their lived experiences and the contradictory perceptions held by staff members with whom they have both a different racial and, in some cases, gender identity. Jean-Marie et al. (2009) grounded their qualitative study in critical race theory and Afrocentric epistemology as they examined the way Black female educational leaders in higher education handled the intersection of race, gender, and leadership in the workplace. During the interview process, one of the participants responded to the opening question “tell me your life story by reflecting on your life concerning your professional experiences” with the following:

As a Black woman trying to lead in an environment that is historically dominated by men, you learn quickly that negotiating with them is the best approach. And sometimes you don’t get the same recognition that a man does. It makes you mad.

But you figure out a way to press on...Sexism is real. Racism is real. (p. 573).

Despite engaging in an ongoing relationship with multiple forms of discrimination brought on by intersectionality, Black female educational leaders continue to pursue excellence for themselves, their students, and their communities.

For Black female educational leaders, embracing identity shifts as a means of answering the call to lead an urban school in the 21st century is an integral part of their

everyday lives. Jones and Shorter-Gooden's (2003) research revealed six basic shifting strategies Black females frequently use as they rise above the oppressive bigotry challenges. These shifting strategies are: (a) battling the myths; (b) scanning, surveying, and scrutinizing the environment; (c) walling off the impact of discrimination; (d) seeking spiritual and emotional support through churches, religious communities, friends, and family members; (e) retreating to the Black community and abiding by the home codes; and (f) fighting back. Toggling between professional and personal experiences of the dominant culture's oppressive ideology is a reality Black female educational leaders routinely encounter and prevail. As Black female educational leaders pursue tenureship as credible agents of knowledge whose lived experiences shape epistemology, they must constantly shift between who they are and who others want them to be.

Robertson (2013) extended the discourse around how Black female educational leaders confront the intersectionality of racism and sexism as they shift identities to incorporate authentic forms of care into their leadership style. Robertson's qualitative study grounded in critical race theory and Black feminist thought sought to examine how Black female educational leaders construct their leadership identities while honoring their authentic voices. Robertson asserts that for Black female educational leaders to provide students and staff with authentic forms of care, yet remain true to themselves as Black women, they must call upon tasks that Robertson calls shifting strategies; tasks she equates with playing a game (2013). Robertson defines shifting strategies as the various approaches Black female educational leaders must utilize to be accepted in multiple environments (2013).

According to Robertson, shifting strategies Black female educational leaders employ to enable them better to incorporate authentic caring into their leadership styles are shifting their appearance to fit in, shifting their behavior to disprove stereotypes, shifting their perception by remaining mindful of surroundings at all times, shifting the pain to suppress negative feelings associated with bias, and shifting their language to match the setting. Black female educational leaders hold the responsibility for elevating adults, students, and communities' lived experiences while traversing through uncertain terrain. Robertson found that although all of her Black female participants were required to make shifts, they fully acknowledged and embraced the shifts as catalysts that motivated them to become better equipped to grow all the organization members towards optimum levels of success (Robertson, 2013).

Like the participants in Robertson's study, Oluo further illustrates the challenges Black female educational leaders encounter because of the cultural differences between themselves and a predominantly White staff. The requirement for Black female educational leaders to engage in identity shifts regarding the way they dress, speak, and wear their hair is observed in Oluo's illustration:

I love taking selfies of my hair and talking about my hair, and if you ask, I will probably let you touch it because it's very soft. But I wasn't prepared to be talking about my hair on the first day of my new job. In a team of over twenty, I was the only black person at the table. Here was my director singling me out, in front of my coworkers to shame black women for making choices. My hair was existing outside of his beauty norms...he thought that my hair, growing on my head, my body, was within his jurisdiction...still, my hair would be a tool of oppression to

belittle black women...we still live in a country where our hair can cost us jobs, how professional we are seen, even how intelligent we seem. Our hair is used to help determine our place in a white supremacist society. (2018, p. 157)

Learning to remain faithful to oneself while honoring others' cultural space is a skill-set inherent in Black female educational leaders' work. Loder (2005) notes that Black female educational leaders infuse these shifting strategies into their practice as they respond to the call to lead urban schools. In doing so, they create social and intellectual space for members of the Black community to elevate their lived experiences in rich and meaningful ways.

Black female educational leaders have a distinct social-service oriented mindset and a desire to care for and remain committed to Black and marginalized individuals (Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Loder, 2005; Lomotey, 1989; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Tillman, 2008). Because of this distinction, Black female educational leaders' lived experiences are uniquely positioned to inform social science research of Black female epistemological systems that manifest connectedness, ethics of caring, and personal accountability in ways that move communities forward (Collins, 2000).

Implications for Policy Change and Action

The Black female participants in Bass' qualitative study illuminated the unique characteristics Black female principals exemplified in their work as they shifted identities and operationalized ethics of care towards students and staff for whom they were responsible. As a result, she suggested six implications for policy and further research when hiring educational leaders. These are to: (a) commit to employing caring teachers, faculty, and staff; (b) commit to continuous, purposeful professional development; (c)

facilitate relationship development; (d) ensure communication is parent-friendly; (e) involve parents and students in leadership and decision making; and (f) implement culturally relevant discipline policies and procedures (Bass, 2012). As Jones and Shorter-Gooden summarized the powerful lessons from exploring the lived experiences of Black women, they state:

Black women have so much to offer our country, so many gifts to share with all of us. And yet, as a society and as a nation, we have never quite stopped to appreciate the truth of their experience, the verity of what it feels like to be Black and female. Black women in American have learned to find humor in heartache, to see beauty in the midst of desperation and horror. They have risen above centuries of oppression so that today, after years of dealing with society's racist and sexist misconceptions, with its brutal hostilities and unthinkable mistreatment, not only are they supporting families, they're leading corporations, major media organizations, the military, and our state and federal governments. (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 2)

We are in the midst of one of the most politicized moments in the history of the United States. In this context, a global pandemic and the Black Lives Matter Movement magnify pre-existing racial, health, and intellectual disparities.

This literature review suggests that Black female educational leaders are unique agents of change who, based on their lived experiences, are equipped to turn oppression into opportunity, calamity into community, and hate into healing. Students, parents, and the community, all of whom make up a world thirsty for healing, hope, and happiness, are looking to political and community leaders, including Black female educational

leaders, to bring us together. Through the illumination of the lived experiences of Black female educational leaders, this research project will help create the type of world Collins describes, stating:

When linked to group action, our individual struggles gain new meaning. Because our actions as individuals change the world from one in which we merely exist to one over which we have some control, they enable us to see everyday life as being in process and therefore amenable to change. Perhaps that is why so many Black women have managed to persist and make a way out of no way. (2000, p. 121)

Through their lived experiences, Black female educational leaders are best equipped to build upon the historical legacy of excellence manifested in the lived experiences of Black people beginning in the 19th century in ways that honor and celebrate Black people's current narratives in the 21st century.

In summary, embracing the core tenet of Black feminist thought, which is to value the delicate balance between how Black females nurture the intersectionality of race, gender, and intellect, as they elevate the lived experiences of members both inside and outside of their school communities, is central to effective school leadership. In addition, remaining aware of the power of stereotypes and how they can distort the perceptions that people have regarding motivation, performance, or competence of stigmatized groups or institutions is likewise essential (Hu et al., 2008). Black female leaders understand that they must approach their work with students and the community in ways that honor the relationship between the pursuit of academic progress and economic, spiritual, and emotional survival (Dingus, 2008). As Black female educational leaders, caring about 21st-century students and families' well-being is beneficial to their overall development

and progress. Furthermore, authentically caring for and remaining committed to improving both their academic and social experience in ways that will afford them genuine and meaningful opportunities to thrive is critical to the Black community's continued advancement. Shiller (2008) describes this type of care as that which happens when school staff partner with members of the Black community in ways that show they care about their students' academic achievement, their students' personalities, and their students' families.

This literature review began with discussing something our country had never experienced before 2008, which was the election of a Black man as the 44th President of the United States of America. As I bring the discussion that focuses on the current literature regarding the unique lived experiences of Black female educational leaders' to a close, I must include a reflection on the relationship between their unique lived experiences and the current state of our world, another unexplored historical space. The value our country places on the lives of Black people and the Black community is revolutionizing our current reality. The trauma many students, families, and communities are involuntarily being compelled to endure due to the Coronavirus pandemic is a reality all school leaders must face as they move toward creating new ways of knowing, new ways of being, and new ways of leading. Society will move through this time in history and develop in ways that make the world better. However, to do so, they must lean into the unique skill-set, knowledge, expertise, and experience of Black female educational leaders, as they craft literature and research that informs future social policy and educational practice in ways that make the world a better place for everyone.

Summary of Literature Review Findings

This chapter begins by exploring how the theoretical framework of Black feminist thought has been used to highlight Black female educational leaders' experiences. As evidenced above, Black epistemology grounds the work of scholarly research around Black female educational leaders. The literature highlights the way Black women view knowledge as that which is gained from experience, emphasizes communal dialogue and connectedness as a way of knowing, expresses the belief that personal emotions and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process, and asserts that claiming expertise on an issue requires lived experiences within that stance. Black female educational leaders' lived experiences manifest an immense value on individual expressiveness, the appropriateness of emotions, and the capacity for empathy as they work with students and members of the Black community (Collins, 2000).

The next portion of this chapter involves a review of the literature that illuminates the legacy of Black people in the United States. Resilience and the pursuit of intellectual scholarship linked to the unique lived experiences of Black people have continued to manifest societal and intellectual advancement for members of the Black community. Black people's ancestral legacy of intellect that has been historically gifted to Black people has served as the backdrop to the lived experiences to which Black people aspire. However, although this literature review reveals trends of various forms of qualitative methods of research such as ethnographic, phenomenological, and case study analysis regarding the vital role that Black female educational leaders have both inside and outside of their school communities, the disparity in representation among scholars in the academy is evident. Although qualitative research's context-bound nature presents disadvantages for some, it analyzes non-numerical data and provides space for the

specificity of experiences in ways that honor voices historically silenced. Gaps in the literature reveal a continued lack of understanding and appreciation of how Black women produce social thought designed to oppose oppression (Collins, 2000). Because Black female leaders so often lead urban schools where most of the students are members of a marginalized group, the system of constructing knowledge dominated by elite White men needs to be dismantled. Black female educational leaders have a unique intellectual dexterity that is an innate component of the daily personal and professional negotiations they are called upon to embrace. For the world of academia to fully support a global community of credible learners committed to making this world a better place for everyone, everyone's voice must have a credible place.

The last portion of this chapter examines the existing research that reviews Black female educational leaders' experiences in the United States. In the scholarly literature, trends in conceptual frameworks such as Black feminist thought illuminate Black female educational leaders' commonalities. The trends are: (a) their work in schools is a calling that requires personal, professional, and spiritual commitment; (b) their commitment to understanding the human condition of students, families, community members, and teachers drives their work; and (c) their roles as social activists and change agents pivot the construction of their leadership identity in ways that disrupt the isms (racism, sexism, classism, etc.). Black female educational leaders are positioned uniquely to challenge oppressive ideology due to the triple jeopardy many of them confront daily based on race, gender, and ways of knowledge construction. In an effort to fully comprehend the embodiment of the experiences of Black people in the United States, individuals in the academy must lean into the epistemological perspective of people whose primary

experience is rooted in racism, discrimination, and marginalization. This experience equips Black female educational leaders to understand and elevate other marginalized groups' lived experiences in creative and unique ways.

This literature review reveals what is known about Black female educational leaders. Specifically, Black female educational leaders have a unique ability to use oppression as a source for institutional transformation. Their commitment to using intellectual discourse is a source for social change within the Black community, and their ability to use their lived experiences is a source for knowledge validation. However, this review of existing literature reveals an emphasis primarily on either "Black women's experiences of racial bias and discrimination" or "gender stereotypes and prejudice" (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p.4); nonetheless, the disparity in the literature regarding the way Black women invert the ramifications brought on by the concurrence of racism and sexism in ways that elevate the lived experiences of other Black people still remains.

The literature does not readily address the lessons that a study of Black female educational leaders' scholarship, resilience, and lived experiences in one of the largest urban school districts in the United States' southeastern region can reveal. Employing Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework for this research project will provide an appropriate platform to hear the voices of Black females historically silenced by dominant ideology and, as a result, answer a calling that is currently sweeping the landscape of our country. The societal injustice that is currently plaguing the Black community is more salient. For this reason, a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of those deeply rooted and connected to the fight on both the intellectual and social side of justice, Black female educational leaders, is necessary. Hence, this study

illuminates the lived experiences of Black female educational leaders and adds to the current body of social research by focusing on the following research questions:

1. How did the realities and lived experiences of these Black female leaders shape the narratives that led to their career path?
2. How do these Black female leaders use their lived experiences to inform their interaction with students and adults with whom they work?
3. How do these Black female leaders understand the relationship between their roles as leaders within the educational system and the broader community?

The following chapter explains the portraiture methodology employed in this study designed to explore the lessons learned from the scholarship, resilience, and lived experiences of Black female educational leaders.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides a detailed description of this study's methodology. It begins with an overview of the portraiture methodology. It then justifies selecting the qualitative portraiture methodology used for this study, the theoretical framework in which this study is grounded, and the research design utilized to conduct this study. This chapter then discusses the proposed procedures for data collection and data analysis the portraitist will use for this study. Next, this chapter discusses the necessary provisions to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in the study. This chapter concludes with a summary of how the portraitist will communicate the findings related to future research, policy, and practice, the societal implications of the study, and the ethical treatment of participants as the data are collected from them.

Portraiture: An Overview

“Both art and science are bent on the understanding of the forces that shape existence, and both call for a dedication to what is. Neither of them can tolerate capricious subjectivity because both are subject to their criteria of truth. Both require precision, order, and discipline because no comprehensible statement can be made without these.”

~ Rudolf Arnheim (1954)

A photographer captures the beauty, importance, and manifestation of life and human experience in photographs. An artist creates with textiles, paint, light, and color.

A novelist pulls the reader into a world where the feel, taste, and smell of words' melodic cadence are palpable. Much like a photographer, an artist, and novelist, a research portraitist blends the beauty of lived experience and rigor of empirical research into a complex, fascinating, and poetic portrait that captures the subject's life story, the aesthetic whole (Alba, 2012; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983), who pioneered the portraiture methodology, social scientists tend to focus their research on wrong things instead of those things that are good. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis describe portraiture, stating:

Portraiture is a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experiences of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions, their authority, knowledge, and wisdom. The drawing of the portrait is placed in social and cultural context and shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one negotiating the discourse and shaping the evolving image. The relationship between the two is rich with meaning and resonance and becomes the arena for navigating the empirical, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of an authentic and compelling narrative. (1997, p. xv)

Arnheim (1954) characterizes art and science as two forces that shape existence, truth, and order when used in a symbiotic way. Portraiture is distinct from other forms of social science inquiry in the way its inclusive framework explicitly fuses rigorous empiricism with captivating aestheticism (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016). Portraiture is a

social science inquiry positioned uniquely to document the culture of “schools, the life stories of individuals, and the relationships among families, communities, and schools” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xvi).

For Lawrence-Lightfoot, portraiture allowed her to bring two worlds together in a way that allowed her to “see clearly the art in the development of science and the science in the making of art” (1997, p. 3). Because of Black female educational leaders’ unique insight regarding Black students’ intellectual and social experiences, their portraits can provide dimension to other community members’ lived experiences. Qualitative approaches, such as ethnographic inquiry, narrative inquiry, phenomenological inquiry, and portraiture, have been widely used to illuminate the voices of those who represent marginalized groups (Merriam, 2009). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) asserts that both ethnographic research and portraiture share ideological responsibility to characterize marginalized people’s lived experiences in an uplifting and positive way. Thomas (1993) describes critical ethnography as a type of research where the researcher advocates for marginalized groups’ emancipation in society.

Similarly, Creswell and Creswell (2018) discuss the various components of ethnographic research and its place in theoretical orientations such as symbolic interactionism, feminism, ethnomethodology, and critical theory. He further states that the integral approach to conducting qualitative research includes the researcher advocating for marginalized groups. The systems of power, prestige, privilege, and authority have further disparaged groups from different classes, races, and genders. Because of the interlocking nature of oppression that Black female educational leaders encounter, this portraiture research study will reveal their reality of turning

marginalization into creativity, thus uniquely positioning them to champion for marginalized populations in relevant and authentic ways.

Like Thomas and Creswell, Lawrence-Lightfoot's focus on illuminating the voice of those historically marginalized is a vital tenet of the portraiture methodology (2016). In portraiture, a work of art produced by an artist is parallel to the narrative (*portrait*) produced by the researcher (*portraitist*). Consequently, the participant's portrait becomes the instrument of discovery that is uniquely negotiated between the researcher, the perceiver (*readers*), and actors (*participants*) in ways that help them visualize "new ways of seeing and thinking" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 36). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis liken this aesthetic experience to a "conversation, primary to the human condition, that occurs between two active meaning-makers, the producer and the perceiver of a work of art" (1997, p. 29). Artists use color, light, and texture and transform images on a blank canvas in ways that capture a moment, a thought, or an experience. Akin to an artist, Lawrence-Lightfoot describes the genesis of her portraiture methodology in the following:

I was searching for a form of inquiry that might capture the complexity and aesthetic of human experience. In trying to create what I call life drawings and trace the connections between individual personality and organizational culture, I felt the echoes of being on the other side of the artist's palette. I wanted to develop a document, a text that came as close as possible to painting with words. I wanted to create a narrative that bridged the realms of science and art, merging the systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature. (1997, p. 4)

Unlike traditional social scientists who focus their research on pathology and disease, portraitists concentrate their research on health and resilience in ways that situate the human experience within an institution contextually surrounded by the broader environment that shapes it (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Portraiture Methodological Design

Unlike positivist research, which focuses on scientific evidence to inform societal norms, portraiture relies on the organic social, historical, and cultural context of human experience to create authentic and believable portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). In the portraiture methodology, human experience frames and shapes the settings that serve as the source of origin for the experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Like phenomenologists and ethnographers, the portraitist creates textual portraits of individuals, always keeping the broader context of the individual's life in mind. In shaping the actor's portrait, portraiture employs context in the following ways: (a) internal context, which consists of the physical characteristics of the place and experiences that evoke the visual, auditory, and tactile senses of the actors and portraitist; (b) personal context which requires the portraitist to become a part of the story by inviting the reader to join her on the journey of creating her actors' portraits; (c) historical context which consists of the way institutional culture and history influence the actor's journey; (d) aesthetic features, such as symbols and metaphors, which involve joining the physical context with the philosophical currents of the institution; and (e) shaping context which requires the portraitist to remain aware that her actors are not only shaped by the context, but they also give the context shape (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Unlike other researcher methodologies that require the researcher to remain on the outskirts of her participant's narrative, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis assert, "the importance of the portraitist sketching herself into the context and doing so at an early point in the portrait. This assertion of the researcher's perspective invites the reader to join actively in the journey of discovery of understanding" (1997, p. 67). Though becoming an integral part of the actor's portrait uniquely distinguishes this social science inquiry from other qualitative approaches, it also has the propensity to obstruct the final portrait's view. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, "measuring the ingredient of self throughout all phases of portraiture is a challenging procedure. It needs always to be guided by the contextual objective of informing vision" (1997, p. 69). When done with the appropriate balance of self and actor, the portraitist's voice blends with the actor's portrait's cadence. However, when speaking to a challenging component of this methodology, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis affirm:

The portraitist inevitably renders a self-portrait that reveals her soul but she also produces a selfless, systematic examination of the actors' images, experiences, and perspectives. This balance, between documenting the authentic portrait of others and drawing one's self into the lines of the piece, between self-possession and disciplined other regard, and between the intuitive and the counterintuitive, is the difficult, complex, nuanced work of the portraitist. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 86)

Because the portraitist is the research instrument that shapes the lens of description, narrative, and analysis, it is critically important that the portraitist judiciously lace her voice throughout the portrait.

The use of voice in the portraiture methodology encompasses epistemology, ideology, and method, in ways that reflect the portraitist's attentiveness to "authorship, interpretation, relationship, aesthetics and narrative" (Lawrence Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 87). Because the portraitist's voice is imprinted on two informative aspects of the portraiture process, which are the collection of data and the analysis of the data, disposition, and articulation of voice drives the work. *Finding* the actors' stories, also known as the disposition of the voice, and *telling* the actors' stories, also known as the articulation of the voice, remains the portraitist's bilateral responsibility (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). To maintain the integrity of the actor's voice throughout the portraiture process, the portraiture methodology requires the portraitist to use her voice in a scaffolded manner beginning with the most restrained use of voice to the most inclusive use of voice. Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) describes the six ways a portraitist uses her voice when co-creating her actors' portraits in the following ways:

1. Voice as witness, which requires the portraitist to avoid the explicit use of *I* or *we*, as she creates her actors' portraits, and instead, implicitly declare her present voice;
2. Voice as interpretation, which requires the portraitist to select and include the factual details of her actors' portraits in a way that contributes to the coherence she seeks in creating the narrative;
3. Voice as preoccupation, which requires the portraitist to prioritize and acknowledge her subconscious areas of interests, or preoccupations, with the conscious awareness of the way that knowledge derives from a larger domain;

4. Voice as autobiography, which requires the portraitist to modulate her personal voice with the components of her actors' stories with which she has emotional resonance, particularly as she decides which elements of the actors' stories to exclude and include in the final portrait;
5. Voice discerning other voices, which requires the portraitist to execute the method of listening *for* a story, rather than *to* a story while co-constructing her actors' portraits;
6. Voice in dialogue, which requires the portraitist to engage in intimate one-to-one dialogue with her actors through propitious and explicit declarations and implicit expressions in ways that allow the actors' voices to remain prominent.

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, "it is the seamless threading of implicit portraitist and explicit subject voices that the reader can experience the closeness of rapport that has been established" (1997, p. 123).

Distinct Features of Portraiture

Portraiture is the first social scientific methodology that explicitly blends art and science, blurs the boundaries of aestheticism and empiricism, and crafts a final portrait grounded in five core tenets: context, voice, relationship, and emergent themes, and the aesthetic whole (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016). Though this methodology shares characteristics with other phenomenological and narrative forms of social science inquiry, it is distinct from other research methodologies in four primary ways. The first is its fundamental use of the researcher's voice when crafting the portrait, unlike other methodologies such as ethnography, phenomenology, or case studies that encourage the

researcher to remain a discerning observer (Alba, 2012; Baylor, 2014; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016; Renix, 2016; Scott, 2011). Lawrence-Lightfoot summarizes this distinction below:

In portraiture, the voice of the researcher is everywhere: in assumptions, preoccupations, and framework she brings to the inquiry; in the questions she asks; in the data she gathers; in the choice of the stories she tells; in the language, cadence, and rhythm of her narrative. Voice is the research instrument, echoing the soul of the portraitist, her eyes, her ears, her insights, her style, her aesthetic. But it is also true that the portraitist's work is deeply empirical, grounded in systematically collected data, skeptical questioning of self and actors, and rigorous examination of biases, always open to disconfirming evidence (1997, p. 85).

When sharing space in the tapestry of her actor's scene, the portraitist stands on the "edge of the scene, a boundary sitter, scanning the action, systematically gathering the details of behavior, expression, and talk and deliberately embraces all stimuli and data" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 87). The portraitist uses her voice to unite meaning and perception laced throughout the layers of her actors' portraits.

Lawrence-Lightfoot utilized the scholarship of thinkers such as Aristotle (1951), Arnheim (1969), and Geertz (1973), as she positioned thinking and meaning as contextual foundations to human experience, a primary condition of the portraiture methodology. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), interpretive anthropologist Clifford Geertz's encouragement in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) to disassemble accumulated structures of inference and implication positioned voice as the primary tool

of her empirical research (1997). As the portraitist's presence moves beyond the perimeter and into the intricately woven layers of her actor's narratives, the portraitist's voice unites in a way that extends beyond interpretive description and instead unites her own cultural, ideological, and educational inquiry with the timbre, cadence, resonance, and tone of her actors' voices. As a result, the portraitist's voice functions as the lens of expression "through which she sees and records reality" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 93).

The second feature that distinguishes portraiture from other methodologies is the multidimensional relationship between the portraitists and actors when co-creating the final portrait. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot, portraits are constructed, shaped, and drawn through the development of relationships (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The duet that evolves between the portraitist and actors' voices during the co-construction of the portrait personifies the portraitist's authentic approach. Unlike traditional qualitative methods that position the researcher as a disinterested observer who should avoid intimacy with her participants, relationship building is central to the portraiture methodology (Alba, 2012; Baylor, 2014; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Renix, 2016; Scott, 2011). As trust and intimacy deepen between the portraitist and her actors, the co-construction and ultimate production of their portraits chronicle the "developing relationship between them and captures the dance of dialogue" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.103). Lawrence-Lightfoot further explores this multidimensionality in the following:

All the processes of portraiture require we build productive and benign relationships. It is through relationships between the portraitist and the actors that

access is given, connections made, contracts of reciprocity and responsibility (both formal and informal) developed, trust built, intimacy negotiated, data collected, and knowledge constructed (Lawrence-Lightfoot, & Davis, 1997, p.135).

As portraitists and actors negotiate the boundaries and dimensional layers of their narratives that shape the final portrait, regard for one another and trust in each other remain at the nucleus of the empirical and aesthetic experience.

The deliberate and strategic search for goodness is the third feature that distinguishes portraiture from other methodologies. Because of its universal focus on that which is good, resilient, and healthy, published works utilizing this methodology can inspire and instill hope and courage in its readership. Furthering the distinction between portraiture and other forms of social science inquiry is the specificity with which it categorizes *goodness*. Positioning the concept of *goodness* as a romanticized phenomenon free of imperfections is the traditional stance of empirical research (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). However, the portraiture methodology elevates the concept of *goodness* as a thoughtfully crafted and centralized focus on discovering perfection within the realm of imperfection. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis summarize this concept as she describes the portraitist's approach to the inquiry process with the following:

Our approach to inquiry resists the more typical social science preoccupation with documenting pathology and suggesting remedies. Rather than focusing on the identification of weaknesses, we begin by asking what is happening here, what is working, and why? The shift of research stance from focus on weaknesses to pursuit of strength, from preoccupation with disease to concern for health, from

inquiry into dysfunction to examination of productivity, does *not* mean that the former attributes are neglected in favor of elevating the latter. Rather, we assume that the latter qualities of strength, health, and productivity will *always* be imbued with flaws, weaknesses, and inconsistencies, and that the portraitist's inquiry must leave room for the full range of qualities to be revealed. (1997, p. 142)

Portraiture purposefully seeks out that which is strong, resilient, and good in unique ways that manifest human experience, and it is through this manifestation that “we figure out ways of transporting ‘those goods’, that goodness to other settings and transforming them as well” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p. 20).

The fourth and most comprehensive distinction between the portraiture methodology and other forms of social scientific inquiry is its unique way of bringing art, science, and humanism together in one exquisitely crafted portrait, the aesthetic whole. Pragmatist theorist John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934) served as inspiration for Lawrence-Lightfoot's conception of fusing empiricism with aestheticism in a uniquely humanistic way (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016). The process of developing the aesthetic whole, or as it is described in portraiture, crafting the final portrait, is summarized by Lawrence-Lightfoot stating:

In developing the aesthetic whole we come face to face with the tensions inherent in blending art and science, analysis and narrative, description and interpretation, structure and texture. We are reminded of the dual motivations guiding portraiture: to inform and inspire, to document and transform, to speak to the head and to the heart. How do we create a document that is both authentic and evocative, coded and colorful? (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 243).

Following the pattern of a beautiful tapestry that represents the harmony between the metaphysical and physical, the abstract and concrete, and the seen and unseen, the portraitist blends empiricism with aestheticism as she weaves the tapestry of her actors' life chapters. In doing so, the portraitist remains mindful of four primary dimensions, which are the conception, the structure, the form, and the coherence. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Weaving the aesthetic whole to blend the artistry of human experience with scientific reasoning's rigor lies at the portraiture methodology's nucleus. In the same vein, weaving an actor's final portrait is akin to the work required to create a symphonic arrangement blended by melodic cadence, a novel crafted with an enthralling plot, and a piece of art designed with vibrant luminosity.

Like the finished products above, the conception dimension, also known as the *gestalt* of portraiture, allows the portraitist to use various parts of the actors' life stories to give form to the finished product. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis describe conception in the following way:

The discovery of conception is the act of merging intellectual insight with emotional resonance. An intuitive fusion of emotion and idea produce a conception. A conception is a total, gestalt-like grasp of the story that enables the author to control the development of the situation, the characters, theme, plot, style, technique, so that in the end they cohere, as a single charged image (1997, p. 248).

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, the work of weaving her actors' portraits require the portraitist to blend art, science, and humanistic lived experience in a way that conceptually "reflects the weight of the empirical evidence, the infusion of emotional

meaning, and the aesthetic of narrative development” (1997, p. 248). Structure, the second dimension portraitists use as they weave the life chapters of their actors’ tapestries, represent the frame that encompasses the tapestry, or aesthetic whole. Similar to the “warp and weft of the weaving, the structure serves as a scaffold for the narrative, the themes that give the piece a frame, a stability, and an organization” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 252). Form, the third dimension that grounds the work of the portraitist, is seen as more organic and fluid than the other dimensions. Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis describe this dimension in the following way:

For the portraitist, form is the texture of intellect, emotion, and aesthetics that supports, illuminates, and animates the structural elements. Standing alone, the scaffold is stark, bare, unwelcoming and uncovering in its abstraction. But form, expressed in stories, examples, illustrations, illusions, and ironies, give life and movement to the narrative, providing complexity, subtlety, and nuance to the text, and offering the reader opportunities for feeling identified and drawn into the piece. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 254)

Coherence, the fourth and final dimension portraitists use when creating the aesthetic whole, blends aesthetic sensibilities with empirical choices in ways that both inspire and inform readers. This dimension establishes an appropriate balance between the beginning, middle, and end of the actors’ portraits. The portraitist sequences events of her actors’ life stories through the “rhythmic repetition of images, insights, and metaphors, blending change and constancy, new developments and old refrains” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 260). When all four dimensions are present in an actor’s final portrait,

resonance, which results from the portraitist joining empirical and literary themes, echo throughout the authentic aesthetic whole. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Rationale for Methodology

“A system is in equilibrium when the forces constituting it are arranged in such a way as to compensate each other, like the two weights pulling at the arms of a pair of scales.”

~ Rudolf Arnheim (1969)

Seeking to explore and understand the relationship between social phenomena and human experience in context epitomized the work of social science theorists such as Elliot Eisner, William James, and John Dewey, in addition to influencing Lawrence-Lightfoot's work (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016). The portraiture methodology allows its readers to enter the actors' stage in a space analogous to their own story. It is inside the frame of the aesthetic whole the portraitist, actors, and readers discover stability, strength, and beauty. I chose portraiture as the methodology for this research study because it allowed me to delve into my participants' experiences in inviting, provocative, and dynamic ways. Because the portraitist is such an integral part of the actors' portrait, portraiture also provided the space for the elements of my journey as the portraitist to intersect with the details of my participants' journeys in purposeful and enlightening ways. Life stories that reciprocally complement each other contribute to the type of world where both the silenced and outspoken voices are heard and thus serve as the contextual backdrop of human experience. When done authentically, human encounters define and shape our experience in salient patterns that occur within and between people and, as a result, inform theoretical contributions and practical usage (Scott, 2011). The realities and complexities of human experience call for the type of system Arnheim describe above as he illustrates the characteristics of a system in equilibrium.

According to Kim (2016), narrative research begins with a story and extends our understanding of human phenomena. Grounding my study in the portraiture methodology enabled me to deepen my understanding of the intersectionality between the layers of my participants' portraits, experiences, stories, and readers' reality. Lawrence-Lightfoot illuminates the understanding of this below:

The portraitist as artist is constructing and communicating her understanding for the reconstruction and reinterpretation of the reader. This communicative expression of understanding relies on the creation of a unified whole. Without unity, without the parts fitting together into an intelligible articulation, there is no communication, no understanding to be shared or found. At every juncture, the portraitist is balancing three areas of judgment: aesthetic and empirical concerns, the separate parts of the overarching interpretation, and the various features of the methodology through which the interpretation has been attained. (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 261)

I chose participants for my study who have made an indelible imprint on my story's pages. For this reason, I selected the portraiture methodology to frame this research study. As a Black female educational leader in a large urban school district studying Black female educational leaders in a large urban district, co-constructing a portrait that resonates with the participants who see themselves reflected in the portrait and readers who believe, learn, and grow from the story, may provide dimension to their lived experiences.

Discovering new sources of strength and knowledge propel humanity toward optimum levels of growth. For this reason, this newly discovered multidimensionality

will provide the field of social science inquiry with new ways of knowing, new ways of being, and new ways of thinking. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, the researcher is seen not only in defining the focus and field of the inquiry but also in navigating the relationships with the participants, interpreting the action, tracing the emerging themes, and creating the narrative told (1997). I chose the portraiture methodology because it enabled me to engage in artful humanistic inquiry, capture the insight and emotion of the actors' portraits in ways that create an aesthetic whole, and blend aesthetic sensibilities with empirical choices (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

The authentic dialogue generated between people joined by common experiences creates feelings of connectedness, a sense of belonging, and genuine relationships that are an essential aspect of knowledge validation within the Black community (Collins, 1989; Daniels et al., 2020; Dean & Porter, 2015; Dillard, 2000). In response to common themes revealed in existing research literature such as isolation and experiences of microaggressions, which Black female educational leaders encounter, Black feminist thought grounds its work in analyzing Black females' response to the interlocking systems of oppression in ways that elevate their lived experiences, self-worth, self-definition, and intellectual dexterity (Baylor, 2014; Collins, 1986). I discussed the specific tenets of Black feminist thought in Chapters 1 and 2. In this section of the chapter, however, I would explore how this theoretical framework is positioned appropriately to frame the methodology chosen for this study.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe qualitative research as an approach for exploring and understanding how individuals or groups make meaning of a social and

human problem. Creswell further states that a qualitative researcher honors an inductive style, a focus on personal meaning, and the importance of reporting the complexity of a circumstance or lived experience. A qualitative portraiture study of Black female educational leaders in a large urban school district will furnish both the existing literature and academic institutions with the necessary tools to create the gestalt of artful empiricism, social justice, and intellectual advancement for Black students, marginalized students, and members of the Black community. Lawrence-Lightfoot describes this task in the following:

Very few social science researchers have tried to seriously describe the process of creating the gestalt. Nor have they offered clear strategies for constructing the aesthetic whole. But researchers have given less attention to articulating the process of moving from selecting the threads (the emergent themes) to weaving the tapestry (the portrait). This is understandable. The act of creating the gestalt is a less codified and delineated activity than the identification and naming of emergent themes. It is both systematic and creative, structured and organic, disciplined and intuitive (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 244).

The utilization of the portraiture methodology for this research study invited readers on a journey of discovery with Black female educational leaders as we co-constructed portraits that represent the rich complexity of human experience.

Andria Thompson's poem *My Black is Beautiful* (2009) captures the essence of this research study. The voices, faces, and stories of Black female educational leaders have been squelched by the racially politicized climate that is currently a deeply ingrained aspect of our society. I seek to answer the research question, *what can we learn*

from a portraiture study of the scholarship, resilience, and lived experiences of Black female educational leaders in a large urban school district? According to Lawrence-Lightfoot, “the creative and analytic task of portraiture lies in exploring and describing competing perspectives, searching for their connection to other phenomena, and bringing order to phenomena that people may experience as chaotic or unrelated” (1983, p. 15). My study is necessary and relevant because of the deficit that exists in scholarly research related to the understanding of the Black female educational leaders’ lived experience and how those experiences contribute to knowledge validation, specifically as it relates to the discovery of new ways of thinking, being, and living (Collins, 1986; Dillard, 2000; Gooden, 2005; Harris, 2007; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015).

Black feminist thought examines the challenges Black women face as part of a larger frame, which is the utility of engaging in social justice endeavors in ways that focus on human dignity and intellectual advancement (Baylor, 2014; Collins, 2000; Farmer, 2017; hooks, 1994). As a Black female assistant principal who believes that race and power are social constructs that hinder the upward trajectory toward success for Black people, including but not limited to Black female educational leaders, conducting research through the lens of Black Feminist Thought creates racial homophily between my participants and me. It is inside this space I find comfort. As a Black female educational leader, the intimate and professional familiarity I have with the lived experiences of other Black female educational leaders in my field yielded positive dividends as I journeyed through their personal and professional narratives with them during the co-construction of their portraits. As I traveled through the layers of my

participants' lived experiences with them by co-creating their portraits, the outcome of this research study will inform empirical social theory, accelerate growth in the Black community, and change the educational landscape of public education.

Research Study Design

Saldaña (2016) highlights the importance of qualitative researchers being organized, exercising perseverance, dealing with ambiguity, exercising flexibility, being creative, being rigorously ethical, and having an extensive vocabulary. Creswell (2018) further expands this description as he positions qualitative research inside a constructivist worldview, which seeks to make meaning of a phenomenon based upon participants' views, and a transformative worldview, which seeks to examine issues related to people's oppression. The portraiture methodology allows for a research design that symmetrically encompasses both the constructivist and transformative worldviews.

I engaged in a research design that utilizes context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and the aesthetic whole, all tenets of the portraiture methodology, to explore Black female educational leaders' narratives' relational dimensions. In doing so, I embedded data collection strategies that provided my participants with the opportunity to share their lived experiences, their perceptions of the influence of intersectionality on their daily experiences, and their roles as change agents in the Black community. As part of my collection strategies, I also ensured I constructed mechanisms to collect data that enabled me to deeply understand my participants' experiences and how they view themselves as Black female educational leaders in a racialized educational context (Bell, 2019). As the portraitist, I utilized a research design that captures the essence and of human experience in an authentic and deeply penetrating portrait, thus revealing

universally embraced concepts inside the particular and multi-layered threads of my participants' portraits.

Preparing for the Relationship

The portraiture methodology appropriately allows for the purposeful selection of the actors for my study because of the indelible footprint they have each left on parts of my journey. However, as I prepared to co-create the portraits of Black female educational leaders with whom I already have a rich and genuine relationship, I remained mindful of potential challenges that our pre-existing relationship may unintentionally spark.

Lawrence-Lightfoot summarizes the importance of this with the following:

In the creation of the final product, the portraitist's relationship with the actors takes on new dimensions. From the relationship forged in the co-construction of the narrative and the back and forth communication of data analysis, the portraitist now relates to the actors as future readers of the portrayal. By clearly asserting her own perspective, the portraitist creates space for the alternative views of any reader. In considering the specific readers who are the actors on the scene, the portraitist is mindful and protective. It is the actors who are most vulnerable to whatever distortion they may find in the image reflected in the portraitist's mirror. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 172)

Given my existing relationship with the participants, proximity and intercommunity were privileged conditions I responsibly created a distinction between, as I traveled between the layers of my narrative and the layers of my participants' stories. As I prepared to weave the tapestry of my actors' portraits as the portraitist, I aligned my work with the work of great social science theorists such as Carol Gilligan and Martin Buber, who

viewed relationships as fundamental to self-understanding, mutuality, validity, and the development of knowledge (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Participants

The portraiture methodology positions the relationship that evolves between the portraitist and actors as one that is grounded in a stance of strength as opposed to weakness, collaborative instead of authoritative, valid instead of invalid (Alba, 2012; Baylor, 2014; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Renix, 2016; Scott, 2011). Sharing the stories of Black female educational leaders with whom I have a strong sisterhood positioned our narratives to intersect in ways that personify shared lived experiences. As the portraitist, I utilized my current relationship with my participants as a medium that supported the overall aesthetic whole, their portraits. Kemper, Stringfield, and Teddlie (2003) describe this commonly used purposive sampling technique as that which “involves drawing elements from a group, usually most appropriately regarded as a subgroup, that is easily accessible by the researcher” (p. 280). Moreover, Creswell and Creswell state that a fundamental goal of qualitative research is to purposefully select participants that will best help the “researcher understand the problem and the research question (2018, p. 185). My participants for this research project included three Black female educational leaders in a large urban school district located in the southeastern United States. Ladson-Billings’ (2005) *Beyond the Big House* illuminates the portraits of seven educators whose scholarly profiles are equal to and, in some cases, surpass her own. According to Ladson-Billings, she chose participants with whom she shared a cultural affiliation because doing so allowed her to construct rich and believable portraits built upon the framework of intimate, familiar, and multi-dimensional relationships (2005).

I chose participants for this study with whom I have a pre-established personal and professional relationship because of their influence on the entire educational community. The evidence of their influence is manifested by their wisdom, resilience, and fortitude they exhibit while championing for people, including myself, students, staff, and parents. To protect the aesthetic whole's authenticity, each of the actors for this research project selected their pseudonym for their portraits. I refer to the three participants as Nia Brown, Ivy Y. Glass, and Elizabeth Smith (See Table 1).

Table 1. Study Participants

Participant Name	Nia Brown	Ivy Y. Glass	Elizabeth Smith
Years of Experience	15+ years	25+ years	30+ years
Previous Roles Served	Middle School Teacher	Elementary School Teacher	Middle School Teacher
	High School Teacher	High School Teacher	Middle School Advisor
	Middle School Assistant Principal	High School Assistant Principal	Middle School Assistant Principal
	High School Assistant Principal	High School Principal	Middle School Principal
Current Role	Building Level Principal	Central Office Personnel	Retired Building Level Principal

Note: I used pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.

Role of Researcher

Qualitative forms of methodology utilize various techniques to gather and analyze information; however, the researcher, in the portraiture methodology, the portraitist, is the primary mechanism of data collection and data analysis (Creswell, 2009; Kim, 2016; Merriam, 2009). According to Creswell, qualitative research is interpretive research where the researcher is involved in a sustained and intensive experience with her

participants (2018). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe the role of the portraitist as one who can construct a participant's narrative in a way that "captures from an outsider's purview an insider's understanding of the scene" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 25). Similarly, Lawrence-Lightfoot asserts that the portraitist embraces human encounters as experiences that have meaning specific to a social, cultural, and historical context (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016). To that end, a distinct characteristic of the portraiture methodology is the researcher's requirement to sketch herself into the context of her actor's portraits and assume the role of observer, listener, and portraitist (Alba, 2012; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Renix, 2016).

As the portraitist sketches herself into the layers of her actors' portraits, she carefully observes and meticulously extracts the layers of her actors' narratives that portray the extent to which human experience personifies empiricism and aestheticism. Experiences where strength, perfection, and productivity intersect with vulnerability, imperfection, and inconsistencies provide her actors' portraits with a type of holistic complexity that mirrors a multi-faceted layer of human experience. As a result, the actors' portraits possess the opportunity to resonate with various audiences in ways that are generous, yet critical, and forgiving, yet discerning. In addition to the search for goodness, the portraitist's role is to employ a sustained level of empathetic regard during the actors' portraits' co-construction. Lawrence-Lightfoot summarizes the way portraitists view empathy as central to relationship building in the portraiture methodology below:

In listening and responding to the actors, the portraitist tries to develop an understanding of their perspective. What would I feel like if I were in her shoes?

If I was looking at the world through her eyes, what would I see? The portraitist tries to imaginatively put herself in her actor's place and witness her perspective, her ideas, her emotions, her fears, and her pain. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 146)

The most comprehensive role of the portraitist is one who weaves an aesthetic whole, a portrait that is believable, authentic, and resonates with a variety of audiences. The quality of understanding, the interconnectedness of life experiences, and profound attention to the actors' perspectives and reality merge emotion with intellect, inquiry with intervention, and insight with catharsis (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

As the portraitist co-creating scenes of women's portraits with whom I have a pre-existing sisterhood, I remained diligent in establishing emotional and intellectual boundaries grounded in reciprocity and mutuality. As I crafted the actors' final portraits, I used my voice to develop appropriate boundaries between the actors and the work by expressing the outsider's stance, allowing for the reader to offer different interpretations, threading, instead of infusing, my presuppositions and perspective throughout the work, and listening for the texture and cadence of the actors' voices (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). The symbolic use of rivers delineated in the *Rivers of Life* methodology that I used during the second focus group workshop with my actors enabled me to systemize our past experiences, as we encounter the calm and occasionally rocky, smooth and occasionally bumpy, and crystal clear and occasionally murky rivers of life along our journeys. A detailed discussion of the *Rivers of Life* methodology is discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Data Collection Procedures

As the portraitist weaves her actor's portrait, she remains engaged with two "mutually informative aspects of the methodology: the process of data gathering and the process of shaping the final portrait" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 60). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) assert that qualitative researchers must collect data clearly and purposefully to accurately reflect the participant's perspective. Additionally, Creswell (2018) enumerates the process that qualitative researchers employ when collecting data, including setting the study boundaries through sampling and recruitment, collecting information through unstructured or semi-structured interviews, observations accompanied by documents, and establishing the protocol for recording information. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis expand this enumeration as they outline the way data is collected when utilizing the portraiture methodology:

In the process of data collection, a story is reconstructed through an interview, co-constructed by the interviewer's listening and the interviewee's telling. In creating the final portrait, the story is reconstructed yet again, in its presentation by the portraitist within a particular context. In presenting the story, the portraitist is ever mindful of the intentions of the original storyteller and the responsibility of retelling another's story (1997, p.118).

Miles et al., (2014) describe the process of data collection as that which is rich in the compilation of holistic data that "focuses on naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings" (p. 11). The data collection process for my research study occurred over three-months and involved the following sources: (a) recording my pre-existing ideological, intellectual, and autobiographical themes before the project begins; (b) garnering actors' consent; (c) conducting two semi-structured individual interviews; (d)

conducting two focus group workshops; and (e) conducting one follow-up unstructured interview to discuss emergent themes.

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis contend that “portraitists need to reflect on their personal contextual frameworks and become clear about the assumptions and expectations they bring to the work” (2000, p. 67) before the start of the research project. Additionally, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis assert the importance of the portraitist’s purposeful entry onto the scenes of her actors’ lived experiences with an “eye that is ever on the lookout for the expected and persistently open to the unexpected” (2000, p. 67). To develop a level of expertise that enabled me to negotiate the influence of my pre-existing ideological themes on the layers of my participant’s life stories, I reflected upon how the emergent themes from the literature review (see Appendix C) converge with seasons of my life chapters. I utilized the same format displayed in Appendix C and recorded my lived experience components that resonate with items listed on the structured grid. Additionally, to further examine the contextual framework I brought to the research project regarding intrinsic preoccupations and assumptions, I answered the three research questions (see Appendix D) through the lens of my lived experiences. As the participants and I journeyed through the co-construction of their portraits, I infused the information from these personal reflections into the research project when appropriate.

The next form of data collection I utilized involved garnering participants’ informed consent, as it is an ethical responsibility of the portraitist. Miles et al., (2014) affirm that this step in the research process is pivotal because it helps create a level of trust between the participants and the researcher at the onset of the study. Once granted permission to conduct the study by the University, Institutional Review Board, and

school district, I assessed the comfort level of my participants due to the Coronavirus pandemic and e-mailed the informed consent (see Appendix A) document to my participants before starting the research study. Additionally, I followed up by contacting each of my participants by phone to discuss any questions or concerns they had. Once I had electronically received the informed consent documents from each participant, I scheduled the first of two semi-structured individual interviews. My preference was to follow the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines by wearing a mask and remaining socially distanced to hand-deliver the informed consent document to the participants so that we can discuss any questions they may have in person; however, because of health concerns and the participants' comfort level, our interviews occurred virtually.

According to Creswell and Creswell, using interviews to gather information for a research study is beneficial when the participants cannot be directly observed (2018). As a result of the current non-traditional instructional format of school due to the Coronavirus pandemic, I conducted two digitally recorded individual semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately 60 – 90 minutes. The interviews occurred in a virtual zoom setting. The first semi-structured interview (see Appendix B) consisted of open-ended questions that referenced the following research questions: (1) How did the realities and lived experiences of these Black female leaders shape the narratives that led to their career path; (2) How do these Black female leaders use their lived experiences to inform their interaction with students and adults with whom they work? Likewise, the second semi-structured interview consisted of open-ended questions that referenced the third research question: (3) How do these Black female leaders understand the

relationship between their roles as leaders within the educational system and the broader community?

In addition to utilizing interviews as a form of data collection, conducting a series of two focus group workshops that were digitally recorded and lasted approximately two hours was the fourth component of my research study's data collection process. Before the start of the data collection process, during the follow-up conversation, I spoke to each participant via phone regarding any questions they had related to the informed consent document. Additionally, I asked each participant to take or find photographs that captured their feelings and experiences during the following seasons in their lives based upon the prompt, What image comes to mind when you think of your: (a) childhood experiences; (b) college experiences; (c) educator experiences; (d) leadership experiences; (e) community experiences; and (f) any other experiences that are meaningful to them? During this time, I informed the participants that these photographs will be visible to the other participants during the first focus group workshop and to remain mindful of that when selecting photographs. Both focus groups workshops occurred in a virtual setting, which allowed the actors and me to engage in rich and authentic dialogue while maintaining a concerted focus on the participants' health and comfort levels.

During the first focus group workshop, I informed the participants that we will participate in a photo-voice activity that will involve creating a photo-voice board that will provide a visual representation of the utilization of their voice during various seasons in their life chapters. (See Appendix E). According to Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001), photo-voice is a participatory research method where participants use their cameras and

photographs to document the reality of their lived experiences in ways that encourage social change and critical thinking. Additionally, Wang and Redwood-Jones assert that this participatory research method provides a contextual framework for participants to engage in dialogue and share knowledge about issues of importance to them and members of the community (2001). As the portraitist, I established the contextual framework for this activity. Prior to the Focus Group Workshop #1, the participants did the following:

1. Selected a photograph or image that provides a visual representation of the following seasons in your life:
 - a. Childhood Experiences in your community/neighborhood
 - b. Childhood Experiences at school
 - c. College Experiences
 - d. Educator Experiences as a Teacher and/or Administrator
 - e. Community Experiences as a Teacher and/or Administrator
2. Digitally affixed the photographs and/or images to the appropriate slides in the slide deck.

During Focus Group Workshop #1, the participants did the following:

1. Engaged in dialogue about the components of photo-voice. (Approx. 10 – 15 minutes)
2. Engaged in dialogue about the experience of gathering or taking photographs/images that captured experiences during various seasons of your life. (Approx. 15 – 30 minutes)

3. Took turns sharing their screen and engaging in dialogue about the selected photographs with the group, including how they used their voice to instigate change during these seasons of your life chapters. (Approx. 45 - 60 minutes)

During this portion of the data collection process, I saved the participants' digital photo-voice boards and infused information from my field notes as artifacts that enabled me to begin crafting the participants' final portraits.

During the second focus group workshop, the participants and I continued building upon our work from the first focus group workshop by going a little deeper into their perspectives of their lived experiences. This focus group workshop focused on photo-elicitation activities and utilized the *Rivers of Life* methodological approach (See Appendix F). Harper (2002) defines photo-elicitation as a participatory action research method that involves the researcher's use of photographs, in addition to words, during an interview to elicit discourse. Harper further states that the difference between interviews using images and text and interviews using words alone lies in the ways individuals cognitively respond to these two forms of symbolic representation. According to Harper, the parts of the brain react differently to visual information than verbal information. Thus, images evoke more profound elements of human consciousness than do words alone (2002).

Like Harper, Ortiz Aragón and Hoetmer assert that participatory action research is a vehicle for rich dialogue between researchers and their participants. Ortiz Aragón and Hoetmer (2020) define the participatory action research methodology they call *Rivers of Life* as a process that employs the systemization of human experience used to reconstruct

and interpret a past shared experience. For this study, the symbolic use of the components of a river such as calm, turbulent, crystal clear, murky, etc., provided participants with visual parallels between the various conditions and currents of a river and multiple conditions and currents of their life journeys, also known as the *rivers of their lives*. Utilizing this metaphor to frame the participants' experiences supported the convergence and reconstruction of emergent themes that linked the life chapters of my participants' portraits. According to Ortiz Aragón and Hoetmer, through the process of reconstruction, diverse individual interpretations emerge that, upon combining with others' interpretations, allow participants to more deeply understand and even theorize from their experiences (2020). During this second focus group workshop, I incorporated Ortiz Aragón's and Hoetmer's *Rivers of Life* methodology to illuminate the acquisition of knowledge revealed by my actors' emergent themes portraits. This part of the workshop involved the actors, both literally and metaphorically, drawing the parallel between the various seasons in their life chapters to that of a river's characteristics. Ortiz Aragón and Hoetmer (2020) further expand upon the symbolic use of the river analogy during the process of reconstructing experiences:

Through the process of reconstruction, diverse individual interpretations emerge that, upon combining with others' interpretations, allow participants to more deeply understand and even theorize from their experiences. In terms of systematization, developing a river is so valuable because rivers are stormy, calm, able, aware, nostalgic; they can be upset. It isn't good or bad, it's simply life. To create a river of life is to remember—it's not about judging, just about

remembering. What did we do, what can we do better, what was worthwhile? (p. 116).

To provide the participants with a contextual understanding of the symbolic representation of their lived experiences during various seasons of their life journey, the participants did the following during the workshop:

1. Read [Javier Heraud Perez's poem *The River* \(1960\)](#)
2. Looked at images of various depictions of a river, i.e., calm waters, murky waters, turbulent waters, etc. Participants listed words or phrases in the “speaker’s notes” section of the slide that came to mind when looking at the image. (Slides 6 - 14)
3. Reflected on the experiences embedded in the photographs and/or images displayed on their photo-voice boards that they discussed during the first focus group workshop session.
4. Looked at the displayed images of the various parts of a river (addressed in number 2), reflected upon the images conjured when reading Perez’s *The River* (1960) (addressed in number 1), looked at the images on their photo-voice boards (addressed in number 3) and reflected upon any similarities between the sets of images.
5. On a piece of poster-board, participants drew their river of life that was comprised of images that represent times in their life that are analogous to the images of a river, i.e., calm waters, turbulent waters, murky waters, etc., while using the images displayed on their photo-voice boards and the

images shown of the various parts of a river that helped guide their thinking.

6. Included written reflections next to each stop along their river, thus reconstructing their authentic depiction of their *River of Life*.
7. Affixed a picture of their finished drawing to the appropriate slide in the slide deck.

During Focus Group Workshop #2 on 2/20/21, we did the following:

1. Engaged in dialogue about the components of photo-elicitation and the Rivers of Life Methodology. (Approx. 10 – 15 minutes)
2. Read Javier Heraud Perez's *The River of Life* poem.
3. Engaged in dialogue about the experience of drawing images that captured experiences during various seasons of their life. (Approx. 15 – 30 minutes)
4. Took turns sharing their screen and engaging in dialogue about their River of Life drawing and how it depicts various seasons of your life chapters. (Approx. 45 - 60 minutes)
5. Discussed the emergent themes from Focus Group Workshops 1 & 2.

The symbolic use of likening a river's various currents to that of the different seasons in my actors' life chapters provided a communicative and systemized platform to affix a universal understanding of a river's flow to the specific and unique flow of individuals' lived experiences.

During the final portion of the data collection process, I conducted a final digitally recorded unstructured interview that lasted approximately two hours with all three participants. We discussed the emergent themes that arose during the two focus group

workshops. Additionally, we discussed how being a Black female educational leader intersects with other personal and professional roles based upon the emergent themes. I triangulated the analyzed data collected from the participants' interviews and focus group workshops and with the participants, recorded the information into the emergent themes grid (See Appendix D). A detailed discussion of the process for data analysis is discussed in the next section of this chapter. Supporting documents for data collection can be found in the appendices and are arranged as follows:

1. APPENDIX A: INFORMED LETTER OF CONSENT
2. APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, PHOTO-VOICE & PHOTO-ELICITATION ACTIVITIES
3. APPENDIX C: EMERGENT THEMES FROM LITERATURE REVIEW
4. APPENDIX D: EMERGENT THEMES FROM ACTORS' PORTRAITS
5. APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP WORKSHOP # 1 – PHOTO-VOICE ACTIVITY- YOUR VOICE TELLS THE STORY OF YOUR LIFE CHAPTERS
6. APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP WORKSHOP # 2 – PHOTO-ELICITATION ACTIVITY - THESE ARE THE RIVERS OF MY LIFE
7. APPENDIX G: JAVIER HERAUD PEREZ'S *THE RIVER* (1960)

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis involves an iterative process of establishing meaning based upon the data (Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe eight

primary strategies qualitative researchers should utilize to organize and prepare the data for analysis and generate descriptions of emergent themes. They are: (a) triangulate different data sources; (b) use member checking to determine accuracy; (c) use a rich, thick description to convey findings; (d) clarify the bias the researcher brings to the study; (e) present discrepant information that runs counter to the themes; (f) spend prolonged time in the field; (g) use peer debriefing to enhance the accuracy of the account; and (h) use an external auditor to review the project. In addition, Miles et al., (2014) advise that data analysis occurs concurrently with data collection. Jackson (1989) further iterates the position of analysis as he posits that radical empiricism occurs when the researcher analyzes data in a manner that gives honor to the cacophony of voices while illuminating diverse perspectives from different angles. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot, the researcher must “set aside her need for control, order, and stability and submit to the complexity and instability of real lived experience” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 191).

As a portraitist, entering the field with an emergent perspective of data analysis both supported and held accountable my selected conceptual framework and methodology chosen for this research study. Though the tenets of Black feminist thought will guide the work, the portrait’s direction adapted based on the actors’ portraits’ layers. I remained open to necessary changes to the data analysis process described earlier in this chapter as I embarked upon establishing synthesis, convergence, triangulation, and contrast between the layers of my actors’ portraits. In doing so, I adhered to the five modes of data analysis suggested by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) to construct emergent themes, which are:

- 1) Listen for repetitive refrains that are spoken or appear frequently and persistently, forming a collective expression of commonly held views;
- 2) Listen for resonant metaphors, poetic and symbolic expressions that reveal the way actors illuminate and experience their realities;
- 3) Listen for themes expressed through cultural and institutional rituals that seem to be essential to organizational continuity and coherence;
- 4) Use triangulation to weave together the threads of data converging from a variety of sources;
- 5) Construct themes and reveal patterns among perspectives that are often experienced as contrasting and dissonant by the actors.

In addition to utilizing the five modes of data analysis listed above, I incorporated a coding system into the data analysis process to transform the complexities of my actors' experiences into those that are understandable and resonant to readers. During the coding process, I use my participants' data from the interviews and focus group workshops to identify emergent themes and adhered to Creswell and Creswell's guidelines, which are to prepare data in a way that allows space to assign code labels, code images by tagging areas of the image, compile all codes for images on a separate sheet, review the codes to eliminate redundancy, group codes into themes that represent a common idea, assign the themes to three groups which are expected codes, surprising codes, and unique codes, array the codes into a conceptual map, and write the narrative for each theme (2018).

Based on the data collected during the final unstructured interviews, I employed a first coding cycle that utilized Descriptive and In Vivo coding systems for my participants' data. According to Miles et al., (2014) descriptive coding systems provide

an “inventory of topics for indexing and categorizing data forms,” and In Vivo coding systems, which use the participants’ own words, are beneficial for “studies that prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (p. 74). Based upon the data revealed during the first coding cycle, I utilized a second coding cycle that enabled me to identify the pattern codes of emergent themes, group information into smaller themes, and make meaning of the data revealed during the first coding cycle. The cultural and institutional rituals revealed during the crafting of the actors’ portraits enabled me to align my perspective of the similarities between our life chapters with the construction of the final portrait; thus, rendering information about the way human experience generates a deeper understanding of one another. Furthermore, the systematic use of qualitative analysis documents used during coding cycles such as jottings, analytic memoing, and transcribed matrices, likewise enabled me to encapsulate my actors’ data inside a portrait that is created in a heuristic, meaningful, and organized way (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2016).

Provisions for Ensuring Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability

Prominent scholars have noted that establishing a trustworthy, authentic, and credible relationship between the researcher and participants is achieved by adhering to criteria which are credibility for internal validity, transferability for external validity, dependability for reliability, and confirmability for objectivity (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln et al., 2011; Merriam, 2009). Additionally, Creswell and Creswell (2018) discuss the importance of assessing ethical concerns that may arise during different phases in qualitative research. In preparation for this research study, I reflected upon the transformation of a poor Black girl from a poverty-stricken area of the inner city who was

invisible to her teachers to that of a resilient and humble 26-year educator committed to making visible those who like me as a little girl, are invisible to some. As I engaged in the process of co-constructing life narratives of Black women whom I admire and respect, I remained diligent in my pursuit to honor their voices and experiences in ways that result in authentic portraits that embody resonance, resilience, and brilliance.

As the portraitist, I desire to construct a final portrait that is moving, authentic, credible, and inspirational to and for its readers. Merriam (2009) posits that because of the organic nature of lived experience, an objective truth or reality is difficult for qualitative researchers to capture. Nonetheless, my purpose for embarking upon this journey with Black females with whom I have a strong sisterhood is to provide other people with the significant experience these women have provided for me as they saw my face, understood my story, and valued my existence. Since their entrance upon the scenes of my life chapters, my personal and professional journey has been infused with authentic fulfillment. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis refer to this resonance as a “click of recognition” or “yes of course” response with “actors who will see themselves reflected in the story, with the readers who will see no reason to disbelieve it, and the portraitist herself, whose deep knowledge of the setting and self-critical stance allow her to see the truth” (1997, p. 247). To construct portraits that provide for trustworthiness and authenticity and thereby ensure the quality of my research project, I blended empirical strategies with aesthetic experiences in ways that position human experience inside coherence and unity.

Miles et al., (2014) describe procedures researchers should utilize when establishing safeguards that ensure findings from research studies are valid and reliable.

As I blended empiricism with aestheticism in a credible and transferable way, I utilized the procedures below:

1. Ensure credibility by triangulating results in a way where descriptions are context-rich and thick, the actors' portraits make sense, and the findings are clear, coherent, and systematically related.
2. Ensure transferability by triangulating results in a way where a range of readers identify with the findings as those that are consistent with their own experiences, understand that the processes and outcomes described in the conclusion are applicable in multiple settings, and find the finished portraits as congruent with the tenets of the theoretical framework used for this research study.
3. Ensure dependability by triangulating results that show meaningful parallelism in the findings across multiple data sources, demonstrate data was collected across multiple settings, and member checking was utilized with the actors to check for the accurate depiction of their lived experiences.
4. Ensure confirmability by triangulating results in a way that provides an explicit detail of the research study's methods and procedures, the level of self-awareness about my assumptions, and provisions made for the research study's data to be available for reanalysis.

To ensure I have honored the actors' lived experiences by creating a finished portrait that is seamlessly balanced, I engaged in the ongoing process of systematically infusing

mediums that check for valid and reliable conclusions. Lawrence-Lightfoot illuminates this symmetrical composition of a finished portrait with the following:

Enriched by carefully constructed context, expressed through thoughtfully modulated voice, informed by cautiously guarded relationships, and organized into scrupulously selected themes, the research portrait results from a seamless synthesis of rigorous procedures that unite in an aesthetic whole. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 274)

As I checked for the validity of the findings of my research study, I continuously asked questions that Miles et al., state are pivotal in examining whether the conclusions apply to a broader context such as, “are they transferable to other contexts, do they fit, how can they be generalized (2014, p. 314). Moreover, I ensured the findings of my research study are reliable by continuously examining the consistency of stability of the research study’s processes and asking the questions, “am I addressing issues of quality and integrity” and “have things been done with reasonable care” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 312).

Additionally, to further ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research study’s findings, once the initial coding and transcription cycles concluded, I utilized the process of member checking by providing my participants with a copy of their transcript to make any desired adjustments. To avoid disclosing information that may harm the actors, I asked them to make a notation of any desired changes and set a date and time to engage in dialogue about the changes. Doing this honored the layers of the actors’ tapestries to support the co-construction of an aesthetic whole that is authentic and trustworthy. To ensure an accurate level of authenticity, I conducted a final unstructured interview with the actors to discuss emergent themes and confirm data analysis findings.

Communicating Findings

Miles et al., (2014) suggest qualitative researchers should present findings in a descriptive narrative form rather than a scientific report. I communicated this research study's findings in clear and straightforward language to co-create and communicate a coherent and authentic final portrait. In the portraiture methodology, the findings that generate the final product, the portrait, are at the forefront of the research process from the inception of the research to the space where the portraitist communicates the findings. Tactics used to generate meaning during the actors' journeys such as noting patterns and themes, seeing plausibility, making metaphors, subsuming particulars into the general, and making conceptual and theoretical coherence will guide my work (Miles et al., 2014).

As I prepared to communicate the portraits' findings, I identified explicit connections between the layers of the evolved portrait sketches, coded data and research questions, findings from the literature review, and emerging convergent and divergent themes. The written reflections, portraits, and drawings that actors completed during the co-construction of the portrait are aligned with the identified emergent themes and provide the backdrop for the layers of the actors' life chapters. In making the final adjustments to the actors' portraits, I wove together the final threads in a way that makes sense of a world surrounded by strength, resilience, and scholarship. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis summarize this below:

It is in the sense of the world that the portrait makes for general readers and for actors at a site that the methodology of portraiture draws its real strength and allows the portraitist to reciprocate the kindness of welcomed study with the gift of the final portrait. (1997, p. 281).

Ortiz Aragón and Hoetmer (2020) assert that the systemization of human experiences allows people to deeply understand the convergence of newly reconstructed and divergent experiences of others in ways that create social change. As the actors worked together and learned from one another during the construction of the *Rivers of their Life chapters*, elevated ways of thinking, knowing, and being became the thread that weaves their reconstructed tapestry of sisterhood together. As the portraitist of this research study, I desire to communicate the findings in a way that provides a narrative of strength, scholarship, and resilience epitomized in Black female educational leaders' lived experiences in transformative ways that inspire others to continue becoming the very best version of themselves. To that end, the lessons learned from this research study dismantle the ideology of confusion, dissent, and hatred and replace it with new knowledge formation about that which inspires, elevates, and uplifts.

Ethical Considerations

Qualitative research involves writing about people, interacting with people, and collecting data from people (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2009; Miles et al., 2014). Human experience lies at the nucleus of social science theory and because of this, anticipating ethical issues that may arise during the research process is an ever-present priority. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), researchers' commitment to protecting participants and building trust promotes credible, authentic, and cross-cultural research. As a portraitist co-constructing the life chapters of Black women with whom I have a strong sisterhood, I am resolute in creating a work of art that will honor their voices, experiences, and life stories.

Adhering to detailed ethical guidelines is paramount when conducting research that penetrates the layers of lived experience. Miles et al., (2014) assert the importance of researchers honoring the lived experiences of their participants by reflecting and remaining mindful of the ethical matters which are: (a) worthiness of the project; (b) competence and informed consent; (c) benefits, costs, and reciprocity; (d) harm and risk; (e) honesty and trust; (f) privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity; (g) intervention and advocacy; (h) research integrity and quality; and (i) ownership of data and conclusions.

As the portraitist, I adhered to these guidelines and both protected and honored the layers of my actors' portraits by remaining acutely aware of my reflexive bias, anticipatory schema, and preoccupations throughout our journey together. As I co-constructed my actors' portraits, I continuously engaged in both self-reflective and self-critical exercises that enabled me to weave my actors' tapestries in ways that maintain vibrant colors, textures, and images. Consequently, I observed the details of my actors' life chapters with a critical lens. In doing so, I remained aware of the importance of this critical lens that is reinforced through Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis's assertion that the portraitist can create an authentic portrait when she remains mindful of the need to increase her "consciousness about the lens she brings to the field that allows her to open her eyes, as well as her mind and heart, to record the reality she encounters" (1997, p. 213). With portraiture, the portraitist is more evident than in any other research medium because she is "seen not only in defining the focus and field of the inquiry but also in navigating the relationships with the subjects, in witnessing and interpreting the action, in tracing emergent themes and in creating the narrative" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.13). The sisterhood that I share with these three strong, beautiful, and resilient

Black women affirms my humanity, resilience, and scholarship, and it is inside this reality, I want our society of thinkers to live; live inside palpable peace, live inside cultural clarity, and live inside harmonious healing.

Summary

The societal injustice currently plaguing the Black community has catapulted our world into a scrupulously chronicled racialized and politicized reality. To move forward, we must lean into a space where new lived experiences shaped by new knowledge, reshape the open canvas of authentic and lived experience in just and meaningful ways. My desire for this research project is to co-create pieces of art that resonate with our society of thinkers to represent a unified human experience that is engaged in a unified endeavor to create a unified community. This chapter has presented the elements of portraiture in a way that moves empiricism beyond methodology, process, or outcomes and instead escorts its readers through a galaxy of discovery, illumination, and appreciation. The contextual interplay between voice, relationships, and emergent themes established this chapter's composition and danced within the frame that detailed the portraiture design's distinct features. Much like a symphony uses resonance and inflection to portray a rhythmic dance between sound and experience, the next portion of this chapter provides a colorful context for the actors' portraits. The final components of this chapter discusses the process for the collection and analysis of data and the methods I employed to frame this portraiture study in a way that inspires our community to join one another on an expedition to discover perfection inside of imperfection, triumph inside of trials, and resilience inside of resistance.

An artist stands before her blank canvas exploring and visualizing the experience she is creating to give others. I began this chapter by requesting the reader to join me in the journey to explore the lessons that can be learned from a study of the scholarship, resilience, and lived experiences of three Black female educational leaders in one of the largest urban school districts in the southeastern region of the United States. Knowledge and expertise manifest Black female educational leaders' lived experiences in ways that create equilibrium and balance between a community of thinkers and doers. Arnheim (1969) posited that a system is in peace when the forces constituting it are arranged in such a way as to compensate for each other. Human experience and understanding lie at the heart of a system in equilibrium, and it is inside the layers of our life chapters, we uncover the magnificence of discovery. I ask that you open your mind and heart and join me in the next chapter, where we will make and find new meaning through the transformative art revealed in the actors' portraits. Now, let us begin our time together.

CHAPTER 4: PORTRAITS

In this chapter, I present the portraits of three Black female educational leaders, Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth. This chapter begins with an overview of the place portraits, and counter-narratives have in the knowledge validation process. It then invites you to rest inside the space of my participants' portraits as we journey together along the rivers of their lives. Finally, I conclude this chapter by setting the stage for a composite depiction of my participant's rivers' confluences and their influence on the knowledge validation process.

Counter-narrative: An Overview

"I am a river eternal of the bliss. I already feel the nearby breezes, I already feel the wind on my cheeks, and my journey through the mountains, rivers, lakes, and grasslands, it becomes endless."

~ Javier Heraud Perez (1960)

Schubert and Borkman (1994) define experiential knowledge as information and wisdom gained from lived experience and suggest that this knowledge's attainment is acquired as a derivative of direct engagement. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), the centrality of experiential knowledge recognizes that the experiential knowledge of Black women is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about challenges people of color face due to their race and gender. Black feminist thought positions these lived experiences as integral components of the knowledge validation process, particularly when encapsulated within the layers of Black

women's narratives (Collins, 2000). Though this research study is grounded in Black feminist thought, its tenets share theoretical space with critical race theory regarding the responsibility of scholarly literature to provide narratives that counter deficit informed research methods, mainly when they communicate a narrative that distorts the experiences of people of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Racialized and gendered counter-narratives that focus on Black female educational leaders' lived experiences as sources of strength, resilience, and scholarship create an inverse space that oppressive ideology historically occupies in Black women's lived experiences. As will be revealed in Nia's, Ivy's, and Elizabeth's portraits, racist ideology and bigotry intended to mitigate their lived experiences conversely accelerate realities grounded in grit and resolve.

Monovocal narratives that discuss members of a marginalized community's lived experiences are often-times affixed to a social and intellectual deficit model (Montecinos, 1995). Majoritarian narratives, those generated by members of the majority population, are not often questioned because "people do not see them as stories but as natural parts of everyday life. Whether we refer to them as monovocals or majoritarian stories, it is important to recognize the power of White privilege in constructing stories about race" (Solórzano & Yosso 2002, p. 28). Narratives about the lived experiences of Black women constructed by Black women embed a layer of authentic truth that is often absent when crafted based upon assumptions of non-Black females.

Ikemoto (1997) furthers this discourse by describing a majoritarian story that distorts and silences Black people's experiences. This is done by utilizing a standard formula that purports to be neutral and objective yet implicitly makes assumptions about

Black people who find their origin inside misinformation and negative stereotypes.

Solorzano and Yosso define counter-storytelling in the following way:

We define the counterstory as a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society). The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform. Yet, counter-stories need not be created only as a direct response to majoritarian stories. Indeed, within the histories and lives of people of color, there are numerous unheard counter-stories. Storytelling and counter-storytelling these experiences can help strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance. (2002, p. 32)

Solórzano and Yosso contend that counter-narratives add to the scholarly literature by building community among those at society's margins.

As a consequence, this charge becomes pivotal when the following occur: (a) put a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice; (b) challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems; (c) open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing possibilities beyond the ones they live; and (d) teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone (2002). And so with that, my friend, I invite you to settle in, open your mind, embrace the unknown, and journey with me on an excursion through the rivers of our lives.

Nia Brown: A Portrait

See My Face: Tranquil Waters

The wind continuously beckoned me to answer her as she vigorously swept the leaves falling from the trees up into her protective bosom. As I rushed into the house on that wintry day, packages falling out of my arms and crashing to the floor, I stopped in the foyer, shook my braids that had become tangled from the wind, exhaled, and said out loud, “Devil, you are not going to mess with my spirit today!” You see, in 25 minutes, I was scheduled to have my first interview with Nia Brown, who was in her third year as a middle school principal and a dear friend of mine. I gathered all the fallen packages and sashayed into the kitchen, as I had decided nothing was going to get me down today. I had waited for 26 years to tell the story, her story, your story, our story in a way that countered the master narrative of oppressive ideology shackled by the isms, racism, sexism, classism, with one cloaked in strength, resilience, and beauty. Nia was not going to have to wait on me. I was on my way!

As I settled into my seat and watched Nia settle into hers, I was reminded of that day eight years ago when I was sitting in a meeting doodling my husband’s name in my notebook while waiting for the meeting to start, when out of the corner of my eye, I saw a majestic, statuesque Black woman walk into the room in a way that demanded my brain abandon my doodling. I affixed my gaze on her. I continued to look her way because something about how the soft light danced around her yellow A-line dress softly beckoned me into the frame of this scene. Over the next eight years, as Nia moved into various positions, our paths continued to cross, and as a result, our friendship deepened. While I looked at the exceptional woman in front of me and took note of her signature

crimson red lipstick, I was reminded of just how very proud and honored I was to share space with her.

As Nia and I relaxed into the shared space that served as the backdrop for the interview, light bounced off Nia's glasses and cast a hieroglyphic glow on the ceiling. The way that beautiful light danced across Nia's face replaced my morning chaos with a peace analogous to tranquil and serene waters. As I looked at a reflection of myself in Nia's glasses, I whispered a prayer to God and said, "Thank you for this moment, thank you for your grace." As I finished my brief exchange with God, I looked up, took a drink of my coffee, and said, "Nia, let's take a journey together."

Nia and I began the interview by discussing her educational experiences as a child both in her community and school. She stated:

I went to Porter Elementary, which was a predominantly African American school in Newbirth. There was an African American female principal at that time, Clarissa Burns, and I remember her very distinctly because she was beautiful. She dressed very well. She was very articulate. She really handled herself very professionally. I remember thinking in the first grade, I want to be like this lady. I'm going to be a leader like her.

As I listened to Nia, my heart began to turn somersaults in my chest because Clarissa Burns had been that same Black female model for me when I first became an administrator. Clarissa Burns, whose curly hair swayed in tandem with the melodic cadence created by the alliance between her heels and the concrete floor, always smelled like freshly picked jasmine flowers. As I silently debated whether or not to share our shared experiences, Nia continued:

So, African American women have always had a strong influence on my life. Then, due to busing, I got moved to First Charter Elementary. And I remember being in tears when I got that letter and told my mom I didn't want to leave Ms. Burns. I didn't want to leave my African American female teachers that I had had. So, that was the first time I had white female teachers and was at a predominantly white school, and I remember feeling like I really didn't belong there. Right? There was just something that was off. (Silence)

Nia lowered her head, and in deep thought, said the following:

It was then that I realized that a good student had to be quiet, that you were supposed to be quiet and not say anything and not raise your hand and just listen to the teacher. And I didn't understand that. I had all these good ideas that I wanted to share, and I was like, "Why do I have to be quiet?"

Nia looked towards the ceiling with visceral sadness reflected in her eyes. For a brief moment, Nia and I retreated to the empty space where rejected anonymity held captive our visibility, as this moment, this space, forcibly ushered him back in. With her right index finger, Nia slowly adjusted her glasses higher on her nose and continued:

I no longer had cheerleaders for me. Ms. Burns had put me on the student council at Porter. So, I just felt like I was connected to the leader of that building, and I didn't feel that at First Charter. I don't even remember who the principal was at First Charter. So, that just tells you I don't know if that person wasn't around or they just didn't have a major impact on me. So, just to kind of move forward, they ended up sending me back to Porter, I think fourth or fifth grade. I don't know if the busing alignment had finally kind of gotten figured out, but they put me back

at Porter. So, I was so happy! It was like a sigh of relief. I went to second and third grade at First Charter and then was able to go back to Porter with Ms. Burns for fourth and fifth grade, and I felt like I was back home again. I went on to George Washington Middle School, which is also in Newbirth, a predominantly black neighborhood. I had an African American female principal there as well, Ms. Harvey. So, I feel like they molded me into becoming a principal before I even knew that education was going to be my career path. I was one of the few African American kids in advanced programs, so I felt like being smart was a white attribute. A lot of black kids would say, "Oh, you're acting white," or "You're talking white," or "You're in the white kids' class."

Though being smart and doing well in school was a reality for many Black females, including myself, it was not a natural perception of others. Absorbed in this scene, Nia continued by stating:

I really didn't know how to handle that because I had always been told that we were supposed to be extraordinary. That's how my parents raised me—that we should go above and beyond. So, I didn't understand why that was a negative thing during my middle school experience. I understood colorism in middle school. I remember girls saying to me, "You think you're better than me because you're light-skinned and your hair's long," and I didn't understand that. I didn't understand why. Why would I think I'm better because I'm light-skinned? I got into a fight my eighth-grade year and got suspended because a girl had taken me by my ponytail and pulled me down the steps.

I felt an acute spasm begin its ascent in the bottom of my belly. Like Nia, I had a problematic middle school experience because I grew up in an all-Black neighborhood and was bussed to a predominantly White middle school. However, on this day, I wasn't alone. The majestic lady in front of me endured the same thing I did.

Ironically, this newfound awareness of commonality with someone I admire and respect created a clear but solid shield between my belly and my brain. At that moment, my kinship with Nia flooded the internal striations created by the building spasm of my river's floor. Nia must have sensed the raging internal battle because she paused, looked directly into my eyes, leaned her head to the right, and smiled. Nia's soothing gesture silenced the crashing waves that had taken residence in my spirit, and with a nod from me, she continued, stating:

So, at Marshall High School, I did okay. I don't even know who my counselors were. So, it was a little bit of a disconnect there, but I believe my junior year, I had an African American assistant principal, Kenneth Lawson, and he kind of took me under his wing. He told me about Hampton University and about HBCUs, and that kind of opened up a whole other door for me. That's when I decided to major in middle school education, particularly because I had such a horrific experience like emotionally and developmentally in middle school. I wanted to help kids with those barriers. I did experience some racism at Marshall. I had a teacher who wouldn't listen to me, wouldn't let me talk. So, I was very thankful that an African American teacher came, Mr. Arthur, and that Mr. Lawson came there as an assistant principal because I felt like then at least I had some advocates who understood me and understood what I was going through.

As the interview moved along the rivers of Nia's educational experiences as a young adult, she reflected upon her most memorable college experiences.

Nia attended a large predominantly white university in the southeastern United States. Like Nia, I attended a predominantly white postsecondary institution. Nia paused and closed her eyes, appearing to be deep in mental reflection. I was unsure what to do. Did the memory conjure up excitement? Anger? Nia opened her eyes, repositioned her body in the seat, and continued:

Joining Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority was the most meaningful thing for me. My mom is an AKA. My sister is an AKA. So, it was a huge rite of passage for me to be a part of that sisterhood. The Greek life gave black people their own little microcosm. It was our own little small world where we came together, and we kind of forgot that we were at somewhat of a racist institution. When we were all together, it was like we had our own little private sector where we got together. I really felt tied to my sorority and that community that we had built.

Nia and I were members of the same sorority, so I had context for the experience she was describing. Since my college days with my sorority, very little had rivaled that level of sisterhood among brilliant and exceptional Black women. Nia paused.

The tide of this scene had shifted as the wave hovering over this scene grew. As the tidal shift framed the scene we were entering, Nia soberly said:

I think looking back, I can think of a variety of times where I was discriminated against. In the midst of it though, I don't know if I really recognized it. It wasn't until later that I realized, man, I guess around college age that things really are very different for black people than white people, and the older I got, the more I

saw little microaggressions and the subtleties of racism. I had always studied racism as the water hoses and the colored water fountains. So, my mind wasn't able to connect those two things until I got older and realized that racism could be very subtle at times but could still be just as harmful and just as damaging. I realized that there is no forgiveness for black people. There is no flexibility; that you have to be perfect. So, that pressure that I put on myself in high school and college, I still do it to myself now. I do not give myself breaks. And I think that's because I'm always thinking that there is no room for mistakes for black people. And you can think of black people who have made mistakes in the community, leaders, whoever, the media comes down on them. They lose their jobs, their reputations. And a white person can do the same exact thing and get promoted. So, that type of pressure really, it's a strain on me... It really is.

My heart ached for Nia. She was such an amazing woman, exceptional educator, loving mother. I had watched her confront challenging situations with such poise, grace, and intellect. People on the outside of this scene were not fully aware of the extraordinary gift Nia carried inside; an unwavering strength and relentless passion for creating space for students' waves to bounce off of imminent barriers. With growing momentum, Nia excitedly continued:

But at the same time, I try not to worry about that pressure and use that pressure. And you know they say pressure makes diamonds, right? Use that pressure so that I am more successful, more available, more of a change agent for my kids because of that pressure. But it's always there. I remember I applied for a summer program, and my Science teacher wouldn't write me a recommendation. So, I

found another teacher to write the recommendation, but it was a Science camp, so really, I needed my Science teacher to write it. She could have kept me from getting in that camp, but I feel like God opens doors, no matter who's fighting against you. So, it didn't matter that she was trying to be a barrier in my existence because I felt like God knew where I was going and was going to open that door anyway. So, she wasn't able to stop me. It was just a hurdle that I had to jump over.

Nia's discussion of her resilience and resolve to succeed, no matter the barriers, reminded me of the ancestral legacy of Black people discussed in Chapter 2.

Nia's educational experience provided context for the transformative life chapters that shaped the relationship between her understanding of self within the broader context of her surroundings. As Nia and I continued to share space within her life chapters' dense layers, her portrait began to take shape and form. The canvas that started blank at the start of the interview was now framed by human experience that consisted of vibrant typography, textured backgrounds, and flowing rivers. I asked, "What made you go into education?" Nia responded, stating:

I felt like everybody needed a Clarissa Burns. Every kid needed her, not just black kids, but white kids also, because I know that the way that she carried herself was very different from what I saw when I looked on TV and saw black women. So, for white people, that does the same thing. We are often stereotyped by music and television, I mean, even more now than when I was a child. So, I felt like I wanted to be somebody's Clarissa Burns. When I look back on my experiences and what I've done in education, I wanted black females, in particular, to see themselves in

me; to shine the light on their voice. I remember being silenced, and I didn't want any other kid to sit in a class and feel like, "My voice doesn't matter." So, when you see that you have an African American leader that is fighting for you and advocating for you, then your voice gets stronger. I can think about a time when two dark-skinned, African American girls came into my office and said, "I want to talk to you about colorism." And I thought they could never have a conversation with a white principal about colorism. Right? We were able to talk about it, and there were tears shed. What makes black beautiful is that we come in all these different shades. Now, we have a club at my school for girls who have curly hair and coils. That's an experience that black girls probably wouldn't have at any other school.

Nia's words manifested the beauty, strength, and scholarship that amazing black women have personified in our lives and how they have created a space for people that look like me, that looks like her, and that look like you.

The interview continued, and I said, "Now I want you to think about your mentoring relationships that you've had. You've spoken some about Clarissa Burns. You've spoken some about other black educators and your family. How did mentoring relationships impact your personal and professional experience, specifically as it relates now to your position as a black female educational leader?"

Well, I can definitely say that I would not be a principal today if it weren't for Janice Colwell and Dr. Lincoln. So, I'm always about taking chances, taking risks. When I was thinking about becoming a principal, I called Dr. Lincoln, the assistant superintendent, and set up a meeting with her. I thought, she's got some

wisdom. She can give me the tools. I'll do whatever it takes. I learned from my experiences that it's all about determination and perseverance. I met with her, and first of all, I wanted to know about her Ph.D. To see a black woman with her Ph.D. was so exciting. That experience for me was a lift to keep doing what I'm doing because I thought, man, maybe someday I can be an assistant superintendent. Maybe a month later, I got into an African American mentoring program. Janice Colwell became my mentor, and then she got a new job at a school called Rudolph Middle School. So, I went in, worked with her, shadowed her, worked on the budget with her. Whatever experience she allowed me to be a part of, I was there. That was great. I mean, it was just like I had an inside track to what being a principal was all about. So, eventually, she had an assistant principal job open, and I applied for it, and I ended up getting the job. I can't say enough about Ms. Colwell because she took a chance on me. I was 29 years old, green, just really wanted to help kids. When I say that she poured into me every day, she was so hard on me. And at the time, I didn't realize that she was building me up to be a principal, but I thought, man, this lady's tough. She taught me a lot about dealing with parents, not backing down, building relationships with kids. I still call her to this day and ask her for advice on different situations. I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for them.

Like Nia, Dr. Lincoln was pivotal in my life journey as a Black woman and educational leader. I worked in a school where I was the only Black female administrator, and because of that, my voice was often silenced. However, I continued to advocate for marginalized students in ways that ricocheted off my colleagues' core belief systems.

Nia and I continued to uncover our portraits' common layers as we talked about our shared commitment to be for Black girls what Clarissa Burns and Dr. Lincoln were for us. Nia shared how she took 30 Black girls at her school who had behavioral and academic challenges and created an after-school program. "Those were the kids that made me thrive as an educator because I had to think about how I'm going to get them to engage in this learning experience and make it important," said Nia. Nia and another black female colleague ran the program together and exposed the Black girls to etiquette classes and other black female community leaders. Topics that illuminated why they have to be excellent and the charge that Black females have to continue the legacy of excellence were likewise examined. The sunlight that bounced off Nia's glistening eyes and peeked around her glasses seemed to magnify her state of excitement as she proclaimed:

When I tell you these girls changed, I mean, it was amazing to watch them grow from sixth to eighth grade. I actually talked to my staff about one girl who ended up going to Spelman and is now working at Google that I ran into this summer, and she was like, that program helped me because I was on the wrong path. As a teacher, you have an experience with probably 100 to 150 kids every year. But I wanted my impact to be greater than that. So, I thought, "How can I really have some systemic change," because there were some things going on in the school with our black kids not having access to GT classes and not being in the advanced program. I saw all of these problems that were barriers for African American students. I thought, "I've got to be able to make some real change, and I can't do it

in this seat. I've got to get a seat at another table, where they're making decisions."

So, that's what charged me to want to go higher.

The admiration I had for Nia's commitment to traverse the educational landscape that historically eluded Black female educational leaders' intellectual grasp ignited the accelerated waves of this scene. I asked, "How did you prepare and position yourself to be in the space where you qualified for these professional promotions?" Nia responded, stating:

I didn't ever feel like I was the chosen one. This goes back to another African American woman, but moving from assistant principal to principal, I kind of didn't know how I was going to get there. You've got to, one, show yourself true as an assistant principal, but then also you've got to get this committee to vote you in without really knowing you basically. And it seems like it's just simple, but it's really not. At the time, the assistant superintendent, who was a black woman, was serving in the role of assistant superintendent and high school principal because the previous principal had resigned. I took a job as an assistant principal at that high school where I had never worked. But I took a risk. I said, "I'm going to go over here and just work my ass off, and then maybe somebody will recognize that I need to be a principal." Right? So, I go over to this high school where there's a huge racial divide. The cafeteria had a divider in the middle, and white kids would sit on one side, and black kids would sit on the other side. And guess what side all the fights were happening?

I braced myself and held my breath as my lips refused to stifle the growing fury brewing in the walls of my throat and sorrowfully whispered, "the Black side." Nia closed her

eyes and slowly nodded her head up and down. As the relentless echo of Nia's words clumsily reverberated off the outer banks of my life chapter, I enduringly waited for her to continue. She quietly stated:

On the black side. So, obviously, that's why they put me in the cafeteria. I had no other job but to build relationships with kids and stop the violence. Those were my two jobs to do every day. And you would have thought it would have been the worst job in the world, but it was actually the most exhilarating job I ever had, because, one, I was needed; two, it was the kids that I've always wanted to service and work for; three, I really thought I could make a difference. I was the only black administrator at the time at that school, besides the interim principal, and then she left to go back to do her assistant superintendent job, and then they brought in a white male as the principal. So, I was the only black administrator. And kids were literally fighting, cussing each other out, walking out of the building. I mean, drugs, sex. I mean, anything you could think of that shouldn't be happening in a school was happening at this school. I actually broke up a gang fight by myself, which still to this day, I don't know how I did because the kids probably should have mauled me in the cafeteria. But I just felt like I can't let our people hurt each other like this, not in a school building and not when there's knowledge to be gained. I dealt with an African American female who was a lesbian and not allowed to go to class. The teacher told her she didn't want to teach her. I literally marched this girl up to the teacher's room and said, can you tell me why you can't teach this child who wants to learn English? And she said, "Well, look how she's dressed. It's just not appropriate. She's flirting with female

students in the class.” That little girl said, "That's the first time that somebody has ever stood up for me like that." I finally decided to apply for Jackson Middle School principal position, and it's been one of the greatest experiences of my life.

The wind that had settled outside the window was replaced with light, fluffy snow that forged the heaviness clinging to our shared space's frame to retreat reluctantly. Together, Nia and I inhaled the resonance that this shared moment peacefully inserted along the tranquil rivers of our lives. Reluctant to interrupt the ease and flow Nia and I were experiencing as we cruised along our lazy river, I debated upon asking the next question, as I knew it would briefly obstruct our view of the peaceful stream and involuntarily submerge us into the river's stormy embrace. Nonetheless, I pursued her tumultuous current as we discussed the demographics of Nia's organization and asked, "How do you believe the demographics of your organization impact your work as a black female educational leader?" Nia responded, stating:

There are two dynamics that make leadership difficult for me. One is being a woman. I have a lot of male teachers. I think that some males don't respect women leaders. I think it's evident if you look at how difficult it is to get a woman into political leadership. Right? And then the second barrier for me is being African American. So, I feel like I have two strikes against me as a leader. Then if you put my age in there, I feel like that's the third strike. I became a principal at 35, which I don't think is abnormal. I mean, there are a lot of principals who are even younger than me who actually started in their early 30s. Those three layers can sometimes cause people to judge me before they even get to know me or go against whatever initiative it is I introduced based on those characteristics. They

want to know how it is that I have my Ph.D. It's almost like, instead of that being celebrated, it becomes a weapon to use against me when it should be something that's celebrated. So, it's kind of damned if you do, damned if you don't. If I didn't have my Ph.D., they would say I don't have enough knowledge and experience to do this job. Now that I have it, it's almost like, "Who does she think she is to have this degree and be so young and want to lead me?" But that's when that resilience comes in. As an African American female, I feel like we have had to always struggle and always go above and beyond and be greater. So, with every hurdle that came, I just found another way. I'm thinking, "Where there's a will, there's a way. "That's just how I was raised. That's just how I'm built. I'm always trying to get better. And when we get better, the students get better.

Hear My Voice: Moving Waters

Two weeks had passed since Nia, and I had shared time together for her interview. Nia's caramel skin radiated palpable warmth as she helped her six-year-old son fix his pants. Just as the river's floor affectionately cradled her moving waters, Nia's fingers cradled her son's small face inside the frame of this moment. Nia kissed her son on his forehead, looked at me, and said, "Hold on just one second, please, I apologize." and lovingly said to her son, "Now, I have to finish this interview with Mrs. Woods, so I'll see you in a little while, okay?" Nia's son nodded his head, directed a curious glance at me, and happily scurried away. Nia and I engaged in small talk about hair, as the hint of burgundy was flawlessly laced within her newly twisted candy apple red dreadlocks, the joy our children bring to us, and the focus for our time together. I stated, "Today, I'd like you to share the way you've used your voice as a change agent both in your school

and the community to move, shape, and re-shape the lived experiences of others.” Nia responded, stating:

I had to get the community involved in our school. Whenever there's a community partnership available, whether it's a corporation, a church, church resources in the community for tutoring, or what-not, I'm really working to maximize our community resources. I didn't realize how strong the role of change agent would be until I became a principal at a predominantly black school in a predominantly black community. As a change agent, I think that the community is charging me with making sure that African American students have access to the same opportunities as other kids. I also believe that they want me to make sure our school is open to our kids and that our school is used as a vessel to impact the local community.

The gleam in Nia’s brown eyes danced across her face as the light that was not absorbed into the frame of this scene bounced off her reflection in the mirror behind her.

To cultivate the momentum of the moving waters our shared experience was creating, I asked, “As a change agent, what barriers have you faced?” The rhythmic diamonds bouncing off Nia’s glasses’ reflection greeted a volcanic pressure that Nia had so eloquently kept at bay. Nia leaned her head to the side as if a hook had snagged a rock on the river’s floor of this destination, looked me square in my eye, and said, “Well, there’s a lot.” Nia continued:

One barrier is just being able to obtain the knowledge through a college preparatory program. The next barrier is that there is no network, really, of African American principals for idea sharing or coming together to talk about

topics of concern. Also, I think another barrier, like I said, is that we're constantly being criticized, constantly being second-guessed. And so, I believe, I had to go above and beyond to get where I am. I had to get my doctoral degree; I had to be a part of all these programs; I had to show myself time and time again in the community, work in struggling schools. I feel like whatever the marker is for white males and white females, then our level of knowledge and experience has to be double that. I also feel like testing is a barrier. I've known a lot of capable educators who couldn't pass the principal exams, whether they have testing anxiety or maybe just don't do well on standardized tests and, therefore, did not make it to the level where they could apply for a principal position. I believe another barrier as a woman is having children. I don't think anybody says to a man, "Because you have kids, you are not going to have time to be a leader, or it's going to be too much on you." Right? "How are you going to be able to balance being a father and a principal?" But I feel like as a female, that's one of the first things in an interview that they asked me, "Would I be able to balance my personal life with my professional life?" And I felt like that was a slap in the face because I feel like being a mother is a badge of honor. And so, that honor does not keep me from being successful in my job. I have to prioritize my professional and personal life, but nothing that my children could ever do would keep me from being successful in my position. They are my passion; the reason why I do what I do every day because I want the world that they grow up in to be a better place, an equitable place. And so, as a woman, I believe people invent false barriers on you because of motherhood.

As a mother of two girls, Nia's words crashed into the moving waters that framed both my personal and professional river.

Being a mother elevated my skill-level as an artist charged with framing others' lived experiences in authentic and meaningful ways. She was exactly right. Being a mother is a "badge of honor." What Nia said next not only forced a flood of murky water to the surface of this space but likewise personified the false narrative that had permeated our rivers, our life chapters. The visceral experience her words created escorted suppressed tears that framed my eyes. Tilting my head back to keep my tears from dropping, I listened as Nia's next words fluently summarized the destination we currently shared. Nia stated:

Another barrier, I believe, is emotion. If a woman emotes and particularly black women, we're known for being very strong, being vocal. If you emote too much of your feelings, you become aggressive instead of assertive, whereas for a male, when a male emotes and asserts their position, they're seen as strong and powerful. But for an African American woman, it's almost like they put you in a category of being overzealous and emotional in a negative way, as in so emotional that you can't separate your feelings from your job duties. I feel like education is a very emotional job because we're dealing with young people who have a variety of developmental needs. We need to be able to be a nurturer at times, a disciplinarian at times, a listener at times. There are a lot of different emotions that go into my job, but it's not always to be a drill sergeant because some kids don't need that; they get enough of that. Their life has beaten them down, their

parents have left them, and they've got all these other things that are going on; they don't need me to beat them down any further.

The tear fell. This was my river. Angry. Aggressive. Emotional. Words full of disturbing vibration. Nia sensed the current's change. Waiting for the wave's crest to become parallel with the shoreline, Nia slowly continued:

As an African American woman, when you do emote, you're seen as weak if you become too emotional. And then also, if you become too assertive, you're seen as aggressive. It is also difficult for some males to work under a female. I believe there are still those gender stereotypes that a principal should be a male. And some male teachers think that they shouldn't have to listen to a female. They don't believe that they can thrive or grow under female leadership, particularly an African American female that "Who are you to tell me as a white male, what's best for kids?" And so, once again, I always try to prove myself through my education.

I reached over and grabbed a tissue to absorb the tears from my eyes as acute resonance framed this scene. Nia and I continued our journey together. She expressed the importance of her role as a Black female educational leader for others as they shape their opinions of Black people, particularly Black women. In contrast to the earlier scene, Nia and I shared a deep belly laugh as we imitated how other people describe Black women on reality shows. After five minutes, we gathered our composure, forced the residual belly laugh back down to our rivers' floors, and continued. Nia stated:

Every day I step into a school, I have to think to myself that every move I make is shaping the foundation for students of what an African American female leader

does, and it's a lot of pressure. Because my students are looking at me, they're putting me on a pedestal, and I have to be the utmost professional so that they don't think that those stereotypes they see are what African American females are like. My assistant principals and admin team say all the time how I'm calm in a storm. That's very intentional because if I lose my cool and show myself to be angry in a toxic way when I ask students to come to me when they're angry and upset, they'll know it's okay to emote, just not harshly or aggressively. That is purposeful because I want them to be able to see me as a model because they are going to run into racism, particularly African American females. So, I think when they look at me, they look at me as a guide and as a model of what an African American leader should look like. African American women are so poised in the midst of chaos, right? I mean, Rosa Parks sat on the bus and did not move.

(Silence)

Nia's words conjured up a powerful vision of a poised and elegant Rosa Parks with white starch gloves on firmly gripping the handle of her purse and gracefully turned her gaze to the heaven's sky. Nia continued by stating:

Also, I'm a mother, and I think that role is more helpful in the position that people realize because when I talk to kids, they start to see me as a mother, right? And that I love them and I care about them, and that I am nurturing them in this educational setting, so being a mother really helps. And so, they look up to me as a mother, too. That is a blessing that often is overshadowed when choosing female leaders and is looked upon as a negative, as a barrier when it has helped me time and time again in my position. I think having my doctorate helps with

white parents, although some don't want to recognize it. I think it does help me because they see my plaques in my office, and they're like, "Okay, you know what you're doing. You have the knowledge to do this job." And so, now, I feel I really use my voice to impact systemic racism.

Nia's six-year-old son entered the room as we were drawing closer to the day's final destination. He wanted his mommy's attention as he excitedly shared his discovery with her. Nia lovingly said, "Okay, thank you, I have to finish this up okay, give me about 15 minutes."

As we concluded our time together, Nia shared her final thoughts by pointing to a picture next to her and stated:

I'm always trying to be a role model in the community. I've got this picture here where I'm looking up at another female in Atlanta. I took that picture because I think as women, we need to help each other and look to our legends and legacies and try to bring somebody else up on the way. So, I'm always looking for another woman to help support through this journey in education. When God charges you with talents and gifts, you have to share those gifts with others.

Ivy Y. Glass: A Portrait

See My Face: Tranquil Waters

The sound of soft waves gently cradled my peaceful slumber as I wiggled my toes against the feather-like fluffiness of my down comforter. My body relaxed deeper into the tranquil space that invited me closer towards the shoreline as the ocean sound on my alarm clock signaled, the day was finally here! I squinted my eyes, and as the numbers eight, three, zero came into focus, levity tugged on the corners of my lips. Today, Ivy and

I would share space, space that would be the antithesis of that cold, rainy day we shared six years ago. You see, on that day, six long years ago, Ivy's wings intercepted death's relentless grasp as he attempted to devour my soul with his darkness. Today would be different. On this very day, as I prepared for my interview with Ivy, I reflected upon the way that life-altering moment six years ago created space for today. I slowly hugged the air with my breath. I closed my eyes, silenced my alarm clock, and whispered, "Darkness, you can't have today. The angel who helped me escape you a long time ago is waiting for me, and I am not going to let her down; you didn't win then, and you won't win now!"

The halo of light caused by the sun's reflection of Ivy's pearl necklace and earrings against the window elegantly framed the radiance that rested upon Ivy's mocha-colored skin. With flawlessly manicured nails folded one on top of the other, Ivy shifted in her seat, looked at me, and said, "I'm so excited!" I responded with, "So am I. So am I. Let's begin by discussing your educational experiences both as a child and young adult." Ivy thoughtfully stated:

I went to a small elementary school in the country called River View Elementary School. I then went to MLK Middle School, which was in the city. Then I went to LeGrange High School. I was fairly involved in several different things while I was in middle school and high school. Then I went to a JUCO called New York Junior College and found out that it wasn't an accredited school. A few years after that, I went to the University of Tennessee, where I got my undergrad degree in special education, where I graduated top in my class. Then I went on to Howard University to get my master's and pursue my superintendency. That is kind of my

educational experience. I was a single parent when I was going through the University of Tennessee. I had three boys who were one, two, and three. I drug them all over the University of Tennessee's campus to classes, and Professors allowed me to because I couldn't afford childcare.

Ivy looked down at her phone that was buzzing, as she had just received a big promotion and had rushed out of a meeting to share space with me. "Do you need to take that?" I asked, and Ivy shook her head and continued. She stated:

Growing up in my family, there were 11 of us. We were pretty poor growing up. I was the middle child. We lived in a five-room house. All the girls were in one room with bunk beds, the boys had a room, and then my parents had a room. It was very difficult growing up. I'm not ashamed of it now, but I had lots of corns and bunions on my feet because as a middle child, I always had to wear hand-me-down shoes. I'd have to squeeze my feet in them. We couldn't afford boots, so my mom would put bread sacks on our feet when we would have to walk to the bus stop. I remember getting really cold. I would have to walk about a mile to get to the bus stop to get on the bus. I would be freezing. I remember it was show and tell in elementary school. All of my white friends were bringing Barbie dolls. I would just lie and say, "Oh, my mom won't let me bring my things to school." But the reality of it was I didn't have anything. That Christmas, we all got a box of chocolate-covered cherries. That is what was under the tree. To this day, I hate chocolate-covered cherries!

In perfect unison, Ivy and I threw our heads back and laughed out loud. In doing so, I hit the table so hard, the flame on the lit candle next to me flickered. As the last giggle

quickly escaped my lips that were attempting to demonstrate reclaimed composure, Ivy continued and stated:

I was thankful for my parents doing what they could but having that many, they just really couldn't afford a lot of things. When I was in third grade and played basketball, you may remember, Yo-Yo sandals were the thing back then. They were these sandals that looked like wedges, but they were straight, and they had a hole in the heel, and that's why they were called Yo-Yo's. I wanted some of them so bad. I wasn't able to get them when they first came out, and then one of my white friends gave me a pair of hers when she was getting some new ones. I thought I was the stuff! I'm like, "I got me some Yo-Yo's now. I'm like everybody else." My white friends that I had at the time really did try to help me fit in and have the things that they did. My best friend, her name was Rachel. I was the only person who was African American that was allowed to go to their house. I remember I'd spend the night.

Like Ivy, my mind drifted back to that weekend during my 6th-grade year in middle school when I experienced my first sleepover. I had finally convinced my parents to let me spend the night at my white friend Stacy's house, and we had so much fun!

Ivy and I talked about the innocence of our childhood and how things were very different as adults. Ivy continued to discuss childhood memories and stated:

There was a lot of jealousy with my siblings, though, because going through school, I was involved. I did a lot of things just because I wanted to do better because I always felt like it was something more than just this. I thought I don't want to have to live in a five-room home. I want to be better. I want to be able to

help my parents. I want to help my siblings. Growing up very poor, I remember there were times when we didn't even have meat to eat for our dinner, and my sister would be like, "Where's the meat?" We would have macaroni, greens, potatoes. She was like, "That macaroni is the meat, girl. You better eat it." People think Corn Chex Mix is the bomb. When I was growing up, we had Corn Chex, Rice Chex, and Wheat Chex. They were the actual cereal in a box, and that's what we ate for breakfast. When the Chex Mix came out, I'm like, "I've been eating Corn Chex for a long time," but not as a mix but as a meal.

Laughing so hard I could hardly speak, I muffled, "Girl, you are absolutely crazy!" You see, one of the things I loved most about Ivy was her ability to consistently turn lemon-water into a top-shelf margarita, no matter the situation! With peaceful gratitude, Ivy continued by stating:

Sometimes going to bed and just having two meals a day taught me an appreciation for not wasting. If we got a soda, that was a huge deal because it was water, tea, or lemonade. Lemonade, because my mom would make it out of fresh lemons because that's what she could afford. We would walk to Jimmy's, a little grocery store, to buy a dollar's worth of baloney and get a package of crackers so we could cut them in fours so each person could have two crackers and that quarter or fourth of baloney. I grew up very, very poor with parents who did the best that they could. They gave us what they could. I've been appreciative of how I grew up in ways that help me appreciate things in life now.

The laughter that was interwoven into the fabric of the moment Ivy and I were sharing epitomized the strength she had exuded throughout our rich sisterhood. Scenes along the

riverbanks of my personal and professional journey often included Ivy's aesthetically pleasing attire that began with her stylish high heel shoes and ended with her exquisitely adorned nails. Ivy's skilled ability to shift heavy and dense chronology into joyful and exhilarating experiences in ways that compel one to take notice is unrivaled.

Ivy and I continued to rest inside the shared space of our similar childhoods. Like Ivy, I grew up very poor; however, I remained unaware of how poor I was until I was bussed to a predominantly White school. Before my social studies teacher, Ms. McGinnis, who was (and still is) a stunningly brilliant Black woman entered the scene of my 7th-grade year, my face had remained an anomaly amongst a sea of White faces. It wasn't until I became an adult that I realized the significance my shared experience with Ms. McGinnis over 30 years ago would create space for today. The abrupt entry of this memory onto the riverbank of my current scene led me to ask Ivy, "When did you know you wanted to be a teacher?" Ivy responded, stating:

The most memorable experience for me was when I actually got to go and start doing some student teaching, my practicums, where I could get into the schools to begin working with kids. I saw the light at the end of a tunnel. I began to do my practicums, and I was able to go into schools and shadow teachers and was like, "Oh, this is really what teaching is going to be about. This is really what I want. This is what I want to be able to do."

As Ivy and I entered another scene along the banks of her river, I asked, "when was it that you realized that your experiences as a black female were different than the experiences of other people?"

It was when I got my first principal job. That's when I first realized it. All along the way, I grew up around white people, not knowing what racism was or any of that. I always had white people in my life, mentors. Some of the best mentors that I had were white. Going in, I'm thinking, "well, I can do the same things that they do because we both have the same degrees and those different types of things."

But it was a rude awakening for me when I became a principal at the Tennessee State Career Academy. As little as this may seem, it was a huge deal where my office could be. The previous principal's office was in the back of the school's building, a big, nice office. When you walked into the building to the right, there was a smaller office. People wanted my office to be there and not where the previous principal's office was, who then was a white male. Literally, I had to meet with the assistant superintendent, the director, my boss and argue about why I should be able to have the same space and same office as the previous principal. It was the most ludicrous thing that I had ever seen. There were three principals before me who were white, who had that office. Why now, I, the African American person, have to be in this small office up front and not have the same experience that the others had? I said, "Is it because I'm African American? Is it because you're all trying to keep an eye out and watch me?" I didn't understand why I had to be right by the door where everybody coming in could get to me before they would even get to my secretary. When I was a teacher, I experienced it a little bit, but I really didn't know the difference between it until I became an administrator. Ever since I have been an administrator in every position that I've had, me, Ivy Glass, has had so many restrictions and things put on me that are so

different from everybody else. I'm like, I don't understand why. I can be in meetings. I would say the same thing or say it first, but if a white person or a white female said it, people are like, "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah." I'd be sitting back and looking. Then I'd raise my hand again, and I'd say, "Hey, I just said that." I noticed there was a difference. People did not want to recognize me for who I was, for what I knew, and oftentimes...

Ivy's words hung in the air as if they were balancing on an invisible tight-rope. The wisps of curls that covered the top of Ivy's hair were rapidly filling the frame as Ivy's beautifully manicured nails supported her head that was hanging low. "Excuse me..." Ivy said. Ivy's pearl earrings dangled along-side her high cheek-bones as they arduously resisted the gravitational pull that daringly confronted them. The tranquil water that had enveloped the frame of this scene, before this moment, became the very thing that imprisoned it. Little by little, the peaceful flow of the river's waters that had defined the scene over the last hour became a torrential current that now held captive tears that represented pain, suffering, and outrage. I lowered my head, and as I clung to the surface supporting my limbs, I saw darkness happily skipping towards us out of the corner of my eye. He would not win today. Ivy saved me from him six years ago, and now I had to save her from him.

Though only five minutes had elapsed, it felt like the tide was at a stand-still. With a heavy heart, I looked into Ivy's caramel-colored eyes and said, "Do you feel like continuing?" Ivy cleared her throat and replied, "Yeah." "We can stop," I said, and with unabated grit, Ivy looked at me and replied, "No, I'm okay, we can keep going." Ivy cleared her throat and continued. Softly, she quietly stated:

I felt so undervalued. I'm just really tired. When you say, "What's wrong?" I'm tired of feeling like I have to fight these battles by myself, why I have to prove myself. I'm just tired. I'm tired as an African American female. Yeah, people talk about Black Lives Matter and all this, but I still think that, as African American females, we will always be looked at differently. If I say things and I'm passionate about it, people say I'm an angry black lady. I'm not angry. I'm just passionate about what I believe. I believe that all students should learn. I have a passion for students. Often, as an African American female, I am misconstrued. I feel like I have to explain myself over and over, and it's daunting. It's a very daunting task.

Disheartened by the ferocious clutch Ivy's rivers had on her this scene, I shifted my body weight and straightened my back. My courage would break the mounting momentum generated by the looming crashing waves. My strength would loosen her rivers' grasp. I reached my hand out as if to forcibly push the tide back, looked Ivy straight in the eye, and said, "I'm doing this research project because, as a Black female, that experience is so powerful. We are different in many ways. It's our experiences that create that skill-set. Your story is so powerful. The world needs to hear this story."

Dismantled by the adept wind that dipped in and out of the eye of the storm, the waves moved slower and slower...slower and slower...until they stopped. With shielded protection, Ivy continued by stating:

When it was time for me to be the principal, I wasn't the chosen pick. People tried to put blocks up because they wanted a white male to be the principal there. People tried to block me from getting that job. In our district, we do district awards for principals; people have said they could not allow me to win. I feel like

I'm never rewarded for all the hard work that I do. I've changed schools around. I've helped build leaders to become assistant principals, principals. I've just got to the point where my faith in God is what really keeps me going. I just say all of my rewards will come from him because so many people are envious and jealous of what I have accomplished here on earth. I've never done anything except try to help people. I will always do that. Even the white people who try to keep me down, I will always try to continue to help them unless someone does something to me that's immoral, unethical, or impossible, then that's when you will see me put up a fight, and the rage will come out. If people try to do something wrong for kids, that's when you will see that. As a principal, money was taken from me as a priority principal to give to the good old boys, to their buddies. I could see budgets, and when I would say something about it, I was threatened in my career about keeping my mouth shut. I'm like, "No, I won't." People don't know the things that I've been through as an African American female.

Hurricane-like gusts of wind burst through the frame of this scene. I wanted so desperately to wrap my arms around Ivy and protect her. I wanted to silence the raging storm surge that was feeding the violent winds. Where were the anchors? In almost a whisper, Ivy continued:

I had to take one part of the general knowledge teaching tests seven times. That was \$100 every time I had to take that. I was so depressed that I tried to commit suicide as a grown adult after graduating from the University of Tennessee Summa Cum Laude, top in my class. I just thought I couldn't keep doing this. I came from 3711 Obama Drive, which was a project area, a single parent, tried to

go back to school to do better for my children, and then this one part of a test is going to keep me from everything that I had tried to do all my life. I just couldn't take it.

Ivy's painful words engulfed my body...my soul...my heart, for it was Ivy who had freed me from the life-altering darkness for which my assailant, my colleague, had sentenced me.

Her pain took me back to that day six years ago when the shadow of death strangled me. I looked deeply into Ivy's eyes as strength and courage invited me into this scene. This was her story. This was her scene. Ivy's opening day was here, and no one was going to delay her curtain call. With fearless fortitude Ivy stated:

I was the only African American female high school principal at that time in New York, so it was very, very difficult because I didn't have people to talk to. I went through a depression. It was a very, very difficult time for me, but I just realized that no matter how people treat me, I'm not here for them. I'm here for kids. And that's why anybody who knows Ivy Glass will tell you she is all about the kids. There were times that I was taken off of committees because I would speak up and would advocate for African American kids because of the data, advocating for African American teachers and administrators, saying we need more. I said, "That's okay. You can take me off of the committees, but what you can't do is stop me from attending meetings." I really think it's sad that white people are inferior to African American females. I feel like all I try to do is help and contribute and give what I have to whatever is happening, whatever initiatives, but if we speak, it's like they think that we want their job. I've had doors closed in my face. When I

got a job, and a white male didn't get the job, he was in a public bar saying that if he were colored and had a vagina, he would've got the job. (Silence)

Coastal erosion devoured the frame of this scene. The stench. Muddy water. Motionless prey. The infrastructure of this moment had been destroyed by sulfur-making algae, monsters that prey on the defenseless. Ivy continued by stating:

Literally, I was qualified. Why can't I, as an African American female get a position and be qualified for a position without saying those types of things? I used to go to the white people and talk to them and tell them these things. I don't anymore because when I did, all it did was hurt me. I got penalized for speaking up. But at the end of the day, what I've learned, is that white people will always stick together, and that's just the way it is.

The words “if I were colored and had a vagina” rang loudly against the frame of this scene. Indignant rage permeated the air. “Seriously,” I said. Ivy responded with, “I know, it’s crazy, and the sad thing about it is they actually believe that!” I knew some people thought that way, but to say it out loud in a public place was simply unfathomable.

Hear My Voice: Moving Waters

Ivy’s tacit recognition of our kindred experience as I re-entered her scene reminded me of the way sisterhood’s power creates space for transformative lived experiences. Ivy’s intuitive and comforting smile shifted the scene’s energy as we thoughtfully expressed our shared love of education. Ivy stated:

I went into the field of education because my son had a 504 plan for reading comprehension. When he was in the first grade, his teacher gave kids candy if they never missed a word. Well, he was always going to miss a word, so he wasn't

ever going to get candy. I remember sitting up in the bed reading with him, us crying and crying, and I thought, "I've got to do something about this. This isn't right." By the third grade, he could read and read on grade level, but it was because of a personal experience. A lot of people don't know this about me. I have a disability as well. When I was in middle school, I was in a special education class for reading. I see so many African American kids that don't get the same treatment as others. I went into education because of personal experiences in school and how I was treated versus my white friends. I needed to be that voice. My parents did the best that they could, but some parents just don't know. If you don't know what the rules are in education, you don't know what to fight for. You just accept what teachers tell you. You accept what the principals and assistant principals or even counselors tell you. It was that for me. I got into education because I saw how African American kids were being treated and families not getting everything they wanted or getting the same opportunities as white kids. I'm not so sure, but I think white people just do things to do it, and some of them are aware of it, and some aren't. I will help all kids, but in particular, I have a heart and passion for helping black and brown kids because of what was done to me. If I don't get positions because people know I'm going to stand up for what's right, to God be the glory. I hope it's no time soon, but I will go to my grave, and everybody will know that Ivy Glass was about helping kids.

The waves of our scenes continued to ricochet from halcyon to heavy, buoyant to broken, and as the first interview came to a close and the scenic winds began to settle, Ivy and I talked about the significance of our faith.

I remember my mom saying, “God didn't bring you this far to leave you. You've got to have faith. You've got to believe,” Ivy said. I nodded my head and waived my right hand in the air as if I were in the midst of a powerful Sunday morning sermon. Ivy continued, “all my praise, honor, and glory goes to God. I'm a servant, and that's what I want to do. I want to serve.” Ivy began to cite her favorite bible verse. Once she started, I became so excited because it was also one of my favorite verses! I began to recite Matthew 25:21 in my head while she stated it aloud, “Well done good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a few things, and I will put you in charge over much,” and in perfect unison, Ivy and I said, “when that time comes, my God will say well done, well done.”

Determined to inhale the crisp air created by the gentle breeze covering this scene, I asked, “What would you say is the most significant thing you have accomplished thus far?” Ivy stated:

I would say that the proudest moment for me as an educator is to see that I had instilled in African Americans, and especially African American males, that it's okay to be smart. It's okay to be educated and proud of it and help others move them along. That's one of my proudest moments. And then to see young African Americans like yourself and others position themselves to be in administrative positions and to be able to help others move up. I do a lot of mock interviews with African Americans at all levels, elementary, middle, and high. I have to reach back and continue to pull people along to be successful and reach that goal that they want, especially African American females. One thing I know is that if I went through what I went through and I survived, I don't want my fellow African

American females to go through what I went through. If I can help them and lessen the pain and show them the road, give them some nuggets, the skills, knowledge, and pedagogy to position themselves and not have to go through the things that I had to go through, I will. As an African American female, it's kind of like our parents who went through slavery or grew up poor, and all of a sudden, we have children, and we don't want our kids to suffer that. I feel that way about African American females. I'm so passionate and so strong about it that I don't want an African American female to go through the things that I went through in their personal life or professional life.

Ivy's red dress and beautifully curled hair entered the scene ahead of her as we set down to share space for our second interview. Ivy's smile was beautifully framed by the strand of pearls that glistened at her neckline. The cascade of light that gleefully peeked around the blinds that separated this scene from the riverbank's elements warmly caressed my face. It was super bright...in a good way.

I debated on whether to take my glasses off as the glare created by the sunlight's reflection obstructed my view. Ivy noticed the luster created by the mirrored image and said, "Let me move over here...is that better?" We laughed and talked about events that had taken place in our lives since our last meeting, as Ivy had just received a huge promotion! "Do you see yourself as an agent of change in your organization," I asked as we finished catching up on each other's lives and began the interview? She responded by stating:

I do see myself as an agent of change. And simply because I have been in different positions. Even today, as we're having this conversation, I have accepted

a new position! So, I think about everything that I do, and it's expanding so that I can affect more scholars' lives. It's important to help adults build leaders who can reach their dreams and become change agents too. I really try to put myself into positions like mentoring people, recommending people for different leadership programs, or recommending them to serve on committees to have that voice that we feel often is missing, especially missing with our African American females. I mean, it's very seldom that we have an African American female at the table when there's an initiative or something that we want to talk about. You don't get that opportunity to have that voice to know how it's going to affect not just me, Ivy, but how it's going to affect all young African American ladies who want to be change agents. Sometimes we're pigeon-holed, and we aren't given other opportunities. One of the things that I try to encourage African American women is that we can't settle. I always encourage people to talk to their leader and insert themselves and start doing the work, and then they can see change, and they can be a part of that.

Ivy and I continued our journey throughout destinations of our shared scenes with several affirmations such as, “mm-hmm,” “amen girl,” and “now that’s what I’m talkin’ bout.” Our conversation quickly expanded as we discussed the role of Black female educational leaders in the Black community. Ivy stated:

I see myself as an agent of change for the black community. I really advocate for African American females. If I weren’t at the table, I feel like African American females will not have gotten opportunities. So me being able to be what I would say, at the right place, at the right time, serving on different committees, being in

different groups, and being able to be that voice that speaks up and being that change agent for African American women, excites me. And often, I have to say to people that are always looking at why we shouldn't get something. It's because they always think we're the angry black woman. It's not anger, people. It's passion. We have just as much passion as you have or you don't have because we have to make up for you too! (Ivy paused and leaned her head to the side)

Ivy and I burst into laughter as we called upon the top corner of our eyebrows to tug on the top corner of our lips. "Unfortunate, but true," I said, as Ivy continued:

And so that is the thing. I think the black community defines a successful African American female as a person who has been a change agent in the black community, a person who has been able to change things along the way for other African American females. And so regardless, as to what position, whether it's education like you said, it doesn't matter what field it is, if we see African American females, and we see a lot in government positions, I mean, we have an example of just yesterday. I mean, oh my gosh, our sorority sister, Kamala Harris! I think the black community defines successful African American females by their perseverance. You see African American females in the community because they have to be resilient, committed, and determined. They may fall, but they get back up. They don't let anything stop them. They begin to look at how I can take these negatives and turn them into a positive.

Turning lemon-water into a top-shelf margarita! Ivy's words gave me goosebumps as I visualized Black women all over the country making things happen!

Ivy, myself, and Kamala Harris were proud members of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, a service organization dedicated to changing others' social, intellectual, and financial landscape. Ivy continued by stating:

And most of all, I know strong African American females who have had any type of challenge before, when someone says, "they can't do it," become more determined that we're going to show them dammit, excuse my expression. And so we do whatever it is that we have to, and often we are the voice for men. They may never admit it, but we are that voice for them. So I think they see us being successful in the black community by having all of those characteristics. And the black community is very happy to see African American women stand up and have a voice and decide that we're not going to settle for the way things were before. They get behind women of color who are successful when they see those things, and then they become a part of it. We have our own conversation within our black community about what success in an African American female looks like.

Ivy and I talked further about the expressive overt, yet cryptic covert conversational code infused into the tapestry of Black peoples' scenes, sometimes out of desire, while other times out of necessity. We shared our experiences as Black female educational leaders within the Black community championing for Black and poor students.

Ivy and I talked about the surprised look plastered to individuals' faces with excitement and laughter when they met us in person, mainly when they had been extremely expressive in their colorful opinions about the Black students' behavior in the school. We continued to share past experiences that had occurred along the riverbanks of

our scenes. Suddenly, the waves stood still, and the air became very thick as Ivy, and I talked about how we felt White people saw us, Black female educational leaders. A nerve had been struck. The waves were momentarily suspended in air, absent of movement, preparing to come crashing down abruptly.

To provide borders for the scene that was rapidly shifting, I asked, “How do you believe the white community defines a successful Black female educational leader?” Ivy responded, stating, “I mean, it's so interesting that you would ask that. And I'll just be, I'll be honest, I really don't have a whole lot to say on that (um hmm)...” Ivy looked off in the distance, filled her lungs with air, exhaled slowly, and continued by stating:

The way I feel white people define a successful African American woman is that she is the footstool for them, that she doesn't speak up to them, that she doesn't question anything that they say, that she does whatever it is that they want.

Basically, a yes woman instead of a yes man. I think that's how they define successful African American females because it doesn't have anything to do with your qualifications, it doesn't have anything to do with the results and outcomes that you get, and they are very, very inferior to African American females.

So...Ivy stopped, and before my eyes, I could see her calming her breathing, slowing her speech, refusing to give in to the emotions that were raging inside of her. The feelings that were raging inside of me. At this moment, our scenes had not only intersected; they were laying one on top of the other. Softly and slowly, Ivy continued by stating:

I'm not so sure. They will say we're successful by giving us kudos and writing us cards or sending an email or a text that says, "You've done a great job..." and this, and that. But when it comes time for promotions, they're inferior to us. I feel like

they say, "we've got to keep that person down, yeah, they're successful, but they're only successful if we can control them." And that's as transparent as I can be. And

I don't have anything else to say on that...

I looked around the room to look for an apparatus to grab hold of, to shield Ivy's scene, our scene, from the torrential waves, rapidly engulfing the frame. Finding nothing but strength in her courageous voice that filled the room, Ivy continued:

Because I want to stay professional and not use profanity, but it's just... (Ivy's voice softened) it's pathetic, (softened more to almost a whisper)... it's pitiful. It is an insult to African American females. And to think that we have to be status quo, and we have to stay at a certain level based on what they consider successful, because here's the deal, if we get promoted, and it's not even over them, but maybe the same level, they think that we will outshine them and they don't want that to be taken from them. That is the thing. It's all about power and control of people. And it's sickening. It makes me sick because we have so many African American females that deserve to be in higher positions. And I'm not just talking about education. I'm talking about across the board. The way the black community defines success for us is they promote us and are happy for us, and they praise us because they want us to go up. (Slowly paused) Now we can get some of us that can be a little jealous of us too. So I don't want to leave that out.

"Um-hmm," I said as I winked my eye at Ivy, who was laughing out loud. Ivy continued:

But it's nothing like what white people have for us, and they are inferior and think that black women should stay here at this level. (Ivy held her hand parallel to the floor). That is not just white men, but it is definitely white women too. They are

so inferior to us and the knowledge that we have. And so we could be in the same meeting, and we can say something, and it's not acknowledged, but then the white person says that, who is successful, we're both on the same level, we've both gotten the same results, and they're like, "Oh, yeah, yeah." "Well, excuse me, Ivy, I, Ivy over here, I just said that." And it was just like... (Ivy exhaled loudly), so it makes a difference as to whose voice it comes from to...(Ivy slowly shook her head back and forth), which is pathetic. That's about all that I can say because it makes me...

Ivy stopped in mid-sentence. I needed the tide to shift. I needed to protect Ivy from the looming waves. "I'm going to let that rest," I said as Ivy's piercing stare into the universe forced the waves that had cast a dark shadow over this scene to retreat. Ivy slowly stated "Just let it rest there. I'm going to just leave it right there."

"What's the next question, honey...Ooh-wee." Ivy facetiously said. Just when I thought we were moving to the next question, with laughter, while rocking back and forth and causing her pearl necklace to bob from side to side, Ivy looked at me and said:

I have had some personal experiences, and it's just hot off the press. And I'm going to say this, as African American females, we need to stand up, and we need to let the white community, we need let the black community, I don't care who it is, know that if they are mistreating us, they need to stop. I gave some people the hand sign, and I told them, "Stop it. Stop saying I'm sorry. I don't want to hear those two words because if you were, you wouldn't have done what you did."

What's the next question, honey? I need to leave that alone.

Ivy's phone began to buzz, and she looked down. Briefly distracted, my mind began to wander. "Why was it so hard for people to understand Black women," I said to myself.

I'd always seen Ivy as a strong, brilliant, invincible, Black female who cared so much for other Black people. Sharply dressed, perfectly poised, and tactfully transparent was the woman I'd seen present to hundreds of educators, schools filled with students, and community centers filled with parents. I admired Ivy then, and I was in awe of Ivy now. The dynamic space our scenes had shared on this chilly afternoon constructed a radiance unrivaled by the hovering nimbus. I'd felt microscopic as a school student, maleficent as a Black woman, and misunderstood as an educational leader. "Do you need to take that," I asked as Ivy looked up? "I'm sorry, I'm trying to respond to an important text message," Ivy replied. While Ivy finished her message, I surveyed the sparkling diamond ring on her left hand, her beautifully manicured nails, and drifted off into the settled waves that had shaped this scene.

Here I was, a poor Black little girl from the rough side of town, interviewing a Black woman for whom I'd admired for years, participating in the story of my life. The barriers I had faced along the rivers of my life are the barriers Ivy had used to strengthen her resolve, and now, she was second in command in one of the largest urban school districts in the southeastern part of the country. Obstacles. Ivy had skillfully used obstacles created by others as springboards for acceleration. Though it had not been easy, she had used experiences as tools that made her better, stronger, wiser. "What do you see as the primary barrier for the advancement of black students in schools and the community," I asked. Ivy responded by stating:

The primary barrier that prevents black students from being successful is that we don't have enough black leaders. We don't have enough minority teachers that look like them. That's number one. We don't have enough leaders in positions because (Ivy paused) most of our African American leaders are in our low-performing schools. People only think that African American leaders can lead there. That is so untrue. When we put them there and then we have a majority of our minority students who are failing, they don't have access. It's the opportunity gap. They don't have access and the resources that all of the others have. I think opportunities to access and have leaders who look like them are among the biggest barriers for our African American kids. And then the third thing I would say is how people perceive African American students. There are so many barriers. Instead of people taking the blinders off and worrying about what zip code they come from, teachers need to have high expectations. Teachers come in with low expectations already of African American students. And African American females think that, let me just say, that we have an attitude and don't want to listen, and we're loud. But it's okay for a group of white girls to be loud in the classroom because they're learning, they're socializing, and so I think it's a huge barrier.

I thought about Ivy's words and compared them to the number of behavior referrals I have received for Black girls *talking loud* compared to White girls. During the previous school year, the ratio of referrals for Black girls compared to White girls was three to one. Ivy and I discussed the disparity surrounding behavior data as she continued by stating:

It's just a misperception of how society, the community, school systems, and districts perceive African Americans and how they learn. We don't take time to figure out the best learning style for our kids. So that's huge. And when we talk about student voices, we're quick to get students and to get voices. But if you look at books, look at covers, and all sorts of things that are tweeted out, you may see one African American but the rest are white. Or you may see one African American and an Asian, and people think they're trying to be diverse because people have called that to their attention. But at the end of the day, I believe that we have been a hindrance. And when I say we, I'm talking about the community and society because we haven't expected that our African American students, particularly our African American females, can do the same or more. Let's look at our girl who dropped both mics when she did that poem yesterday.

The reference to Amanda Gorman brought chills to my spine. The powerful speech this exceptional young Black woman gave at President Biden's and Vice President Harris' inauguration triggered a visceral response grounded in pride, as I responded to Ivy with, "Both mics...her book is number one today!"

Ivy and I continued to talk about the communal scene of perseverance that occupied a permanent residence in the rivers of Black peoples' lives. "What do you think is the primary barrier for the advancement of black female educational leaders," I asked. Ivy quietly stated:

They just don't understand African American females. When we go into an interview, we have to have all of our Is dotted, all of our Ts crossed. I think that it's hard because before we can even have an opportunity for the job, that has

nothing to do with our interview skills, our letter of interest, or what our resume looks like, because people are intimidated by strong African American females, people are already trying to figure out reasons we shouldn't get the job. That has been the issue for so long. I will go back and say, and I know this personally because people are inferior to strong African American females because it's happened to me. I mean men, women, and white people, and all we want to do is have the same opportunity as them, and be able to go in and show that we have skills, and we've got talent, and we can do things too. But I think that one of the biggest barriers is that, instead of having an open mind to see what African American females can bring to the table if advanced into a position, they're automatically thinking about how they can stop us from getting the position, which is a sad thing.

Ivy's eyes narrowed as mine began to burn. Ivy was telling her story, my story, our story. Nineteen of the twenty-six years I have been an educator have been in an educational leadership role. For nineteen years, every school I'd worked as an administrator had become a survival of the fittest training camp. Who was the most cognitive fit, socially fit, emotionally fit? My ideas were questioned, I was publicly dismissed and purposefully excluded. Nonconsensual shoreline modifications made by White colleagues to my rivers, Black students' rivers, Black communities' rivers had authored a water birth of resolve, resilience, and resistance. As Ivy and I rested inside the frame of this shared experience, she thoughtfully stated:

We've worked hard, we've got skills, we've gotten results, and we don't make excuses. And the accountability factor, African American women are not afraid to

hold people accountable. We will hold people accountable for their actions, but we will also support them. We're strong, we're intelligent, we are the backbone to a lot of things that go on, and I will say people are afraid and intimidated by that if you have a strong presence. It helps when African American females who are blessed enough to be in a position like me can help people reach their goals. As African American females, it's important to mentor our girls so that they know that they too can be anything they want to be. Yesterday, we made history. That's just one thing, and there'll be many more to come. And so we have to think big and always keep ourselves in perspective.

Ivy's passionate disposition is one of the attributes people find most attractive.

Her ability to silence the waves of a scene with her sheer presence is undeniably fascinating. That characteristic drew me closer to her when she first entered my set in my administrative career's genesis and continues to pull me closer now. Ivy's commitment to modeling excellence for other Black female educational leaders and the Black community has created spaces along riverbanks that would remain in our rivers' groundwater without her. Chapter 2 of this research project illuminated the pivotal role Black female educational leaders have within the Black community. "How do you go about changing the negative perceptions people have about the Black community," I asked as the light and airy wind began to disband the previous overcast that had attempted to haunt this scene. Ivy responded by stating:

Well, I think first you have to be in the community; you have to be a part of that.

You don't have to live there, but you can't be afraid to go there. You can't be afraid to talk about it. You need to get out, walk around, talk to people. Most

disenfranchised kids don't have this, they don't have that, but it doesn't mean that they don't want to learn. It doesn't mean that parents aren't sending the best that they have to schools. It doesn't mean that parents don't want to be involved. It doesn't mean that they don't want their child to be the next mayor or the engineer or the next president or the next vice president. It's the current situation in which they are in, but they have high expectations. Capitalize off of that. Because if we can take those blinders off and say, these kids are from the West end, and these disenfranchised, and they're from a single-parent home, or they're living with their grandmother, or their aunties. Who gives a shit who's raising them?

“Amen,” I said as I nodded my head up and down. Ivy continued by stating:

I try to change people’s perception of African American families when they say that parents don't want to be involved. I did that in the previous role that I had as a principal and in the current role that I have now. If we could have a more open mind about our students, their achievement, what they are bringing to the table, our African American leaders, our African American females, in particular, look at where they are, look at what they're doing...

“Or what they’re capable of,” I said as Ivy, and I observed the close-out waves that were approaching the shallow waters of this scene. Echoing my response, Ivy repeated:

Or what they're capable of because that could be us any given day or time. So never try to down somebody because of where they come from. As a principal, we used to ask students to hold up the sign: "Do you really know me?" It's the most powerful thing ever. And we learned some things even from our white students that we didn't know, that were walking around with a facade but were really

depressed. Kids that would say something like, "I can't walk down my sidewalk without being afraid of being attacked," "I've never seen my father," or, "I saw my father get killed." So see, we never know. So if we have conversations and build relationships with our kids and build relationships with our adults, we can start saving so many lives.

The global pandemic has affected every facet of every person's river in some way, shape, or form. Change has been involuntarily normalized for so many people, particularly those who were already disenfranchised due to our rivers' currents' relentless marginalization. A new day has come where we can turn the pages of our rivers into scenes that promote equity, growth, and peace.

I knew our time together was coming to a close, and oh how I didn't want this moment to end. My scene was encased in a peaceful breeze that smelled of vanilla lavender. Ivy's body was outlined with a halo of light that emanated warmth, strength, and courage. My eyes lingered on the angelic host of this scene, our scene, your scene. As our gaze rendered the slowly moving waves motionless, Ivy stated:

I do feel things will be better. We just have to be given the opportunity. And we have to believe in each other. And we have to continue to build each other up. If we could just be given an opportunity and people would have an open mind, the sky's the limit for our African American students but particularly our African American females. Let us flourish, let us floss, let us do the things that we know how to do, and we can do those things just as well, if not better than the next person. Give us an opportunity, and we will show you what we can do!

Elizabeth Smith: A Portrait

See My Face: Tranquil Waters

Elizabeth Smith was a luminary, as she had authored the professional rubric by which Black female educational leaders lived. Sixteen years ago, Elizabeth's scene converged with mine in a way that would change the rest of my life. I had served as a high school guidance counselor for six years in a school where the lived experiences of Black students were routinely marginalized. As the only Black female administrator in a school that served almost 2000 students, for which 97% went to college, I was charged with the daily task of shifting scenes in ways that moved the water molecules of students' rivers onshore for some and offshore for others depending upon the varying levels of atmospheric pressure in their scenes. On that sunny day when the air was light and crisp, while frustrated from the speaker's repeated use of the term, "at-risk students," I asked Elizabeth, who was at the same conference, "Why does everybody view Black students from a deficit mindset?" The words Elizabeth spoke to me at that moment changed the trajectory of my scene's winds profoundly. "Honey, I don't know, but I do know in order to change their thinking, you have to make sure you are in the right seat on the right bus!" I did not understand her statement's magnitude then; however, I am now fully aware sixteen years later.

Becoming an assistant principal was made possible because of Elizabeth's modeling, guidance, and steady movement inside my scenes' waves. Elizabeth was the first of many firsts. The first Black female principal, the first to go to college, the first to silence the waves. I looked up to Elizabeth. I wanted to be like Elizabeth. I admired Elizabeth. Though she retired when an atmospheric disturbance caused the educational

landscape of Black students' scenes to convulse, she remained a steady fixture among the Black community. Elizabeth's health had taken a turn for the worse, so as the time to conduct our first interview drew closer, I became worried that the task of re-living in some cases, torrential downpours that had consumed her scene, would be too much. You see, her firsts came with a cost in a way that set the stage, for me, for you, for all Black women. To ensure my entrance into Elizabeth's scene didn't threaten extreme storms, I called her before our scheduled interview and checked on her. She and I talked about her recent hospital visit and how incredibly supportive her husband had been during her recovery. "I've still been working with schools," Elizabeth said as we talked about the way she fills her days now that she is retired. The strength and passion Elizabeth had always showered upon others' scenes radiated through the phone. "I'm not going to let you down," Elizabeth said as her energy forced the waves of my river to reach the shoreline. Love, adoration, and reverence for this unique human-being on the other side of the phone swirled towards my shoreline as the gentle breeze escorted it back. After all, I would get to share space with Elizabeth. My heart retreated towards the scene, as it had cradled the shoreline in its arms, and whispered, "God, thank you for this moment, thank you for this space, please watch over Elizabeth."

The day was here! The manifest radiance bursting out of the seams of Elizabeth's smile reached the frame of the scene before she did. The sweatshirt that said, "SEN18ORS," reminded me that Elizabeth was pouring into disenfranchised students who were seniors in high school during *retirement*. The way her glasses framed her cinnamon-brown features discharged waves of wisdom into the atmosphere. I shared with Elizabeth the structure of the first interview, which would focus on the rivers of her

personal and professional life. I reminded her that she did not have to answer any questions that made her uncomfortable. I began the interview by stating, “Discuss your educational experiences as a child and a young adult.” Elizabeth responded by saying:

My educational experience in elementary school was one of the best things that ever happened to me. I went to an elementary school in the south that was 100% black, and it was 100% black teachers. We were pushed, and on a regular basis, were taught that we could not be equal to, we must be better than. Every morning we had devotion in the classroom. We had breakfast in the classroom. We had a milk break in the morning. Two boys would go and get the container, and it would have the milk and the cookies or whatever we were going to have that morning. We'd have our devotion before everybody could eat lunch. Our principal would come to the top of the stairs inside the cafeteria, and she would say grace, then we could eat our lunch. And then, at the end of the day, we had a milk break in the afternoon. Our teachers were all about not just our school life but our life outside of school. I don't know if we were just that poor that they took care of those kinds of things, but it was not unusual for a teacher to have bought the outfit you were wearing.

Elizabeth's words conjured a scene of compassion, strength, and love. Elizabeth and I talked about the differences between the current school system and the one in which she grew up. As Elizabeth and I talked about the place of discipline in schools, she stated:

We had corporal punishment. One time I got paddled because I'm a snitch, I'm the first one to tell, and I had a teacher one year that didn't believe in snitching. Our teachers were the ones that took us to the doctor, took us to the dentist. We had to

go to the dentist from class. The nurse would come to class, get you and walk you to the clinic. The school was responsible for everything. That's the only school I know. Our elementary school went from kindergarten through seventh grade. We were exposed to the arts, never got on the bus, but we walked two by two to hear the orchestra and go to a movie once a year. Whatever we did, we walked.

Everybody knew everybody. In school, we weren't allowed to wear pants. Our best thing that would happen in the day would be to see a teacher out in public; we talked about that for a week. From the time that I can remember, I've only ever wanted to be a teacher. They were the royalty in my community. They did it all.

And that's what I wanted to do.

Listening to Elizabeth talk about her educational experience was exhilarating. I had only had one Black female teacher throughout elementary to twelfth grade, and 100% of her teachers were Black!

While Elizabeth talked about her amazing childhood experience, my mind drifted to just how antithetical my experience was to hers. Moving through the scenes of elementary school felt like being trapped in a wire cage at the bottom of the river. I could see what was around me. I could see the light piercing through the river's surface; however, everything on the other side of the light was out of reach, not meant for me, not designed for me. Elizabeth's laughter steered me back from the darkness that threatened to encase this scene. She continued by stating:

When I was in elementary school, we lived in a two-bedroom duplex with my grandmother, grandfather, mom, and six children. The six children stayed in one bedroom. My grandparents stayed in the other bedroom, and my mom stayed in

the sunroom. We never ran out of space because we didn't know that a closet is supposed to be something with a bunch of clothes in it because we had two outfits for school. (Elizabeth and I laughed) You wore your school clothes, you came home, put on your play clothes, and then you hung that up. And then the next day, you wore the other outfit, didn't get washed in between, and then you rotated for the week. Then we had a Sunday outfit. Six kids in my room, and we never ran out of closet space. We had two sets of bunk beds in that room. We all stayed that way as I went through elementary school. Then, when I was in seventh grade, getting ready to go to the eighth grade, my mom decided she needed to be on her own, and the only way she could afford to move out as a single mom with six kids was to move to the housing projects. Our housing projects were the largest housing project in our city. When she moved to the housing projects, the decision was made that I needed to go to the white school because the white school was down the street. And at the end of our block, if you crossed the street, you were in a white neighborhood, which meant for me as a child, I grew up knowing I've been through the colored door.

The words “the colored door” rang loudly in my ears! My scene immediately became juxtaposed between two stages, going through a visible “colored” door meant for you or going through an invisible door not meant for you?” As this somber thought rebounded between the waves caused by this scene, Elizabeth continued:

I sat on the colored side. We had to share places. When the nurse took us to get our polio sugar-cube at the health center, we didn't go through the front door; we went through the colored door. We drank water from the colored water fountain.

Elizabeth and I continued to talk about our experiences as Black girls in predominantly White school environments where being smart was not nurtured and, in some cases, seen as natural. Elizabeth excitedly stated:

Now, I'm the nerd of all nerds and drove teachers crazy. I'm the student that gets upset because I want to answer all the questions, and I don't want you not to recognize my hand is up in the air. Why do I have my hand up if you're just going to ignore me? (I nodded in agreement). Being in a school with teachers who don't believe in your brilliance is so very disheartening.

To move the tide of our scene in a different direction, I asked, "When did things change for the better?" Elizabeth explained that she knew she was intelligent and capable of greatness, so even though her commute on foot would be longer, she changed schools. She explained this by stating:

I enrolled in a vocational school that was on a college campus. I would walk this crazy distance to school, and to take a shortcut, I had to climb a hill and climb through a fence that had been ripped apart to get to the back of the school. The Lord controls everything, so that's where I was meant to be. When I got to my new vocational school, which was 100% black, 100% black teachers, it was a wonderful experience! The people that I socialized with were the teachers. When I had lunch, I looked for a teacher to hang out with. These teachers were phenomenal. Then they decided to integrate the schools. I got to go to an integration camp. And so they brought students from all these schools, and we actually stayed more than a week together. The students were fine. It all broke loose when the parents showed up and didn't understand why we were getting

along with their kids. They came in and tried to take all of our best teachers and give us some of their worst teachers, white teachers. We had some pitiful, poor excuses for white teachers that were suddenly appearing in our school. Our integration should have worked, but we were a textbook case of white flight. We had one white student on campus, and his parents put him in a mental institution because he said he was black. We were a 99.9% black high school.

Again, my mind conjured up a mysterious scene where schools were made up of Black students, Black teachers, Black bus drivers, and Black cafeteria staff. Would that be better for Black students? Would that yield more equitable lived experiences for Black students? As if Elizabeth sensed the conundrum dancing around the frame of this scene, she said, “If I spent the night over anybody's house, it was a teacher's house. The strangest thing that happened when they integrated our staff is I ended up spending the night at three different white teachers’ houses because they were good teachers. Even one was our librarian.” Elizabeth enrolled in college at 16, as she had completed all of her high school requirements. She explained, stating:

My mom never knew I was applying to college. I was offered scholarships in town, but I didn't want to go to school at home. I knew for me to survive, I had to leave home. I ended up at a black school further North because I wanted to be a band director, and I needed to be in a black marching band. When I was there, I had the best teachers, the hardest teachers.

Since Elizabeth had mentioned her mom throughout the conversation, I wanted to know more about their relationship, as I, too, had an interesting relationship with my mother growing up. Though my mother is now my best friend, as a child, I didn't understand the

gravity of the sacrifices she made so that my brother and I would not go without.

Elizabeth stated:

I love my mom dearly, but my life was shaped partially by my mom's actions.

What my mother's life was, I was bound and determined my life was going to be the opposite. My mom, I didn't find out till I was an adult that she had actually never really been to school. She was an excellent cook. She was a breakfast cook, so she was usually gone to work before we got up. We always got ourselves up for school. She was never there to see us off to school. And that's why my view on parent participation is different from other people. All I need you to do is have the presence of your parents on your shoulder. I don't need their physical body.

My mom did go to my awards programs, and when the band was playing, even in things like if I was receiving the academic award or something, she was there, but she did not do school visits. She was not a mom that could have ever helped you with your homework. She could not become a chef because she could not do the math needed to be a chef. My mom had six kids in her early 20s. She had six kids. And of those six kids, there are four different fathers. And so if as a teacher, you wanted to get a good cussing out, say something about our last names not being the same or "Why don't you look like this one?" My mom would let you know real quick what she thought about you asking that question of her kids.

After listening to Elizabeth's description of her mother and her school experiences, I now had context for her eminence.

The depth of the layers that framed her scenes was beautifully knitted together. Her rivers gave birth to unparalleled strength and resilience. Elizabeth turned her head to

the side, and the brilliance created by the light that danced off her make-up free skin rivaled that of a diamond, and as we shared space in this scene, I quietly thought, “She is breathtaking,” which caused what she said next to take me by surprise. Elizabeth said:

I had experiences that most kids probably don't have. In my family, I was the white sheep of the family. If you see a family picture, everybody else is dark, and I'm not. And so I have been able to figure out that when it comes to colorism in the black community, it's not about whether or not you're dark or light; it's whether or not you're the minority in your home. If you are in a family and you're dark, and everybody else is light, then you catch the grief. If you are in a family and you're light, and everybody else is dark, then you catch the grief. Whoever is the minority is the one that catches the grief. So, I caught much grief growing up. And I have to tell you that I don't appreciate James Brown and his, I'm black, and I'm proud. I don't appreciate phrases like, the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice.

Elizabeth's scene hung in the fold of the growing wave. She continued by stating:

I caught a whole lot of flack about being my complexion. And so that was not a pleasant thing. When she was made to take me someplace, my sister used to say that I was some little white girl that followed her around. And so you didn't whine about it. You just lived and went on with it.

Elizabeth paused and looked away. Out of reverence, I waited for Elizabeth to move to the next scene. Elizabeth slowly exhaled and returned her gaze towards me.

We briefly talked about the influence her relationship with her father has had on the rivers of her life. Elizabeth thoughtfully and slowly stated:

My father, I knew a name, but I didn't know a person. And so my other siblings, they all knew a name and a person. My mom and I didn't agree on some things about my father. I would say to her, "What happens in my life is impacted by who I am." I have medical conditions in my life that I really need to know who my family is, and if you don't know who you are, you don't have the correct medical history. My dad was not a part of my growing up, but he has been a part of my adult life. From the time I was dating my husband, he's been there from when my daughter was born, and now she has a granddad.

Elizabeth was a trailblazer who had paved the way for so many Black female educational leaders, as she was the first Black female promoted to principal in her school district.

"When was the first time you realized that your experience as a black female was different from the experiences that you observed in other people," I asked as the waves of this scene approached the shoreline? Without hesitation, Elizabeth said, "I always knew." I leaned in and braced myself for the wave's crest. Elizabeth continued and said:

I've always known that my experience was different. When I went to the white school for a short period, I started my militancy back then because I knew things were not equal. My view of how people were treated was through that lens because things that were done to us were so much different. I came from a 100% Black school in kindergarten through seventh grade. I was in a world where they celebrated my nerdiness. They got excited because I wanted to answer all the questions.

As the wave of this scene approached shallow water, the bottom of the wave came crashing down. Elizabeth's commemorated scene was suddenly replaced with brewing stormy weather. She methodically continued by stating:

Then I enter a white school, and they say to me that if I worked very hard, I might be able to get a B. I didn't even know what B was. My Black teachers had already taught me that my life experience would be different because they kept it in the forefront. "You cannot just be average," they drilled into us. "We're not going to accept less than your best." Then to get to a place and be told to your face that if you work hard, you can get a B and you've never seen a B? (Elizabeth paused, as her right eyebrow tugged on her lips) So, from that moment, I knew. I participated in walkouts because I don't understand a world where you're talking about my brain is inferior to your brain. This is a teacher standing in front of a class and saying this.

Elizabeth gestured a reminiscent yearbook as her hands cradled the air. She leaned back in her chair and looked to the right as if inviting this memory to have a seat next to her. She continued by stating:

What was so enlightening to me, looking at this yearbook, my elementary school teachers that were black, I can visualize them. And I'm looking in this yearbook, I'm saying about the White people, "Who was that?" I'm in pictures with people that I have no memory of. And I'm right there, in the middle. (as if pointing to her picture) And so I'm thinking, "Was it so insignificant that it did not even register?" Which was totally different than what I had experienced in my other setting. When you are the minority of the minority, it was like, "Oh, this

experience does not make any sense at all." When I got to the vocational school, I didn't even look to try to figure out how to get to the school that was up the street because I felt at home again, because these teachers celebrated me and were all about pushing me.

Elizabeth and I talked further about her vocational school experience and how it was dramatically different in her other setting. The disparity between financial, social, and emotional experiences framed the scene our rivers were moving into. Elizabeth expanded upon this by stating:

Now, some experiences we didn't even know we were having. I never knew we were poor. We knew that we were going to get the same toys every year from Toys for Tots. We did the same typical things of looking at the Sears Wish Book, but we knew we would not get those things. I'm from a very traditional Southern family where there were activities for girls and activities for boys. My brothers didn't have to do chores other than taking out the trash. They didn't do dishes. They didn't do any of that. Well, the whole time I'm going through that, I'm saying, "Nope, not going to be that way. I'm going to do something different." When I say from the time that I can remember, as soon as they would say, "You can't," I said, I can. When it's put in front of you that way, it's just a new challenge. And so you approach things through that lens.

The depth of my relationship with Elizabeth stretched beyond that of the typical mentor and mentee. Instead, I used her scenes as a model for the construction of mine.

When I became an administrator nineteen years ago, ripples created by wind occasionally became tsunami waves generated by the refusal to see my face, to see the

faces of those who looked like me, and denial of our stories' worth. During these scenes along the rivers of my life, I frequently questioned myself. "Why did you go into education," I asked Elizabeth? She responded by stating:

Those are the people that I saw. I thought that was the best thing you could ever be in life was to be a teacher. Kids in our neighborhood probably would try to avoid our house where we lived because if you came down, I was going to make you play school. Everybody had to play school if I was around. I've only ever wanted to be a teacher. I fought teachers to get to be a teacher. And I've just never wanted to do anything other than be a teacher. I went to an all-Black school because I knew that the teachers who looked like me would take care of my every need. There were kids in our class that would not have survived without them. And my younger sister was the prime example. Her teacher got her hair done, bought her clothes, and when she went to a white high school, she got lost. Later on in my education, I realized that my sister had a learning disability but was never identified. While she was in the shelter of a caring teacher, that didn't even matter. She never had to be put in a separate class of any kind because the teacher took care of what she needed to be successful and feel good about who she was. She went to a different school, and she got lost in the path. She ended up dropping out.

Elizabeth's powerful words filled the spilling waves of the scene that emboldened the space we were sharing. She continued by stating:

I wanted to work in an urban school because I would not have anybody dropping out on my watch. That was not going to be the thing. I needed to be around the

students that needed me. Even when I became an administrator, I had no desire to go to where the money was. I wanted to stay where I was needed. And so that was by choice. I want to help. The same way I was helped, I wanted to help others. Simple as that.

Hear My Voice: Moving Waters

The role as the first Black female educational leader in her district was ingrained in Elizabeth's riverbank. Because of her boldness to traverse terrain not designed for her, space along the river's topography was created for so many others. The overcast that lethargically lingered around the frame of the scene quickly began to dissipate as we entered the headwaters of this river's scene. Elizabeth reminded me of her influence on the rivers of my life when she said:

I had no direct contact with any black female administrator in my whole process to become an administrator. None. When I became an administrator, I said that would never happen to anybody under my watch. And when I became a principal, I started training other women how to become a principal. I would hold meetings with people interested and work with them on how to read and analyze data. We had our own underground network that contributed to people becoming principals. I was not mentored to be a principal, but I decided I would become the mentor for others, so I did. Black female principals knew that we could not survive individually. When we became three, we became a unit, and we supported each other. We did our mentoring and support out of our supervisor's sight because we knew they wouldn't cut us any slack. When it was the three of us meeting and supporting each other, it became a regular mentoring session. We

brought to the table the problems we were having without worrying about being ridiculed, and anyone that came along after that became a part of our group.

The thought that Elizabeth had to mentor other Black female educational leaders that had come before me in secret accelerated my heartbeat. Though I had stood in spaces along the rivers of my life, the only Black face among a sea of White ones, my deep river's tributary was unparalleled to the shallow waters in Elizabeth's river. She had gone through so much.

The kinetic energy of ancestral legacies had generated Elizabeth's ability to move waters along our rivers' channels. These legacies for almost two centuries had framed the wave interface of Black women's scenes. We were in this fight together then, and we are in this fight together now. Elizabeth courageously stated:

We knew that we could not deal with the district alone. We needed to be able to lean on each other. And the sad part, about that, even to this day, is that we could not have done that in the open because of what others would think.

The air shifted towards the scene, causing the waves to break as they approached the shoreline. I tilted forward as Elizabeth raised her eyebrow and said:

One day somebody said something, and it caught me on the wrong day. A comment was made about how many blacks were sitting at a table for lunch. I went off, and I said, "The day you say that those white men don't need to be sitting together and those white women don't need to be sitting together, you can come back and say, what are we up to? Why are we all together?" As a people, we consciously separate ourselves. And whether it's right or wrong, we have done that more and more over the years. If there are too many of us gathered together,

we'll spread ourselves out, but that's never done the opposite way. We have to be better about recognizing that we have the right to eat lunch together if we want to sit together. It's real. It's not imagined. And so you learn to lean on each other.

As a Black female educational leader, I desire to be viewed as brilliant, beautiful, and balanced. Unfortunately, those words don't often saturate our scenes.

Amid the curtain call, a gentle wind blew across this scene's surface as Elizabeth and I shared a knee-slapping belly laugh as she said, "We have been brushed with a brush that does not exist. We laugh a lot over the phrase, the angry black woman. Like what in the world, you haven't seen the wrath for real?" "Um, mmm, we are so angry," I jokingly said. As our final giggle skipped towards the shoreline, Elizabeth concluded this interview by discussing her most significant accomplishment by stating:

Professionally, my ability to reach students through teaching has been my best accomplishment all along the way. Personally, my Christian walk with my family is my biggest accomplishment. We talk it, and we walk it. And that's the same as with me and teaching. I have no tolerance for hypocrites. And so what I say, what we say, we do, and this year in May, my husband and I will have been married for 45 years.

It had been a couple of weeks since our first interview, and Elizabeth had endured a medical windstorm. She sat down slowly in the chair to protect the lesion framed by a bandage.

Elizabeth's inner strength and courage were illuminated by the lamp's light positioned behind her. Worried about unnecessarily pouring debris into Elizabeth's shallow waters, I asked, "Do you feel up to interviewing because we can reschedule if

needed?" Elizabeth assured me that she was fine and would let me know if she needed to stop. She and I talked a bit longer about the procedure she'd had and the focus of today's second interview. As the scene's curtain opened, I asked, "As a Black female educational leader, do you see yourself as an agent of change?" Elizabeth responded by stating:

For sure. That's the role of the principal. So from day one, even before, as a teacher, I saw myself that way. If you identify a need, then you have to be willing to do something about it. That's how I operate. I'm going to recognize that there's a deficit, then I'm going to be willing to help improve on that deficit. My role as principal is to remove the obstacles that keep you from being successful in ways that help your students achieve their best. That's my role. I'm the one to help you get done what you need to get done. If you stop being the change agent, then you should not be in a school.

Continuing the movement of water along the river's shoreline, I asked, "Do you see yourself as a change agent in the Black community?" She responded with:

I'm very active in my church. And so our church is the black community within the church. Most of my community work has been through my church. I have worked with other agencies, as volunteers, and those kinds of things, but not so much as taken the leadership part, but I won't hesitate to take on whatever job needs to be done within the church.

Elizabeth's active work with different ministries in her church has created space for young Black Christians to merge their spiritual and academic journeys' conflux.

Like Elizabeth, my Christian faith is the channel that holds the rivers of my life together. We laughed and talked as we shared how our faith has influenced our scenes as Black female educational leaders. “There have been many a day when I had to call on his name to help me keep my composure,” I said as Elizabeth laughed. We continued to chuckle as we talked about the way we think people expect Black women to act. “How do you believe the black community defines a successful black female educational leader,” I asked. Elizabeth responded:

I think the first thing they visualize is a strong person, and I mean, physically. You don't visualize a crumbling person, and you don't visualize someone slumped over. Let me go back to students. We talk about learning styles. And we talk about whether or not you are a visual learner, and you're right-brained, left-brained? I tell anybody that black students will not learn from people they think are weak. They have to have a strong person standing in the front of the room, standing in front of the school, because they can sniff fear. And if they sniff that fear in you, it's over because a lot of black homes are run by black women. And those black women have to be strong black women to do a full-time job, raise a house full of children, and do whatever else is necessary, so Black women become good at multitasking. And in my day, growing up, there was no disrespect when it came to the head of the house. That was not going to happen. I think that's how it has become in education for a lot of the black community. Most of your professional black females were in the school, workforce, as doctors and lawyers, and all of that... (silence) most of your professional black women were educators. When you start thinking about who had that, it was a black female teacher. So we

have come a long way. A lot of people believe that black women have become educated because we had nothing else that we could do. That is a lie.

Elizabeth's energy was back! Her scene had taken a dip into a wave of momentum. With animated excitement, she continued:

Most black women that I know that became educators chose their profession.

They didn't take that profession by default because you want to have an impact on our people, our children, and the quickest way to get to our children, and to make sure they're headed towards the right path, is to be right where they are, which is the school.

The way Elizabeth's described the Black community's perception of Black female educational leaders made the channel of my rivers overflow with pride.

My mind drifted back to the beginning of my career as an administrator and watching Elizabeth silence a room with *the look*. This look had become a reticent tributary that flows into the rivers of others' lives. This look had earned Elizabeth assorted depictions, analogous to oceans, seas, lakes, rivers, and canals. The belly laugh that Elizabeth and I shared during the first interview had found its way back into the waves of this scene as we reminisced about the remarkable way she championed for students, though not always to the liking of the opponent. As our conversation about the opponent deepened, I asked, "How do you believe the white community defines a successful black female educational leader?" Elizabeth stated:

We laugh a lot in my circle because we have this misnomer that we are given this title and brushed with the angry black woman syndrome. No, it's not that at all. It's really funny because, for a little while, we'll get comfortable and talk about

when they first realized they were going to be working for me. And one, in particular, said to me that everyone told her, "Do not apply for that job. Because she's going to get rid of you." I have gotten rid of ineffective individuals. Our children can't afford to have less than the best. If you can't do the job, you shouldn't be getting the check. And if you can't get the results, you got to go. Elizabeth and I laughed as the image of her telling someone, "you got to go," filled this scene. However, the riverbed that had been casually moving the water began to gain speed as the waves rushed towards the shoreline. Elizabeth's eyes grew serious as she said:

When you're talking about being a change agent, one of the most critical jobs occurs when you're staffing; who you are letting in your students' rooms? Our children don't have another life to give. So if I won't put my child in your class, I don't want to put anybody else's child in your class. That's just the bottom line. So you get brushed with these untrue statements... [(silence)] They make statements and say that you are mean and you're not very nice. They don't know me. I know me, and others who work for me know me, but people on the outside don't. I don't back away from asking questions. If you give me the floor and say, "What questions do you have," and I have questions, I'm going to ask. I'm not going to sit back and wait for somebody else to ask my question. I like to hear things from the original source. So whether that's the superintendent, a teacher, the principal, if it needs to be asked, I'm always going to be polite, but I'm, matter of fact, straight to the point. I don't like playing games. That's not me. When you talk about non-blacks looking at you, it is often some fear there. I've told people

directly, “I’m not going to own that. That’s on you. I’m not taking responsibility for your thoughts.”

Those words settled in the chambers of my scene. Hearing Elizabeth refute the very wave that had consumed so many of my scenes provided clarity within the murky channels of my river. It was not my responsibility to take the excess water generated by others’ thoughts and perceptions.

Elizabeth’s palpable confidence furnished my scene with a lucidity I’d not yet experienced. I shared this feeling with Elizabeth as we talked about other barriers that impede Black female educational leaders’ advancement. She responded with:

Black females have to really know how to play the game. You can be articulate and very knowledgeable, but it’s ineffective if no one can hear your message. You have to know how to maneuver through the system without being seen as we are often portrayed, that angry black woman. [silence] It’s about the big picture. You have to have a laser focus on how you’re going to get through to the end. So you multitask but still have that laser focus. For most of us, it’s all about the students having more when they leave us than when they arrived. I will say to anybody; I don’t care where my students come from. Wherever they are, when they leave, there’s going to be a difference. So it’s hard for a black female because you feel like you’re fighting all the time for every little thing. You know that some didn’t have to fight that hard to get something, whether it’s resources for your building, repairs, technology, whatever. You got to go out there and get it. It’s not going to be brought to you or just given to you.

The lack of Black female educational leaders is a nebulous reality, no matter the state or district. Chapter 2 discussed the literature that reinforces the frame of this scene. The juxtaposed systemic reality caused by school systems' lack of Black female educational leaders is further illustrated in Elizabeth's next scene. As we moved towards that destination, Elizabeth stated:

Once you become a school leader and are seen as a strong leader, your school assignments change. Your school assignments are usually challenging schools. Based on state data, if that school is deemed a challenge, the leader of that school will be a minority more than likely. The reality is, once you're seen as a strong leader, a strong minority leader, your chances of getting the Blue Ribbon Schools decrease. The odds are, you're going to become the principal of a school that's struggling. Now, the flip side of that, most of the strong black female leaders that I know, if you asked us where we would want to be the principal, that's the school we're going to pick anyway. Because we don't want to take any chances that you're going to mess our kids up further. We're going to go where our kids are and where our kids need us. And if that happens to be the school that's struggling, we're going to apply for that school. We're not going to step back from the challenge. We're going to step up and get done what needs to be done. We also build tenure in schools. We're not fly by night. We're not going to be here two years and move on to another place because you can't see a change that way. We're going to stay with it and do what needs to be done.

I asked, “How do you use your voice as a Black female educational leader to change the negative perceptions that people have about black or marginalized children?” Elizabeth responded, stating:

We come prepared. We cannot, and we do not just open our mouths just to hear our own voice. We’re very selective in what we say, who we say it to, and when we say it because it's not about us. It's about our students. We know who's in that room, who's going to do what. We sit back and watch the things we’re going to have to advocate for.

Elizabeth’s chest slowly moved up and down as if she were conjuring calm to take hold of this scene. With tender recollection, Elizabeth continued:

You recognize that the further up you go, the lonelier it is because then, it becomes a matter of trust. Whether or not you’re fighting this battle by yourself, or you have somebody in your corner that's helping you fight, it's lonely at the top. You have to be very good at building a team because your administrators that work with you, your teachers that work with you, have to be on the same page. As a principal, I was asked to go to a school that needed to be turned around. I worked very hard to build the staff, build the students, work with the parents, but I was not going to be at war. That's not what the work is about. I did my job. I was successful at doing the job. The school did a complete turnaround. But it never should have been allowed to get to that point that it needed to turn around in the first place. But it was a whole different fight. That fight had nothing to do with what was best for kids. That fight had to do with cleaning up some things. And I'm all about what's best for kids. And so I needed to go someplace where students

needed me. Not so much that the adults in the building didn't need me; I needed to be there for our kids' needs, not the adults.

After Elizabeth spoke so passionately about her commitment to improving students' lives, we talked about the rhetoric currently swirling around every layer of the Black community's scene.

As the river's storm propelled justice for the Black community further and further offshore, the US capitol scene on January 6 rendered Elizabeth and me speechless. For a moment, we sat in silence, a silence that flooded this scene. The injustice that Elizabeth so eloquently spoke of at the beginning of the interview raised the sea level of the Black community's rivers with rapid force. Destructive erosion and thermal expansion that had previously threatened the rivers of Black people's lives were currently inducing devastating climatic conditions. "How do you see your role as a Black female educational leader amid the challenges currently facing the black community," I asked. Elizabeth responded by stating:

Well, the reality is, this is just Elizabeth speaking; this Black Lives Matter has not gone deep enough for black lives to matter. It is not about how the police treat you; it's about how schools are treating you. The schools have been broken. When children start kindergarten, they're as excited as can be. They want to read. They want to do math. They want to do all of it. Somewhere along the way, our students are no longer seen as being successful. We have children entering kindergarten being told that they will not be successful. So now, these children don't trust authority. That lack of trust then bleeds over into school, and now you see the school leader as your adversary. The original police that you met was the

assistant principal. By the time you get to middle school, you're now being criminalized. Now, don't get me wrong because I'm a firm disciplinarian. If you do wrong, you have to fix it, but to have children in kindergarten, repeating kindergarten, repeating first grade did not start with Breonna Taylor or George Floyd.

Elizabeth paused and looked away. Silence. The sovereignty that stilled the waves of this scene was palpable. With reverence for Black children's lived experience, Elizabeth continued:

Where were these people when the person that was in their classroom teaching them as first graders was scared to death of black kids in the class, and these kids were allowed to take over a first-grade room? The thinking that they became criminals and were viewed as criminals is institutionalized at the school door. Our education's most important value was our education; that was the civil right we needed to fight for. We were not prepared. We failed those children. Right now, we have a whole generation of children who have failed during this pandemic because they're not learning. And they've now created a habit, because school is a habit, going to school has to be your work habit. We have gone away from that... and now... (Elizabeth paused) you don't even have enough time to get me to talk about where the school started breaking down.

The circular motion of the waves began to get faster. An earthquake of pain was rattling the frame of this scene. Elizabeth was telling the story of so many. Excited to start school. Excited to become an educator. Excited to become an administrator. A tsunami was brewing in the disintegrated crevices of this scene. Thoughts began to boomerang off

the river's floor. Why did some students hate school? Why were some students unsuccessful in school? Why did some students feel isolated by the school? Can we really make a difference? The strength of Elizabeth's voice interrupted the abyss of doubt I was involuntarily ushering into this scene. She continued by stating:

There should not be children that hate to go to school, especially in elementary. I want strong people to be around them. And now, if I had anything to say, I would probably want to be at a preschool through 12th-grade school, so nobody else could contaminate them. We have people that are not inspiring them to want to learn. So yes, all of that turmoil of Breonna Taylor, Floyd, all of that is real. But if you travel back, it started long before them, and it didn't start with the police. It began with little bitty kids. Adults need to treat them with dignity and respect and have high expectations for them. I don't want teachers to give them something for nothing. They have to work for what they get. But you've got to teach them. I use to tell my students all the time that there are two things I know to be true; your religion and your education; once you have it, nobody can take it from you. We have to go back and figure out how we messed this up? Back in the day, we didn't have a bunch of labels. You had people that said, "Here's where they came in, and they're going to be better when they leave."

"Whew-wee," I said as Elizabeth shook her head back and forth, saying, "umh, umh, umh."

Elizabeth had always been very transparent about her lack of tolerance for hypocrites. Forcing the dense air hovering over this scene offshore, Elizabeth and I laughed and joked about our shared intolerance of the intolerable because, as Black

female educational leaders, we were aware of our charge to get people to want what we know they need. We talked about recent events in the Black community and how Black female educational leaders can balance the Black community's rivers as they empty into the oceans of our world. Elizabeth intuitively stated:

There's wrong in every profession, and some police have no business being police. But we also have to face the fact. There are a whole lot of people doing what they shouldn't be doing. None of these folks should be dead. And we need to recognize that. I'm sure there were teachers in that crowd storming the Capitol, but we don't want to recognize that we created these issues. We've got kids who are not being challenged to do their best because we don't have people looking for their best. We see their best. You cannot be a strong black female leader without bringing into that building your mother hat. You are the mother of this household. And this school is going to operate like your home. And that's just the bottom line. Everybody should be valued when they enter school.

The waves had settled, and a breeze hung from the frame of this scene. Elizabeth exhaled and stated pragmatically:

Our students that are struggling are struggling because of the system. We were not prepared to deal with our students. And now that you have even fewer black educators, it is even worse. Even though I'm retired, I'm still connected to the classroom. I have never stopped teaching. I see it as my responsibility to teach others and not hold onto that knowledge. I'm a true believer that my ministry is teaching. The educational system has to be fixed in order for all lives to matter

because until the educational system believes that all lives matter, equality in this country never will.

Summary

The portraits included in this chapter reveal lessons that can be learned from the scholarship, resilience, and lived experiences of three Black female educational leaders who have answered the call to lead in an urban school district. This chapter illuminated *who* these Black female educational leaders are, *what* these Black female educational leaders do, and *why* these Black female educational leaders continue. The first research question guiding this study is *how did the realities and lived experiences of these Black female leaders shape their career choices and paths?* Black female educational leaders are positioned uniquely to challenge oppressive ideology due to the triple jeopardy many of them confront daily based on race, gender, and ways of knowledge construction.

To fully comprehend the embodiment of Black people's experiences in the United States, individuals in the academy must lean into the epistemological perspective of people whose primary experience is rooted in racism, discrimination, and marginalization (Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Reed, 2012). Chapter three of this research study discussed tenets of the theoretical framework, Black Feminist Thought, which grounds its work in analyzing Black females' response to the interlocking systems of oppression in ways that elevate their lived experiences, self-worth, self-definition, and intellectual dexterity (Baylor, 2014; Collins, 1986).

The second research question guiding this study is *how do these Black female leaders use their lived experiences to inform their interaction with students and adults with whom they work?* Chapter two of this research study discussed Black female

educational leaders' legacy at length, specifically related to what Black female leaders do within schools and communities. The conceptual framework of Black feminist thought seeks to create an intellectual space wherein Black females have choices and are empowered to act in ways that contribute to societal, institutional, and intellectual transformative experiences, particularly in the lives of historically marginalized individuals. As a critical social theory, Collins (2000) affirms that Black feminist thought honors the interplay between the generation of knowledge and positions Black female intellectuals at the knowledge validation process's nucleus regarding declarations of Black women's expertise's lived experiences.

The third research question guiding this study is *how do these Black female leaders understand the relationship between their roles as leaders within the educational system and the broader community?* Black female educational leaders contribute to this democratic society by incorporating Collins' four essential elements of Black feminist epistemology into their daily interactions: (a) lived experience as a criterion of meaning; (b) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims; (c) the ethic of caring; and (d) the ethic of personal accountability (Collins, 2009). The meaningful discourse transported through storytelling generates new knowledge in ways that define creative thinking and purposeful living.

Anzaldúa (1990) surmises that manufacturing research literature must be done in a way that allows individuals to alter that which has been presented as historical truth to that which is actually true. Our truth, embedded in the layers of our lived experiences, illuminates our stories in ways that transform theory to practice. Solórzano and Yosso (2002), further assert that when research and theory explicitly address race and racism as

a gateway to liberation rather than a proxy for oppression, lived experience becomes a source of strength instead of the traditional deficit paradigm. Anzaldúa (1990) suggests that research literature develops new theories that enable society to understand better individuals who are at the margins of society.

Chapter 2 of this research study revealed that Black female educational leaders have a unique ability to use oppression as a source for institutional transformation. Their commitment to using intellectual discourse is a source for social change within the Black community, and their ability to use their lived experiences is a source for knowledge validation. However, the existing literature primarily emphasizes deficit-informed research regarding Black women's experiences based on racial bias, discrimination, and gender stereotypes. Instead, scholarly literature should call attention to the way Black women invert the ramifications brought on by the concurrence of racism and sexism to elevate both their lived experiences and the experiences of others (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

This research study seeks to address the literature gap by exploring the lessons that a study of Black female educational leaders' scholarship, resilience, and lived experiences in a large urban school district can reveal. In the form of individual portraits, this chapter elucidated *who* these Black female educational leaders are, *what* these Black female educational leaders do, and *why* these Black female educational leaders continue. So that you are enabled to viscerally experience the stage production of Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth's portraits, Chapter 5 is crafted in the form of a play. Chapter 5 transforms the confluence of Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth's individual rivers into a singular channel, one

scene, one voice, one stage. So sit back, open your mind, and join me on an excursion through the *river of their lives*.

CHAPTER 5: COMPOSITE PORTRAIT

This is the River of Our Lives

By

Nia Brown, Ivy Y. Glass, Elizabeth Smith

About the Actors

NIA BROWN has been the light at the end of the tunnel for students and families in an urban school district for over 15 years, where she fulfilled the roles of teacher, assistant principal, and principal. Nia describes herself as *peace, beauty, life, and rest* for the collaborators with whom her life's journey intersects. Nia thrives inside the frame of her successes and failures despite the obstacles placed in front of her. She leads with integrity, strength, and determination to change the trajectory of students' lives. As Nia encourages students to continuously believe and achieve, she remains devoted to combating systemic racism in ways that break glass ceilings. Nia lives in Kansas City with her husband and children.

IVY Y. GLASS has reminded students, families, and communities that God has all things in his control and can help with anything as long as they have faith for over 25 years in her role as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, and central office personnel. Ivy describes herself as a leader who empowers others to have high expectations, strength, and a strong voice as they make it to the finish line, no matter what. She leads by example based on how she wants others to lead. Ivy continues to ground her work in making a difference to save the lives of other minorities. In doing so, she remains a vessel of survival for individuals crowded in the whirlwind of turbulence, white privilege, and racism. Ivy lives in New York with her husband, children, and grandchildren.

ELIZABETH SMITH has remained committed to honoring the lives of those that paid the price for us to be where we are her entire life. For over 30 years, Elizabeth has assumed the responsibility of ensuring the natural flow of the ills of life as they move between turbulence, smooth times, and outside demands. During the last three decades, Elizabeth has fulfilled the roles of teacher, advisor, assistant principal, principal, and district support personnel. Elizabeth describes herself as a no-nonsense leader. She

believes that leaders should model the expectation by walking the talk. As a lifelong learner, Elizabeth is fueled by her conviction to positively impact others' lives by relentlessly advocating for the voiceless. Elizabeth lives in Springfield with her husband, children, and grandchildren.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT Cassandra Woods has shared space with exceptional students, families, and community members for over 27 years as a teacher, guidance counselor, and assistant principal. Cassandra describes herself as a beacon of light that empowers others to successfully navigate the choppy waters of life, waters contained within the riverbanks of their schools, communities, and lived experiences. Cassandra believes that knowledge is the navigational lighthouse for the world's educational landscape, and it is inside this transformative landscape, that peaceful waters, calm turbulent waves. Deuteronomy 31:6 says, *Be strong and bold; have no fear, because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you.* Cassandra anchors her faith within the layers of this verse, for with God, all things are possible. Cassandra lives in Louisville with her husband and daughters.

Act 1 - Scene 1

Setting: This act opens with Javier Heraud Perez's poem, The River (1960), set as the backdrop for this scene. Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth begin scene 1, participating in a photo-elicitation workshop that takes place on February 20, 2021. The sun has cast a beautiful glow on the snow outside the window that surrounds this scene. This scene of the actor's portraits is grounded in the visceral experience generated by conjured images within the layers of Javier Heraud Perez's poem, The River (1960). During this scene, Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth discuss their reactions to the poem in addition to its influence on their combined river of life. The stage for Act 1, scene 1, is set within the realities and lived experiences that shaped Nia, Ivy's, and Elizabeth's career choices and paths. This scene begins by introducing us to "who these women are."

(Nia, Ivy, Elizabeth, and Cassandra enter the scene, stage left and sit down facing each other. Cassandra reads [Javier Heraud Perez's poem The River](#) (1960) aloud).

Cassandra: (sitting the poem in her lap) As you read along, as you listened, what went through your mind?

Ivy: I thought about the different things that are happening in life. Sometimes it's calming. Depending on how water flows, it takes on different facets. So thinking about when water is calm, I think about me being calm. When there's a lot of turbulence, then it makes me think about heartache and pain and different things that I have gone through. The different trees, it's kind of like if we take

care of trees and fertilize them, they grow, but there are dead pieces throughout.

Ivy: *(looking down, tears forming)* I think about all the things that I've gone through, like through my childhood, different people...I've had...like where I literally...want to punch somebody in the face. I know that's not the professional thing, but you know anger has come inside of me. But I began to start thinking about my heart being pure, what's the right thing to do. I will say, a lot of my mentors, including Elizabeth, have helped me to think about things differently. Elizabeth has said to me, "you may feel like that, Ivy, but you cannot say or do those things." So my heart has been filled with a lot of angst, a lot of anger, but then I began to think about... like a lighthouse.

Elizabeth: My former pastor used to always say, "We're either going into the storm, we're in the storm, or we're coming out of the storm," and that is real. That is the black person's life. Even when we are in the calm, we are headed to another storm. It is just our reality. When I think about this river, it takes me immediately to our ancestors because the images in my head about slavery go straight to a river. We had to go through that river. We don't get to be on the sidelines of the river. For many of us, as black females, what happens, though *(with a slight pause)* is when those rocks are hitting us in the storm, we often forget that others are out there because the black women in my life are very proud, very strong, and often-times, we don't reach out. We tend to hold things in.

Nia: Uh-hmm, you are so right! *(Ivy nods in agreement)*

Elizabeth: Black people are not the ones that will go to the therapist because we have been taught that that's what churches are for. Church has been our therapy. But the reality is that what I love about a river, is that I know for a fact that if it's not moving, that is when it becomes sad. *(Nia and Ivy leaned in)* When you are going through the river, you don't know what's ahead, but I know that I'm okay as long as I'm moving. I don't like most poetry, but I did understand this poem. What I love about a river is that it's not the same. So not knowing is part of what I thrive on. I like new challenges. I like going through things. And I like proving that I'm going to swim. Baby, you put that boulder down there if you want and see what I'm going to do with it. *(Laughing erupted)*

Cassandra: *(nodding and laughing)* Won't he always do it *(referring to God)*...swim, baby swim!

Elizabeth: I just get excited by that! When they want to throw a boulder my way, all right. Bring it on! That's the way it is. But, we know that our path is going to be the muddy one. We're not going to get that smooth swim at the pool surface. We go into it knowing that. So it's just that whole idea that oftentimes you feel as though you're swimming by yourself. *(Silence)*

Cassandra: Nia, what are your thoughts?

Nia: *(with a slight pause)* I thought about water as the sustainer of life. You can go several days without eating, but you need water. Right? I thought a lot about Christianity as well. You're baptized, right, so it has this cleansing element. But there are also times when the water's murky, and you can't see where you're going or where your path is going to reside. I feel like, as a black woman, everything is a fight because there's always this turbulence in the water. But as a people, we've learned how to navigate the waters through our families and the support systems that we create. And so when I get to those times when I think, I don't know if I'm going to be able to sustain, that's when I go to prayer, and I go to those people I do trust.

Nia: *(Nia shifts her body and continues)* I've learned over the years that you have to keep that circle small. As Elizabeth said, you can't tell everybody everything or let your guard down with people because you can't trust everybody. As I've gotten older, my circle has gotten smaller and smaller. And so I'm thankful for... I'm thankful for the passengers on my boat. If we're sailing down this river, I think about the passengers that are with me. And so I'm blessed to have had mentors, as Ivy said, who was one of my mentors, who have invested in me... I believe that that's God as well..he doesn't let you travel alone.

Ivy: Those things bring me peace, joy, and happiness at the end of the day, no matter what. So if the skies are blue, if the skies are not clear, no matter what, I know that my peace and comfort comes from the Lord. That's what gives me such great peace about all of this. *(Silence)*

Ivy: And so just really trying to...when you think about clean waters... and when I think about the river... there is a lot of seaweed, and there's...trash... with different things in it. *(Tears begin to fall)*...trying to pull all of that out to cleanse, so it is pure are the things that I think about in my life...*(Ivy pauses and exhales)* I've had to let go and move things out so that I can just move forward and...*(crying)*

Cassandra: It's okay. Let the tears fall. It's safe. Let it go. You are here with women who love you. (*Silence*)

Ivy: And all the hurt. Sometimes I just wonder why. And I know that I shouldn't question, but everybody goes through things...but I just get...I get so tired. And even when you try to let things go, people just keep bringing things up. And I'm like, I'm trying to move on. I just want to be left alone. I want y'all to leave me alone. I'm trying to do the best that I can in situations. But people, they just keep on. They say things. They send things. And I know, I feel like it's just a test of my stress, but you get to a breaking point. And when I hit those rocks in that river, sometimes I don't want to come back up. (*Silence*)

Nia: There have been times, as Ivy said, where I'm like, I don't know if I can do this. I can take an easier road. Right? Like we're all very educated women. I could do something that wouldn't be such a weight on my shoulders. Right? But then I think about those other little girls that need to see me navigate this path so they can navigate it. I think about my daughter and where her path is going. And so I remember looking up to my mother and wondering why she never cried. Like, I never really saw her cry. And then I realized as I got older that she probably cried at night. Just like I do. You hold these tears in all day. You are strong for your family, and at night, you cry on your pillow.

Cassandra: (*whispers*) Yes.

Nia: So, as I've gotten older, I've really tried not to hold everything in. When I have those bad days, I try to talk them through, like Elizabeth said, because you didn't tell your business when I grew up. Right? You didn't talk about stuff in school that you were going through at home. You kept everything in. So as I've gotten older, I've tried to lean on people I know because if you don't, those things explode, and like Ivy said, you do want to punch people in the face. It's like, you've pushed me in a corner, and all I can do now is fight my way out. And then you become that angry black woman...but you can't knock people down and not expect them to get back up...right?

Elizabeth: I'm probably the only one here that's actually been physically seen as the real angry black woman because I've been physically taken out of a faculty room. I came across that table in the cafeteria to smack the living daylights out of a white woman that had her

finger in my face, a fellow teacher. I had to get a whole lot of lectures on that one.

Cassandra: *(Laughing out loud)* I bet you did!

Nia: It is what it is.

Elizabeth: I am who I am. I think about my first leadership position as a black female in a school that was very affluent. Someone is standing in front of me with her finger in my face...I'm saying to them...I'm going to give you some advice. If you want to keep that finger, put it down because any moment now, I'm going to snatch it off.

Cassandra: What was she thinking?

Elizabeth: The reality is, sometimes people need to be taught how to address you. I'm not the plaything. I'm not your slave on the plantation. You are not my master. I don't answer to you. And so when you feel that urge... *(Elizabeth looks towards the sky in deep thought)*

Elizabeth: I've gotten better. Now, I can hold that beast down. I'm a nonviolent person, but we get pushed, and I don't know why they think that we're not going to push back at some point...but I've just found different ways to get my point across. But Ivy and Nia, your feelings are real. That's how life is. You can't disappear. You've got to be there because we have to see that there's a way through these things. We can survive. We will survive. We are very strong, and there's a way we can do this in a classy manner that can't be distorted. We are here, and we're not going anywhere. We're here to represent.

Ivy: Yes, because it makes it that much more difficult. As an African-American female, you already have white people who you're fighting against. It's an uphill battle constantly. We have to stick together. They think we have no power, no authority. They think they're going to tell us what to do. And we've had enough of that with, which was the same with our ancestors during slavery. I will not allow them to do that because there are no shackles on these feet. We have to stand up for what we feel is right. Nia, I like what you said when you talked about what happens in life on different paths. Elizabeth, that was an excellent point about the river. If you're moving, you're good, and if I'm not moving, I just have to think about how to navigate my way through the turbulence because, at the end of the day, we all depend on Christ and church.

Cassandra: You are absolutely right. We draw our strength from Christ, and nobody, has more power than him.

Ivy: That is our saving grace. Prayer is always near our hearts. That is it. That's how we were raised. And that's why I say in here *(pointing to her heart)* that that's my saving grace. That's where I feel calm, and I get peace. Sometimes, I get a little sad. Sometimes I'm crying. It's not because I'm sad, just like my internet keeps being unstable, sometimes life is unstable. *(laughter fills the room)*

Nia: I can "amen" so many things that you all have said, but one thing that really resonated with me is that often it's not white people holding us down, as you all said. It's other black people. I mean, I worked for a black male principal that really tried to silence me, and I was fighting for black children. Right? And so oftentimes, you're not ready for that, at least I wasn't. I wasn't ready for an African-American person to try to silence me. And so I'm thankful to Ms. Glass today for moving me out of that situation because I did almost lose my job one day, the way I talked to my supervisor...I had never been in that situation before. I was an employee that always wanted to support my principal, and at that time, I just was not aligned with the vision of where that person was going.

Cassandra: Well, Nia, I am so glad you didn't lose your job that day because our sweet babies need you so much!

Nia: And so that was eye-opening for me. I really do agree with what Elizabeth said, that if we were able to align as black people and really help one another instead of trying to be the top Negro, as I call it the token Negro, and instead, just try to do what's right for each other and support one another, we'd be in a different position than we're in now as a society and also as educators. We are placed in certain positions, and we're boxed in. They believe that we can only work at predominantly black schools or with black parents and black students when we have the degrees to help any school in any part of the city. And so I think there's a limiting factor, and until we come together, I believe we will continue to be placed in pockets.

Cassandra: Right. What you all are talking about are things on a micro-level, which as Black female educational leaders, we have to navigate blows from every end of the river. Right? On a macro-level, we have to navigate blows from white people, but we're kind of ready for that. We get ourselves braced for that. But then this other micro-level wave comes crashing at us when it's Black people,

because we weren't ready for that. But then what happens is that the waves on the other side happen so frequently that they build this resilience. So we're strong, we're malleable. So even when we get blindsided by Black people, we're able to bounce back in a way that nobody else can because our lives are all about bouncing back from white people. (*Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth nod their heads in unison*)

- Cassandra: Thinking about the poem we read, your photo-voice boards we did at the last workshop, and your river of life drawings you did for this workshop, if you had to describe yourself with words and phrases, what would they be?
- Nia: I am calm, beauty, rest, peace. I am serenity, trust, faith, life. I trust and believe that the blood of Jesus will cleanse my soul, give me faith and courage, and wade in my troubled waters. I am shaped by my successes and failures. I thrive despite the obstacles placed before me. I have a testimony. God wants me to be still and listen to the unsettled journey. As we brace for change and my tears cry a river, I believe that God has a plan for me. The journey is not always smooth sailing, but I will continue to live and learn, ride the wave, and allow my passion to clear the air. As I hang off the cliffhanger of my breakthrough, I am on my way to the promised land.
- Ivy: I have faith to make it no matter what. I know that God has everything in control, even though there are a lot of distressful and evil forces that are rough like a whirlwind. I am God's beautifully laid out plan designed to help Blacks make it to the finish line. I am a serious leader with no excuses, just results. I am happiness, joy, fun, and colorful. I am peaceful because Jesus gave his blood and made a sacrifice for us that we may see peace in a foggy, crowded, and unsafe place. I am beautiful. I am survival. I want to be a light. I want my light to shine, so men may see the good works and glorify the Lord in heaven.
- Elizabeth: I am peaceful when I start my journey in the early morning hours. I am refreshed when the natural flow is maintained. I am strength, integrity, no-nonsense, and retired. My inner spiritual peace comes from Jesus' sacrifice and those who paid the price for us to be here. I am determination. I do not accept failure or being in the background of turbulence. I carry myself in a way that breaks glass ceilings and clears the path for those who come behind me. I am a nerd who loves books. I am no-nonsense. As Ivy would say, "Failure is not an option." I am committed to cleaning up garbage put in my path by forces outside of my control, no matter what. I

am accomplished. I feed life. I have inner peace when I'm at my favorite place, Sunday morning in church. I am blessed.

End of Scene Act 1, Scene 1

Act 2 - Scene 1

Setting: This act opens with images of rivers set as the backdrop of this stage's scene. During the second act of the photo-elicitation workshop that takes place on February 20, 2021, actors are presented with images of rivers that elicit words and phrases that are instinctually conjured. Ice-cycles that are melting on the rooftop outside add a luminous glow to the displayed rivers' images. The life contained within the vibrant and crisp images of the rivers fills the frame of this scene. During this scene, Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth look at nine images of rivers and discuss things they have done during various destinations along their combined river of life that most resonate with the said image. The stage for Act 2, scene 1 examines how these Black female leaders use their lived experiences to inform their interaction with students and adults with whom they work? This scene begins by exploring "what these women do."

(Nia, Ivy, Elizabeth, and Cassandra enter the scene, stage right, and look at the displayed images of rivers that rest before them. All actors thoughtfully gaze at the nine images contained within the frame of, [*The Rivers of our Life*](#), record their thoughts, take their seats, and begin sharing).

Cassandra: *(settling in and looking around the room)* What experiences come to mind when you look at these images?

Nia: The first image represents your testimony, right? This is the start of whatever your journey is. It's that part when you're smooth sailing, and you're thinking clearly about what your passions are, but as we know it, it doesn't always stay that way. I thought about crying when I saw the rush of water. I also thought about anger, kind of what Ivy talked about. Usually, when I cry, I'm angry. I usually don't have a lot of tears of sadness, but I also wrote in here that you live and you learn because you see, as you fall off, it does get calm and smooth at the bottom. So you learn from those tears and that anger and that pain.

Elizabeth: *(in deep thought)* The first one is the starting of a journey. That's the smooth times. It's pretty easygoing. I count that as being peaceful, and that's retirement. The next one, I called troubled waters. It's the outside demands, for me, that really showed. I've got more tasks to complete, and it has nothing to do with students. That's what I saw.

- Cassandra: Elizabeth, you and Nia looked at that first image as the beginning of the journey. The way we begin our journey has so much to do with what we do for others while on the journey.
- Ivy: This image tells my story from childhood to a teenager. As you see the different aspects of the river, like out to the side, to my adult life. There are many different facets of this river. Sometimes it's smooth, sometimes it's bumpy, sometimes it's calming, but it's also dysfunctional at times. So, if I go and think about my life personally and professionally, I saw that sometimes, it took different pathways for me to get where I needed to get to.
- Ivy: I really think that this is a beautiful picture. I mean, it's calming. It makes me think about life and greener pastures. When we think about going through things, we can see the end. You look at the sky, and it's blue. You've got white clouds over here. I look at that as life takes us through different journeys, we may have difficult times, but there are greener pastures, as they say. I thought about that when I first became a teacher, and just really being nervous about even becoming an administrator, and just thinking, "Okay, you got to go through this fog in order to get to the other side, and things will be better when you get there."
- Nia: So you all know that spiritual aid in the water. I thought about that with this next image. I thought about being still and just hearing the Lord. Sometimes we move so fast, and I think that was one of the benefits of the pandemic, that we all had to be a little bit still for a while and really hear his voice and, you know, where he's leading us. And so that's what came to mind when I thought about this one (*pointing to an image*). Sometimes the waters are troubled, and you have to take that moment of stillness and really think about what his purpose is for your life. (*pointing to a different image*) And this one really is one of my favorites because I thought about the blood of Jesus and how that cleanses your soul. And then, you know, red is the color of anger.
- Nia: It's also the color of passion. Sometimes I do get angry as an educator. When I think about some of that systemic racism that we just talked about that holds back our children and also holds us from positions that we rightfully should have. You know, when I think about positions that we probably don't even go after because we know so much about that glass ceiling. And so, (*looks directly at Ivy*) Ivy, I just really appreciate your courage to go after these positions because often we don't because we know it's already been groomed for a white person. So keep fighting that fight.

Ivy: Failure is not an option. No excuses, just results. You may fail as you're going through life's journey, but it's not an option to stay down. I look to Christ and begin to pray and know that I can do all things through Christ that strengthens me. That's what I think about. I think about the storms that Elizabeth talked about. We go through storms in our life. But like you said, and my pastor always says that too, you're either in one, going through one, or coming out of one.

Elizabeth: The water is our work gear. Things are forever moving, with a little turbulence. This is life, but it's natural to me. To me, this is what life is, that water. You're going to have a little turbulence. Then you have a little calm, that's going in the storm, coming out, the whole bit.

Elizabeth: *(points to an image of a foggy river)* Probably nobody else sees it this way, but for me, that's my peaceful time. I think that's early morning. That's planning each day. That's coffee drinking time when you just want to sit out on the deck. When Ivy was in the mountains, and you can go out and see the view and just sip your coffee, that's your alone time. That's refreshing to me.

Ivy: *(points to the same image)* This right here, it's just very foggy to me. A lot of times, life is foggy, and we can't see. It looks like it's crowded; it looks like it's not safe to me. So, when I think about going into meetings or places that I'm unsure about, it reminds me that I have to be able to have a keen eye and that spirit of discernment to be able to see through people's foolishness, the mess in life that's happened. So, having a keen eye to be able to know which path to take. If I go to the left, what's that going to bring me? If I go to the right, what is that going to bring me?

Cassandra: Ivy and Elizabeth, those are such interesting perspectives. That mountain scene that Ivy was in was peaceful, wasn't it? Elizabeth, like Ivy, I did not see peace and quiet when I looked at that image, but now that you have described it that way, I can absolutely see it. Isn't it interesting how the lived experiences of others can re-shape the way you see things?

Elizabeth: Um hmm... *(smiles)*

Nia: I also think about faith and courage and life and just how you know that you...you do bleed. *(Turns her head away)* I cry for kids every time I see on the news that another teenager has been shot and killed. Some students that I've...that I've worked with. I think

about that when I look at this image and how it's our charge to cover and protect kids. I'm praying that we go back to school. I feel like education is a safe haven for many African-American students, and since they have been out of school, they don't have that covering protection that they're used to having.

Nia: I feel like the job we do is life-changing and life-saving for students. And so that's where you get to this beautiful picture. *(points to an image)* That calm, even though there were some storms on the way, when you get there, you're never done. As Elizabeth said, when you come out of a storm, there's usually another one coming. But when you do get to that place of calm, that's where you're just thankful to God. He gave you the ability to get there.

Ivy: *(nods in agreement with Nia)* This one, for me, was the most beautiful one ever. It's very calming to me. When I look at these different facets in here, I find peace...when you think about all the things in life that you have gone through, and I think about God's creation, and who could create something like this except for Him? He has His hands, and He just molds and shapes things, so I think about me being a piece of clay in this picture. Then how at the bottom there where you see the water, the blue, sometimes I would go through the blues. But then, when you look above, and you see the sun is rising, I think about how He has brought me through. The Word said no weapon formed against you shall prosper or do any harm, so I feel like I have been through some things, but I see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Cassandra: *(repeats Ivy's words)* No weapon formed against us shall prosper...

Ivy: It brings me great joy knowing that with God, all things are in His control, and with His help that I can do any and everything that I want to do. So, all the things that people try to take from me, God's already given it to me. I know that the world didn't give it to me, and the world can't take it away. It just helps me to want to be able to help others, as well, and to let them know that it is possible to do all things.

Nia: This one *(pointing to an image)* made me think about resting, resting in your strength, resting in your abilities. I wrote the phrase believe and achieve because often, you can't see what's out there. That's beautiful like Ivy said. *(pointing to a different image)* I called this one the promise. When YOU have a plan, God laughs right. I feel like he already has our plan mapped out and navigated for you. And sometimes we make turns that we shouldn't make, but

he always somehow gets us back to that right and purposeful place. Is this...is this (*opens her arms*) being in the promised land? Just like Moses, who wasn't sure how it was all going to work out, he followed the Lord's voice. People had doubts, but he continued to navigate to the promised land. What awaits us on our journey, we don't know, but it is that feeling of accomplishment when you get there!

Cassandra: Yes, indeed it is! (*claps her hands*)

Elizabeth: But you know sometimes, there is garbage...that garbage in that picture (*points to an image of garbage in a river*) looking one, that's the ills of life. That's the garbage put in your path, out of my control, but I'm responsible for cleaning it up. No matter what, the job has to be done.

Ivy: (*points to the same image*) I thought of this one a little different. I wrote down survival, having faith to make it work no matter what the situation is. There's a lot of trash there, but being able to survive no matter what the situation is, that's how I looked at this. Life is full of trash. There are a lot of things that come through. But when you begin to clean up that trash, you have to think about that's your way of surviving. Now, I don't know, but I felt that this was a bird right here... (*points to a bird on the top of the trash*)

Cassandra: Ivy, I see the bird now. Oh my goodness, my eyes never went to the bird.

Ivy: And when I think about that, I think about that bird as a symbol of an angel sent by the Lord to say, "You can do it." It's probably humming and singing songs like our ancestors used to do in slavery.

Ivy: (*Ivy begins to sing*) Wade in the water, wade in the water, children. Wade in the water listen, wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water... Sometimes I go through life, and it's full of trash... (*Ivy looks away*). I will survive because if I just keep trusting in the Lord, He has not brought me this far to leave me.

Ivy: But in all things, again, I think about this, it says to trust in the Lord with all thy heart, lean not on our own understanding. But in all our ways, acknowledge Him, and He'll direct our path. I think about that when I look at that little water down there (*points to an image*), and I'm thinking which way, which path of life should I take? I have to trust and lean on Him to do that, which is what He

has done in everything that I've done. I prayed about every position, and He has directed my path.

Elizabeth: Nia talked about this one earlier. (*points to an image of a red river*) The red water, in my mind, is how society views blacks. We messed up the natural flow of things. At times it's depressing to me. I see it as the lives of those that paid the price for me to be where we are now, and that's Jesus's sacrifice.

Ivy: (*points to the same image*) This one here, I thought is rough, but very colorful. The red is smooth. It made me think about the blood of Jesus and the sacrifice that He made for us. Just being able to think about that no matter on the sides, there's a lot of color, but it looks like some of the trees and things are dead. But in the middle, again, like I said, that made me think about the blood of Jesus and His life and how He sacrificed for us that we may have eternal life. So, no matter what is happening on the sides of us, when life gets tough, when things get difficult, that if we just continue to hold on to His unchanging hand. When it talks about the blood of Jesus, then I know that I can do all things through Christ that strengthens me. No matter what happens, and I may get sad, I will cry, and those things happen. But I know that His blood will take care of everything for me.

Cassandra: Ivy, you talked about the trees on the side of the image. Talk a little more about that.

Ivy: Water, for me, is always peaceful and calm. But on the sides, though, you've got what looks like little mountains, and you've got some trees, and some of them look like they flourished, and some of them still need some nurturing. I think about how as an African-American female, as I try to mentor young adults and even children, I can see them getting on here, wanting to just be on the rafter and just go and play there. There are also things in life when you look at those trees that sometimes you gotta do. You have to do some pruning, remove some dead things and get them out of the way. And you got to feed, and you got to give soil in order for it to grow. You start at different ones, so I think about the little ones being like children. And then, as you go on up, the taller ones are when we are in our adult life.

Cassandra: Nia, you referred to what Ivy is talking about as the Promised Land earlier.

Nia: Um, hmm....(*nods her head*) That is my story, my journey.

- Elizabeth: If you don't feed it, if you don't feed light, it will not prosper. We have to support it. We have to nurture it.
- Ivy: So, there are things that we go through, but just thinking about just being on that boat and having the right people on the boat to be able to sail through to get to where you have to go in life. And making sure that you don't hit these bumps over here (*points to the side*) because if you do, then you can fall off the boat. And when you fall off the boat, you have to decide whether you can swim through life's challenges to get back to the boat? Or will you drown in all the mess and foolishness that's going on because you don't have enough strength, you haven't built up that faith, courage, and belief in Christ that he can get you through all things.
- Ivy: This (*points to an image of a bridge over a river*) was one of my favorite pictures. It looks fun, eventful, peaceful, beautiful, and more importantly, I have reached the finish line. As I think about the race is not given to the swift or the strong, but to those who endure to the end. So, I see myself. I think about how beautiful it is. When you look at it, I thought these were lions on the poles here (*points to the image*), and just being very strong and holding up the bridge to be able to get through. Like I said, I made it to the finish line. When I think about our African-American females who look up to us, life will take them through a lot of events. Some will be fun, and some won't be fun. But we have to be able to help show them and let them know that no matter what happens, you can get to the end, to the finish line.
- Cassandra: Yes indeed, we can see the finish line. Speaking of the finish line, we are nearing the end of this portion of the workshop. I want each of you to think about how you have used your lived experiences to inform your interactions with students and adults with whom you work and complete this sentence. As a Black female educational leader, I...
- Nia: I lead with integrity, strength, and determination to change the trajectory of students' lives.
- Ivy: I lead by example. I lead based on how they want others to lead. I have high expectations. I use my strong voice, and I lead with strength.
- Elizabeth: I lead by modeling the expectation. I walk the talk. I lead with high expectations.

Cassandra: This has been so absolutely powerful. As Black female educational leaders, we lead with strength and determination fueled by God.

End of Act 2, Scene 1

Act 3, Scene 1

Setting: This act opens with a set framed by images of river of life drawings. The participatory research methodology, the rivers of life, serves as the backdrop of this stage's scene. The soft wind softly brushes up against the frame of this scene. During the third act of the photo-elicitation workshop that takes place on February 20, 2021, actors are presented with images of river of life drawings. The various destinations along the river of life drawings depict lived experiences parallel to the different conditions and currents of a river and their lives. During this scene, Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth engage in a discussion about their drawing that depicts the river of their life. The stage for Act 3, scene 1 examines the methods these Black female educational leaders employ as they endeavor to understand the relationship between their roles as leaders within the educational system and the broader community? This scene begins by traveling alongside the riverbank of the actors' lives as we are invited to discern "why these women lead."

(Nia, Ivy, Elizabeth, and Cassandra enter the scene, center stage, and take their seats. Each actor places her [River of Life drawing](#) (designed before the workshop) in front of her and invites the other actors to join her on an excursion through her river of life.

Cassandra: Ladies, I am so excited about today where we will share drawings that depict the rivers of our lives.

Elizabeth: Well, I will tell you now, you won't be able to tell the difference between my drawing and a kindergartner's. (*laughter fills the room*)

Nia: Honey, me too! I have talents, but drawing ain't one of them! (*laughter continues*)

Cassandra: Well, today is your lucky day for so many reasons. (*smiles*) Today is not about the drawings, right? It is about this powerful experience of sisterhood, sharing, and knowing that we are not alone on this journey. For the sake of this research project, our drawings will serve as a source of dialogue between amazing, beautiful, and talented Black queens. But the way the pictures are drawn is not the focus, so I don't want anybody to worry about

that. Instead, it's about discovering how the lived experiences represented in our drawings help us deepen our understanding of both our experiences and others' experiences. Today's time is to share, explore with one another, and remember why we do what we do. Oooh-wee, (*rubs hands together*) who wants to go first?

(Nia displays her river of life drawing and invites us to join her as she points to destinations that frame her drawing, while the other actors leaned in towards her)

Nia: So, like I said, I'm not an artist (*laughs*), but in 1988, which is when I started mine, I entered Porter Elementary, which was a huge turning point for me. And then I kind of had a cross up here that I drew because that's kind of what navigated my life from start to finish, living a Christian life. And then, I talked to you guys about the boat and the people on the boat with me. And so that's what that picture represents. And then there are some waves, which means there's some turbulence. I've got a little runner here because I talked to you all a lot about how athletics was life-changing for me. And then I've got a little heartbreak right here. This is 2000, when my parents got divorced right before I went to college. And so that was a difficult time for me because one, they got a divorce, and two, I was moving...moving away. My sister was getting married. It was just like so many life-changing things that happened all at one time.

Nia: And so I kind of had to, for the first time, really figure out how I could fend for myself because my parents really couldn't support me at that time because they were kind of grieving the loss of their marriage. At that time. I've got a little school bus here because busing really changed things for me. I started off going to an all-Black school in Newbirth and then being bused to First Charter Elementary, where I didn't feel like the teachers really believed in me, was hard. It was just like, kind of going through the motions. I wasn't connected like I was when I was at Porter under Ms. Burn's leadership. And so that, that was some turbulence for me as a child. And I...(*pauses and looks away*) I talked about that..how I cried with my mother when I got that letter that I had to change schools. I really didn't understand that as a child.

Nia: And so you'll see also here is kind of my circle. I'm in the middle. There's kind of a fork in a row here. Because I feel like professional and personal are two different paths. They intertwine, but different things happen during those time periods. And so this is my family. It's kind of just a circle there because they're like the center of my world. So when I think about my greatest

accomplishments, it's always my family and my children...like...not what I've done...I think as far as degrees and things like that...but being able to provide something different for them than what I had as a child.

Nia: And then I've got people around me. That's my other family members, my parents, my aunts, my uncles...we're very centered around family. And that's what really keeps me. I've got a little fist here...supposed to be a fist at least (*laughter fills the scene*)

Cassandra: Okay, I didn't see a fist at first (*laughs*) but now that you say that, I absolutely see a fist and nothing but a fist!

Nia: It's a fist that stands for Black power. I talked about this a little bit last time. I didn't learn about Black history until I got to college and really talked about all the positive contributions of Black people and the way they stood up and fought for what's right. And so that's when I started to understand what it meant to be an African-American and how much weight that was to really make our ancestors proud.

Nia: I had already learned about Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks and all that, but I hadn't learned about our history and the depths of the civil rights movement. Learning about Marcus Garvey and really getting into our history happened in college for me.

Nia: And then if you look over here, there's a tree. I always think that life is about growth, and trees sustain life for a long time. And so I hope that my legacy will...be that other...you know...that other Black woman who helps beautiful Black girls find their path and remember me pushing them to do great. Here with the professional, I've got a little schoolhouse there and a book.

Nia: And so I've...I've kind of got some little Xs here, which were things that were considered barriers during my personal life. A lot of times, I was told that if you're a mother, you can't be a principal. You can't...(*slowly*) you can't balance having children and leading a school. You can't get your doctoral degree with kids, or you're not going to be a good mother. You're not going to be a good wife. And so, I hope that I've broken that barrier down and let people know that you just have to have balance in life.

Nia: And on the professional side, I've got a little schoolhouse in a book because I spend a lot of time reading leadership books and really trying to dive into what a good leader is. I didn't have a lot of models when I was a teacher, and I never had an African-American

principal as a teacher. So, I didn't know what the model was for an African-American female to be a principal besides my elementary principal. I was thankful when I got the opportunity to come to Rudolph Middle School and work under Ms. Colwell because that was the first time I had an opportunity to see what struggles a black female has as the principal and how she has to navigate those struggles. So I was really glad that she opened up those doors for me and allowed me to see a lot of things behind the scene that I still keep with me now. And I understand better why she did a lot of the things that she did that I didn't understand as an assistant principal.

Nia: Because Ms. Colwell never really hired a lot of males, and I never understood that. I'm like, "We got these kids; I'm struggling to do these holds and on the ground." I'm like, "Why don't we have no males around here?" Now, as a principal, I understand how hard it is as a female to get males to respect you, number one, as a black female leader, and then to follow you is something else. Now, as I grow as a leader, and I'm able to have those conversations with her still, I now understand why she staffed and budgeted the way she did.

Nia: I felt like I never really got to know her as a person till after she retired. She was always very just professional and didn't talk about her personal life. We didn't laugh a whole lot. It was very much about the work, and I never understood. I was like, "It seems like she's always got her guard up. She doesn't... relax..." I guess it is the word I'm looking for. And now I understand because when a black woman becomes relaxed, it's taken as you're unprofessional or too emotional. So, I understand that better now while she had to be who she was, and it's really shaped me in my leadership. So, that's my story and my journey.

Cassandra: Whoo-wee...Nia, that was powerful. *(Looks around the room at the actors)* Let's just rest inside the layers of Nia's story for a bit. What's similar? What's different? What resonates? For now, those questions are rhetorical because I promised you ladies that we would stay good with time today, but we will come back to those thoughts at the end. Okay, so who's next?

(Elizabeth displays her river of life drawing and invites us to join her as she points to destinations that frame her drawing. The actors reposition themselves in their chairs to get a better angle)

Elizabeth: *(ponders as she looks at her drawing)* Hmmm...It doesn't quite look like a river, does it? *(laughter fills the scene)* I don't know

what that is... but anyway.. alright, so when my river starts, I started thinking about my journey in life. So, it's more like a stream on the left side. That's me being just me. And then, as the river goes on, it widens because more things are allowed into my world. But starting off, it's just a stream; it's not a wide river. At the end, it's more like it would be the ocean.

Elizabeth: For me, a river and fish go together. Off to the left, I have books. Books are always going to be part of who I am. I can deal with fish because it's all about schools and fish travel in schools. So, I'm always going to be about schools. So, I have the river over here wandering as life continues... yep, it does...alright. Over here is one of the books off to the side...younger in life, I knew church... and we had the Bible, but it was being thrown at me. It wasn't a part of me. But once I get out into life, everything I do from that point on is who I am. So, that's why the Bible starts my river. It's just you can't take it from me; you can't take it out of me. You deal with me. You're going to deal with that. That's just how it's going to be.

Cassandra: Amen to that, my sister!

Elizabeth: Then we're going into post-secondary education, and these little lines off to the side, those are the small impacts, because that's my time as the teacher. You're impacting, but it's not a large impact. See that little spaceship? (*actors say, "Um-hmm in unison"*) That's me, that's the fish swimming against the flow. I somehow often found myself that way. I was not swimming with the others. I was always swimming against the way it should naturally go. So, it took me quite a while to become an administrator, and part of it is that I didn't conform, and I didn't do things the way they felt they should be done. I didn't fit their mold. I have this habit of...if you give me an opportunity to ask a question, then I'm going to ask. It may not be the question you wanted to be asked. When you are that type of personality, they try to keep you out of the public light. So, I had to fight to become an administrator, so I was in the classroom for quite a while.

Elizabeth: As I entered into administration, it changes. At first, I'm swimming ahead. I'm swimming ahead of the other fish quite often. These weird things off to the side... (*points to an image on her drawing*) it's no longer the small impact, now it's exponential growth. You're able to impact others. But along that process, I still realized it's not about me. It's about the support I'm able to give to others. So, I transitioned from being at the front but still swimming just as hard and doing just as much, but now I'm very content to be that support

that's in the background. That's when you get the exponential impact. And I see it as an infinity-edge because it doesn't matter if I'm in retirement or what. I will continue to be me and impact where I can impact. That's my little chart.

Cassandra: Oh my goodness, Elizabeth...I want to say so much right now, but I promised you ladies I would stay on track because y'all know I can talk, right?...*(laughs)* Alright. Ivy, it's you.

(Ivy displays her river of life drawing and invites us to join her as she points to destinations that frame her drawing. All the actors leaned closer to Ivy and squinted their eyes to get a full view)

Ivy: I'll show you...it's hard to see...I need more colors...

Cassandra: That's okay, we can see it. It looks beautiful.

Ivy: Okay, here it goes. *(smiles)* I love peace... and beaches. I love water. That brings me peace and happiness, and then, as you go along the river, there are two books here. One, because I like to read, and then this one says the Holy Bible because that is truly my strength. As I'm going through, I have the words passionate and caring down here because as I flow through and go through life, I am very passionate. I am caring, and often people take that as a sign of weakness for me. I have a...This is supposed to be a church...

Cassandra: Wait a minute. *(tilts her head to the side and smiles)* I definitely see a church!

Ivy: I've got grace and mercy right there because as life has taken me through so many things, it's because of God's grace and His mercy that I have been able to succeed. The word says, "Grace and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life," and so I look at that as I go through, because down here *(points to an image on her drawing)* I've got a different path.

Ivy: And I've got...so much... *(pauses and looks down)* I have to keep church in mind because I've got some turbulence here, and I've got some stick people here, and it says stress, and it says children and life. But then, when I move over here, this represents the calmness that I have through life, and I start thinking about when I was a child. So all of these streams represent something different. When I was a child, as a teenager, when I was grown, I went to college, got married, had children, and then my profession. So just thinking

about all of that, it was wavy. It wasn't something very smooth, and there were a lot of bumps that I had to go through. And then I have a lighthouse up here because I think about that, at the end of the road, that everything I do is... *(pauses and takes a deep breath)* I want to be a light.

Ivy: I want my light to shine, so men may see the good works and glorify the Lord in heaven. And when I think about the turbulence...*(pauses and looks back at her written reflection of her drawing)* So this is what I wrote. I love to have peace, be calm. I don't like stress or confusion. My happy place is being on the beach around the water. Water, to me, is very calming, soothing, and relaxing. The turbulence in the river of life is when I have stress from my family, work, and friends. The palm trees represent my happy place. The church represents joy, grace, and mercy, knowing I can do all things through Christ and everything happens for a reason. The ups and downs in the water are the different things I've experienced growing up, like a rollercoaster. I've learned so much through this that will help me as I continue to go through this life's journey.

Ivy: So I would like to add these things that I wrote onto my picture to try to make it a little bit fuller and put a little more color in there...*(slowly and in deep thought)*. I'm just thankful...I'm just...I wrote this, and I just want to say that this has really helped me. I'm blessed and honored, and I just want to thank you personally for giving me the opportunity to be a part of this. And for Elizabeth and Nia, it has been truly a blessing, and I just...

(The actors' eyes began to glisten as they inhale and slowly exhale in unison)

Ivy: I thank God. He puts people in our lives for reasons, and for you to have chosen the three of us was truly a blessing. We're all in different spots. I would say Nia is like... she's the baby. I'm the middle one, and then I look at Elizabeth as being the older sister who has the wisdom and the knowledge and truly has been, and still is, that mentor to me...for me...no matter what. I'm thankful that I was able to be a part of this, and I have learned a lot. It has helped me grow personally and professionally, and so I just want to thank you. And I want to thank Nia and Elizabeth for being here for me as well.

Cassandra: Well...I mean, ladies...oh my gosh...I hate that this is the end of it. It has been a life-changing experience. It has been something that I've always known about black women...I've always known, as a

black woman, as a black female educational leader, that we are different. You all will see in the portraits... once they're done that...(holding back tears), Ivy talked about how you appreciated this experience. For me, as you all will read in your portraits, each of you has changed my path, the way I travel, where I ended up. Ivy, you looked at that last image with all of the different variations (*points to an image of a river*), because like you...when I think about that image, I think about all of the various forces that are coming after us, all of the different things that try to keep us from walking in our grace, walking in our brilliance, walking in our beauty, and that if we just stay connected, if we just keep our arms connected and keep our pathways linked, they can't stop us. They just can't stop us...because we have something that is very uniquely different.

(Cassandra displays a grid titled [*Emergent Themes - All three portraits*](#) to the actors)

Cassandra: The last thing I want you all to do, is based upon the entire experience, based upon your individual interviews, based upon the photo-voice workshop that we did, based upon the workshop that we did today, I want you to think about the three questions that drive this entire project that are located here. (*points to the displayed grid*) I want you to look at the three questions and the three statements right underneath them and next to your name, complete the statements, *Black female educational leaders are*, *Black female educational leaders lead*, and *Black female educational leaders lead as a means to*.

(Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth complete the information on the grid)

Cassandra: And so, as we finish this final workshop, I want you to glance at the answers, the statements, what everyone put because the reason that this is one document is purposeful. Let's look together at what everybody said.

Cassandra: And then I want you to go to somebody else's, Nia, you go to Ivy's, Ivy, you go to Elizabeth's, and Elizabeth, you go to Nia's, and highlight something in their answer that was like your answer. Highlight, in any color you want to, what was similar about what they said about how they feel, with how you feel.

(Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth highlight the information on each other's grid)

Cassandra: Nia, talk a little bit about Ivy's and what you highlighted, Ivy, talk about Elizabeth's and what you highlighted, Elizabeth, talk about Nia's and what you highlighted. Talk to us briefly about what you highlighted and why.

Nia: I'll go ahead and start. I highlighted Ivy's. The first question is the who, and what I highlighted was no excuses, just results, because I feel like no matter what comes our way, that's what I put in mine, that despite the obstacles, we have to get those results. So, no matter what may come up, whether it's a barrier or a lack of resources, or if it's systemic racism or white privilege, we find a way, right? And so, whether it's initially a success or not, when we find out we need to make a new move, we're going to figure out how to get there. So that's what I highlighted on that one.

Nia: And then the what, we both used the word strength. And I think that that's something that rests in the lives of African-American women. She also had the words strong voice. I didn't use the word voice, but I think that part about what I put about determination and wanting to make a change, you have to have a voice to do that. And so that's where I saw a likeness in our answers. And then the last one, the why, I highlighted making a difference for the lives of students of color or minorities because I had that in mine too, to combat systemic racism and to shatter glass ceilings. Ivy also talks about that fight to dismantle this ongoing racism in society and I feel the same way. We have to keep up the fight for our students.

Cassandra: Alright. Ivy, you want to talk about Elizabeth's, what you highlighted on hers, and why?

Ivy: Yes. So, I highlighted the words no-nonsense and failure's not an option because I had put in mine that we're serious leaders and no excuses, like that, just results. No matter what, we are no-nonsense. So when people come and try to bring things our way, we're just not going to play with them. We are who we are. We're going to tell it like it is. And they can like it or not like it, but it is what it is, as we would say. And I highlighted the words modeling and high expectations because I talked about leading by example. And I also talked about having high expectations, too, that we lead with high expectations. We know that no one rises to low expectations.

Ivy: And so...I think a lot of that comes from... Excuse me. (*Silence*) Just over time, we know that white people often have low expectations of us. And so, we have to have high expectations of ourselves and of others who we're working with to make sure that

our scholars know that we believe in them and no matter what, they can succeed. And then, I highlighted the impact in the lives of others because I also wrote that, about making a difference and saving the lives of others, just knowing that that's who we are and that no matter what we do, it's all about outcomes and results. As Elizabeth said, "We need the data. How many lives have we saved here, people?" You know, if we're just doing stuff, we're not making an impact. It means nothing.

Cassandra: Okay. Elizabeth, talk to us a little bit about what you highlighted in Nia's.

Elizabeth: I highlighted the striving despite obstacles, because that is that... no nonsense. We're not going to deal with the failure. We're going to thrive. We're not just going to be in the background. That's not us. On the what, I highlighted integrity, strength and determination, because that is what we portray. We want to show, we just don't want to talk the talk, we want to walk what we say. We want to see in us what we are saying is. Hypocrisy is a horrible existence. So we don't want to say one thing and do something different. So, the integrity to strength, and the determination, that is all how you carry yourself. And the why, breaking those glass ceilings. That's what we're about. Making the path clear for those that come behind, whether we're impacting the lives of others or we're advocating for our students or for our colleagues, it's about breaking that glass ceiling.

Cassandra: As our time together ends, I want each of you to think about the strategies you employ that help you understand the relationship between your roles as leaders within the educational system and the broader community. Finish the sentence, As a Black female educational leader, I lead as a means to.

Nia: I lead as a means to combat systemic racism and break those glass ceilings.

Ivy: I lead as a means to make a difference by saving the lives of other minorities and going against white privilege attitudes and ongoing racism in our society.

Elizabeth: I lead as a means to positively impact the lives of others and advocate for the voiceless.

Cassandra: Well, ladies, this has been the most amazing experience I've ever had. I want each of you to know that you hold a dear place in my

heart. I have found other black women that see the world like I see it. Your entrance into the rivers of my life helped me realize that there are other black women who think like I think, that there isn't anything wrong with me, that I'm not this angry black woman who was mad at the world all the time. I just wanted...and still want what's best for kids, all kids, especially those without a voice. I want you ladies to know that no matter how dark the road gets, that no matter how hard the battle is, I stand here because of each one of you. And so, I want you to know that you have left an imprint on the world because Cassandra Woods is here 100% because God placed you inside the frame that supports the rivers of my life.

(The stage lights go down as this scene comes to an end. With arms linked by connected hearts, Nia, Ivy, Elizabeth, and Cassandra exit stage right as the curtains fall)

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study sought to explore how Black female educational leaders use their scholarship, resilience and lived experiences to elevate others. By examining the narratives that led to their career paths, our understanding of the balance between their roles as educational leaders and community activists is expanded. The portraiture methodology employed in this study was conceptually framed within the theoretical framework of Black Feminist Thought. I selected this methodology and theoretical framework to ground this research study because of my ethical and moral commitment to Black feminist theory, precisely as it folds into Black female educational leaders' lived experiences. Additionally, this methodology and theoretical framework's unique focus on empowering others to visualize new ways of seeing and thinking likewise created space for this research study in the existing scholarly literature (Collins, 2000; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The research questions I used to guide this study are:

1. How did the realities and lived experiences of these Black female leaders shape the narratives that led to their career path?
2. How do these Black female leaders use their lived experiences to inform their interaction with students and adults with whom they work?
3. How do these Black female leaders understand the relationship between their roles as leaders within the educational system and the broader community?

This final chapter begins by discussing a summary of the research findings. Next, I discuss the implications for Black female educational leaders, theoretical understanding, and the community. I conclude with subsequent considerations regarding further research and final thoughts.

Summary of Key Findings

The first key finding of this research study is that Black female educational leaders use their realities and lived experiences to shape their introspective view of themselves as leaders who use their failures and successes to propel them closer to excellence, no matter the obstacle. As educational leaders, Nia found strength in being told no, Ivy found strength in being secluded, and Elizabeth found strength in being the first. Though the findings are consistent with the literature review in Chapter 2, it is necessary to contextualize the findings of this research study within the broader frame of how lived experience influences knowledge construction. The ideology of domination exists in numerous layers of research literature; however, literature framed within a Black feminist epistemological context supports this research finding. Collins (2009) states that Black females contribute to a democratic society by incorporating the following into their daily interactions: (a) lived experience as a criterion of meaning; (b) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims; (c) the ethic of caring; and (d) the ethic of personal accountability. Similarly, Black feminist thought is generated through epistemological constructs of knowledge embodied by Black women rooted inside the space of their lived experiences (Mastin & Woodard, 2005).

The three Black female educational leaders in this research study personified the multidimensional relationship they have with oppressive ideology and knowledge

validation. The process whereby knowledge is validated is primarily controlled by the dominant culture, including elite White men (Collins, 2000). Although the literature conjoins the continued oppression of Black people with superiority ideation inherent in White people, this study did not seek to explore that ideology. Instead, this study aimed to illuminate authentic sources of knowledge construction that extend beyond dominant ways of knowing, explicitly related to Black female educational leaders' lived experiences as a criterion of meaning, knowledge claims, and knowledge validation.

This research study revealed that Black female educational leaders embody introspective perceptions of themselves that counter the master narrative (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Furthering this discourse, Baylor (2014) asserts that dominant groups repress critical social theories generated within oppressed non-dominant groups. As a theoretical framework that grounded this research study, Black feminist thought positions Black female intellectuals at the knowledge validation process's nucleus regarding declarations of expertise on Black women's lived experiences (Collins, 2000). According to Bass (2012), Black women's lived experiences create new ways of knowing and being for other Black women to share intellectual experiences, thus contributing to the knowledge validation process.

The second key finding of this research study is that Black female educational leaders use their lived experiences to inform their interactions with students and adults with whom they work as they change the trajectory of lives, lead with strength and integrity, and use their voice to communicate high expectations. Chapters 4 and 5 framed the actors' portraits by inviting its readers to pause along the participants' riverbanks encased within the interlocking nature of oppression, the power of self-definition and

self-value, and the importance of cultural and communal ethics of care (Collins, 1986). As a result, this finding offers further insight into the Black feminist's epistemological framework. As was evidenced by the portraits in Chapter 4, Black female intellectuals do not rely solely on oppression prompted by race, gender, and class to base their resistance. Instead, the focus shifts to dismantling the inaccurate depiction of Black women that, in many cases, drive these systems of oppression (Baylor, 2014; Jean-Marie et al., 2009).

Honoring marginalized individuals' voices, lives, and intellectual experiences are uniquely juxtaposed within the frame of Black female educational leaders' refusal to be silenced (Woods, 2020). The participants in this research study unanimously illuminated the necessity of their voice for the voiceless while often reaping consequences of isolation. Generating psychological research that illustrates how Black female educational leaders impact Black students is most accurately done when the authentic voices and lived experiences of Black female educational leaders author the research literature. Black feminist epistemology positions Black females as central agents of knowledge who believe in the unique use of dialogue and connectedness when assessing knowledge claims (Collins, 2000). The degree of connectedness established between Black female educational leaders and students occurs through honest and reciprocal dialogue. According to hooks (1989), "dialogue implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination" (p. 131).

Gaps in the literature reveal a continued lack of understanding and appreciation of how Black women produce social thought designed to oppose oppression (Collins, 2000). This research study's findings may be used as a template to create space for rich and

authentic dialogue that contributes to new ways of thinking, being, and living. Black female educational leaders have a unique intellectual dexterity that is an innate component of the daily personal and professional negotiations they are called upon to embrace. For the world of academia to fully support a global community of credible learners committed to making this world a better place for everyone, everyone's voice must have a credible place.

The third key finding of this research study is that Black female educational leaders understand the relationship between their roles as leaders within the educational system and the broader community in ways that enable them to combat systemic racism, impact the lives of minorities, and break proverbial glass ceilings. Chapter 1 of this research study opened with a discussion of Black females' legacy of influencing members of the Black community's social, emotional, and intellectual experiences (Bass, 2012; Collins, 2000; Cooper, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Renix, 2016; Tillman, 2008). Historical and politicized representations of oppression have created spaces in Black female educational leaders' lived experiences in ways that have grounded the utility of their activism for marginalized communities. As school and community leaders, Black female educational leaders' lived experiences serve as valuable apparatuses that advance the Black community's social and cognitive landscape (Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015).

Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth demonstrated their commitment to the students and members of the Black community throughout each destination along their river of life. Elizabeth's school-age experience involved 100 % Black educators, and though Nia's and Ivy's did not, their portraits revealed how critically important a role other Black educators played in their lives. This research study's findings invite the community to

shift from the pervasive oppressive rhetoric of race and epistemological racism to that of elevation and acceleration (Milner, 2007). Moreover, Milner (2007) defines epistemological racism as scholarly literature that perpetuates multiple types of racism, including individual, institutional, and societal. The findings from this research study aimed to dismantle that deficit-informed rhetoric by replacing it with first account manifestations of strength, resilience, and excellence revealed by the participants' portraits. The knowledge that comes from experience provides communities with a process of socialization that enables them to confront and thereby dismantle systemic oppression (Ladson-Billings, 2005).

As evidenced in this research study's findings, the literature review disclosed Black female leaders' common descriptions as emerging themes. These themes are Black female leaders as community builders, Black female leaders as change agents and activists, and Black female leaders as caring leaders (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Loder, 2005). When students believe adults in their schools genuinely care about them, their motivation to excel academically increases (Bass, 2012; Byas & Walker, 2009). During this research study, Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth discussed at length their commitment to using their lived experiences in ways that enable them to combat systemic racism and, as a result, impact the lives of historically marginalized people. Their commitment is reflected in the literature review highlighting Black female educational leaders' pivotal role as school and community leaders. Black females design institutional systems that yield equitable experiences for all children both inside and outside of their school communities, thus eliminating social, emotional, and intellectual disparities (Bass, 2012).

Implications for Black Female Educational Leaders

The portraits that framed Chapters 4 and 5 of this research study revealed the transformative journey these three Black female educational leaders have had as their rivers of life have continuously illuminated who they are, what they do, and why they do it. Milner (2007) states that to represent the lived experiences of Black people accurately, scholarly literature must disrupt existing notions of normality, deficit discourses, and misinformed beliefs. Dillard (2000) observes that research literature encompasses its full utility when grounded in an enlightened epistemology rooted in truth and authenticity instead of the inverse, which she calls “endarkened epistemology” based upon deficit informed research (p. 666). Likewise, Milner (2007) exposes the cognitive dimension to deficit discourses in his description of them as “belief systems, thinking of researchers, and policymakers that highlight the tensions in how researchers have perceived and discussed people of color” (p. 390). Thus, as a Black female educational leader studying Black females, it is vital to consider this research study’s implications for Black female educational leaders.

As a researcher who identifies personally as a Black female and professionally as a Black female educational leader, honoring my participants’ authentic experiences was very important to me. As readers invited to join a metamorphic excursion through the rivers of the participants’ lives, it was critically important that the research experience was framed through the lens of the participants’ lived experiences and not mine. Throughout the research journey, I continuously posed racially and culturally grounded questions about my experience and the lens through which I engaged that experience to ensure my experience remained on the frame of the scene in a way that allowed the participants’ and readers’ experiences to fill the scene.

Because of the oppressive lived reality I experienced in school up until I had my first and only Black female teacher, I continuously engaged in what Milner (2007) describes as reflection and representation as I crafted the actors' portraits. Sitting, crying, and laughing with my participants while allowing them to walk inside the riverbanks of their truth, provided directional clarity for negotiating and balancing my personal and professional identity within the scene's frame. I used the portraiture methodology to ground this research study. In the portraiture methodology, the findings that generate the final product, the portrait, are at the forefront of the research process from inception to the space where the portraitist communicates the findings (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

During the final focus group workshop, narrated in Chapter 5, the sisterhood and connections between Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth were breathtaking. Nia and Ivy reverently spoke of the influence Elizabeth's portrait had on their lives as each participant shared just how grateful they were for one another. The *Rivers of Life* participatory action research method provided a vehicle for rich dialogue between me and the participants (Ortiz Aragón & Hoetmer, 2020). Ortiz Aragón and Hoetmer (2020) define the research method, *Rivers of Life*, as a process that employs the systemization of human experience used to reconstruct and interpret a past shared experience. Mack (2016) further asserts the importance of creating the social, emotional, and personal space for Black female educational leaders to engage in with each other and members of the Black community; as doing so, provides Black female educational leaders with a solid foundation upon which to stabilize their efforts to fully support Black families' ability to navigate societal challenges brought on by the intersection of race, gender, and class.

As evidenced in my research findings, Black female educational leaders empower other women, particularly those who are marginalized, to use their lived experiences in ways that elevate both their own experiences and those of others. The literature review revealed the unique composition of othermothering personified in Black female educational leaders' lived experiences, particularly as it relates to Black and marginalized students. Nia's, Ivy's, and Elizabeth's portraits highlighted how Black females use lived experiences as a means of knowledge construction regarding utilizing challenges to accelerate excellence. Black women's lived experiences create new ways of knowing and being for other Black women to share intellectual experiences, thus contributing to how Black females experience the world (Collins, 2009; Dillard, 2000; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

According to Collins, the work embedded in the tenets of Black feminist thought "aims to empower Black women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions" (2000, p. 22). This research study's findings contribute to new knowledge formation related to the portraiture methodology and its creative use of dialogue and lived experience as criterion for meaning. Additionally, because of this research study's epistemological approach grounded in Black feminist thought, Black female educational leaders' lived experiences are emboldened to contribute to the knowledge validation process in ways that reject deficit narratives of exploitation, misinterpretation, and misrepresentation.

Implications for Theoretical Understanding

From a theoretical stance, the interlocking frame of scholarship, resilience, and lived experience is this research study's contribution to current research and calls upon

scholarly literature to pivot within the frame of Black female educational leader's lives. This study, grounded in Black feminist thought, aims to illuminate authentic sources of knowledge construction that extend beyond dominant ways of knowing, explicitly related to the lived experiences of Black people as a criterion of meaning, knowledge claims, and knowledge validation. The conceptual framework of Black feminist thought seeks to create an intellectual space wherein Black females have choices and are empowered to act in ways that contribute to societal, institutional, and intellectual transformative experiences, particularly in the lives of historically marginalized individuals. As a critical social theory, this theoretical framework honors the interplay between the generation of knowledge and Black females' lived experiences (Collins, 2009).

As defined by Milner (2007), interest convergence is the examination of truth by researchers when "people in power often in discourse are supportive of research, policies, and practices that do not oppress and discriminate against others as long as they-those in power-do not have to alter their systems of privilege" (p. 391). According to Milner, people in power will champion in the fight against racism, injustice, and hegemony as long as their power or interests are not impacted (2007). Throughout the research process, negotiating and balancing my interests and lived experiences along the perimeter of my participants' frames created clarity for the interpretive lenses through which my filtered experiences inhabited. As a Black female educational leader studying Black female educational leaders, our interests' conversion repeatedly occurred throughout the research process. In the context of this research study, power and interests are tightly connected. Those who have power can influence the interests of others.

Baylor (2014) describes Black female educational leaders as “community othermothers” who navigate the nexus of their work around conceptions of transformative pedagogical practices rooted in social activism and members’ intellectual advancement in both their personal and professional communities. The findings from this research study demonstrate what Bass (2012) refers to as *Black feminist caring*, which occurs when Black female educational leaders inhabit the role of Othermother for members of the Black community and incorporate institutional systems into their practice that reflects how Black women show the way they care. Additionally, this research study supports the literature’s stance on distinguishing Black female educational leaders from their White counterparts because of their overt embrace of the social responsibility to advance Black children’s social, emotional, and intellectual experiences based upon lived experience.

Throughout American history, demeaning stereotypes such as “Mammy, Aunt Jemimah, Savage, and Jezebel” have characterized Black women’s reality (Boskin, 1986; Goings, 1994; Jewell, 1993). The findings from this research study, which aims to remedy the literature gaps, revealed the intricate navigational system Black female educational leaders employ as they creatively reverse oppressive systems meant for their intellectual detriment into transformative movements that change lives. Milner (2007) defines engaged reflection and representation as a process where “researchers and participants engage in reflection together to think through what is happening in a particular research community” (p. 396). According to Ladson-Billings (2004), narratives and counter-narratives contribute to educational policy, research, and theory. It is inside the layers of Nia’s, Ivy’s, and Elizabeth’s portraits, a first-row seat in the stage of their

counter-narrative was granted. Collins (2009) asserts that Black female intellectuals are central to Black feminist thought, reframing Black womanhood's portrayal as resilient, compassionate, and intelligent instead of the reverse. In contrast to society's cultural representation of Black women, the power of Black females' self-definition and self-value is rooted in the authentic imaging of Black women by Black women in ways designed to replace externally derived images (Collins, 1986).

Black female educational leaders employ their experiences as marginalized members of society as they champion for marginalized children in their school community, which moves them beyond school leaders to social, political, and community activists. Collins (1990) asserts that "being one of the few groups negatively affected by multiple forms of oppression, Black women have developed an enduring interest in not just resisting racist and sexist laws and customs, but in changing a broad segment of the rules shaping American society" (p. 217). The findings of this research study debunk the social, political, and historical nuances that have shaped deficit-informed research about Black female educational leaders, particularly related to the *angry black woman* syndrome, which was a common sentiment in each participants' portrait. I hope that Ivy's words, "I'm not angry people, I'm passionate," resonates with all people, including but not limited to Black female educational leaders, for whom unwarranted descriptions have been given.

Advancing scholarly excellence is a goal of this research study, as it is a tenet that frames Black epistemology (Collins, 2000). Recreating hooks (1994) lived experiences of feeling valued and seen by her teachers because they knew her parents, what her home looked like, and where she worshiped were repeated sentiments echoed in the

participants' portraits. This research study highlighted the path these Black female educational leaders navigated as they championed for marginalized students by breaking proverbial glass ceilings. If knowledge construction is to occur in ways that accurately depict Black women's lived experiences, Black women have to remain at the helm of their knowledge claims (Collins, 2009).

Implications for the Community

Singleton (2015) contends that for educational leaders to eliminate educational inequities and, as a result, close achievement gaps, they must develop cultural systems in their schools that provide all educators with the space and climate to discuss race openly and honestly. The findings from this research study demonstrate how Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth used their voices to advocate for the voiceless. Additionally, this research study positions Black female educational leaders as social activists whose activism focuses on accelerating marginalized individuals' trajectory towards excellence. Generative research has been conducted on the advantage that educational leaders have regarding cultivating mindsets in their school buildings, perspectives that are contextually grounded in critical theory, and advancing social justice platforms (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2008; Lomotey, 1989; Mansfield, 2014). To add to the existing body of research on Black female educational leadership, I remained diligent throughout the research process in what Milner refers to as *shifting from self to system* (2007).

Milner (2007) encourages researchers to shift the exploration process from a personalized level to one that considers policy, systemic, institutional, and collective interests. Black female educational leaders' social and political relationships with hegemonic structures of power and domination are explored in Black feminist thought.

To that end, Black feminist thought, which is grounded in subjugated knowledge of domination, positions Black female educational leaders as unique agents of change for members of historically marginalized communities. This observation connects to this research study's findings by sharing the unique insight the participants had concerning their personal experiences as Black females and their professional experiences as Black female educational leaders. Collins (2000) discusses the theoretical conceptualization of Black feminist thought and the way it intersects with social activism in the following:

I place Black women's subjectivity in the center of analysis and examine the interdependence of the everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge shared by African American women as a group, the more specialized knowledge produced by Black women intellectuals, and the social conditions shaping both types of thought. This approach allows me to describe the creative tension linking how social conditions influenced a Black woman's standpoint and how the power of the ideas themselves gave many African-American women the strength to shape those same conditions. (p. 269).

Throughout this research study, I remained diligent in contextualizing subjugated knowledge of domination within the frame of the actors' lived experiences on a broader historical, social, and cultural scale to create a deeper level of resonance between the study's participants and the study's readers (Milner, 2007).

Race, racism, and culture mean different things to different people. In the context of this study, I wanted to explore the place race, racism, and culture occupied in the participants' narratives. The literature review revealed an underdeveloped focus on the ideology of domination generated through negative stereotypes of Black women in ways

that make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of injustice appear to be organic, routine, and inescapable parts of everyday life (Andrews & Roberts, 2013; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Mastin & Woodard, 2005). The findings revealed in the portraits of this research study show the reverse. Instead of allowing injustice to decrease acceleration towards excellence, Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth used challenge as a source of strength, resilience, and scholarship throughout the rivers of their lives. This research study invites us to examine the challenges Black women face as part of a larger frame, which is the utility of engaging in social justice endeavors in ways that focus on human dignity and intellectual advancement (Baylor, 2014; Collins, 2000; Farmer, 2017; hooks, 1994). Historical and politicized representations of oppression have created spaces in Black female educational leaders' lived experiences to ground the utility of their activism for marginalized communities.

Portraiture, the methodology used to ground this research study, creates space in scholarly literature for empirical research and the aesthetics of lived experience to conjoin. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983), who pioneered the portraiture methodology, social scientists tend to focus their research on wrong things instead of that which is good. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (2000) describe portraiture as a "method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life" (p. xv). Likewise, this study's findings reveal Black female educational leaders' commitment to elevating the social, emotional, and intellectual landscape of the Black community. Systemic and organizational barriers that impede just and authentically lived experiences of Black and marginalized people can be remedied by knowledge-generating literature

“interpreting and representing people and communities of color in ways that honor those communities and in ways that maintain their integrity” (Milner, 2007, p. 397). Collins (2009) states that for this to happen, scholarly literature must commemorate Black female educational leaders by doing the following: (a) use their lived experiences as a criterion for meaning; (b) use their voices through dialogue to assess knowledge claims; (c) observe and learn from the way they demonstrate ethics of caring; and (d) use them as agents of knowledge (Collins, 2000). This research study does not attempt to position Black female educational leaders as unilateral recipients of oppressive ideology. Alternatively, this research study’s findings provide a first-hand account of how Black female educational leaders use oppressive ideology to share their situated knowledge within broader contexts, thus advancing members of historically marginalized communities towards excellence.

Considerations for Future Research

This study provides the groundwork for future research related to contextually transforming challenging situations into growth opportunities. Scholars who desire to utilize tenets of Black feminist thought to ground their research may find the contextual analysis of lived experience as meaningful and relevant to their study. This study’s unique construction includes first-hand accounts of lived experiences framed inside the layers of the participants’ portraits. Chapter 5 of this research study illuminated the actors’ voices in the form of a conversational play, and though plays are often thought to be grounded in fictional events, *The River of our Lives* was not. One of the primary tenets of Black feminist epistemology is the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims. The intimacy level infused within the actors’ portraits created a space for genuine, authentic,

and organic discourse between myself and the actors. Throughout the research process, I continuously sought to capture the actors' lived experiences inside their portraits' layers in ways narrated by their voices (Magnum, 2014).

Another point of consideration for future analysis would be for researchers to use the findings from this study to provide the existing body of empirical research with a critical analysis of deficit informed research, specifically, as it relates to knowledge claims about Black female educational leaders. According to Robertson (2013), due to deficit-informed research, Black female educational leaders are continuously called to shift between various approaches in order to be accepted in multiple environments. Additionally, Robertson's research contextually frames the arduous task for Black female educational leaders to shift their appearance to fit in, shift their behavior to disprove stereotypes, shift their perception by remaining mindful of surroundings at all times, shift the pain to suppress negative feelings associated with bias, and shift their language to match the setting (2013).

I chose the portraiture methodology to ground this research study because of its unique focus on that which is good, resilient, and credible (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 2000). This research study is necessary and relevant because of the deficit that exists in scholarly research related to the understanding of the Black female educational leaders' lived experience and how those experiences contribute to knowledge validation, specifically as it relates to the discovery of new ways of thinking, being, and living (Collins, 1986; Dillard, 2000; Gooden, 2005; Harris, 2007; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015).

Neither the voice, lived experiences, or authentic identity of Black females has earned a position of esteem in current scholarly literature as the criterion that validates dominant ways of knowing, generation of knowledge, and knowledge claims (Collins, 1990, 2000; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). In fact, according to Mastin and Woodard (2005), “findings of scholarly research have consistently supported that the images of Black women in the mainstream press, as a whole, are detrimental and stereotypical” (p. 265). This research study, grounded in authentic, credible, and honest discourse, provides future research with Black female educational leaders’ voices and lived experiences that, when honored, valued, and listened to, may help eradicate the societal injustice currently plaguing Black communities in the United States.

This study invites us to transform the nature and practice of research, specifically regarding members of historically marginalized communities. According to Milner (2007), for this to occur, researchers must do the following:

The next generation of scholars, among others, can change and advance the research literature in ways that validate and give voice to people who have often been silenced, misinterpreted, misrepresented, and placed on the margins. *How* education research is conducted may be just as important as *what* is actually discovered in a study. Moreover, who conducts the research, particularly what they know, and the nature of their critical racial and cultural consciousness - their views, perspectives, and biases - may also be essential to how those in educational research come to know and know what is known. (p. 397)

This research study creates space within the current scholarly literature to position Black female educational leaders' lived experiences as authentic sources of knowledge as a criterion of meaning, knowledge claims, and knowledge validation.

The repetitive themes of strength, resilience, and scholarship threaded through the actors' portraits illustrated in this study supports the centrality of Collins' (2000) "distinction between knowledge and wisdom and the use of experience as the cutting edge dividing them" (p. 257). The authentic dialogue generated between people joined by everyday experiences creates feelings of connectedness, a sense of belonging, and genuine relationships that are an essential aspect of knowledge validation within the Black community (Collins, 1989; Daniels et al., 2020; Dean & Porter, 2015; Dillard, 2000). Through the critical lens of Black feminist thought, future studies might investigate how Black female educational leaders use their lived experiences to socially and intellectually transform communities.

Final Thoughts

As the final curtain call of this dissertation approaches, I am humbled by the opportunity I've been blessed to share. Today, with the sun shining bright in the sky, I walked my 19 and 24-year-old daughters to their cars that were parked in the driveway, as they had both come down to spend the weekend with me in celebration of this moment. As we stepped beyond the threshold of the garage with arms linked, I paused, looked at the sky, and smiled. "What are you thinking about Mommy," the girls said in unison? I closed my eyes, rested in God's grace, and quietly said, "I was telling God, thank you." The beauty of this moment was the moment, God's moment, Nia's, Ivy's, and Elizabeth's moment, your moment, that I had waited one year shy of five decades to

discover. You see, my beautiful and brilliant daughters grew up, unlike myself, walking inside their majestic strength of confidence, beauty, and excellence. Their journeys had been my destination. Their rivers had been my haven. Their story had been my existence. On this beautiful day, as I stood back in awe of the glow their grace radiated against the backdrop of the sunset, my heart smiled. I was here today to breathe life into my daughters' rivers because Black female educational leaders were there for me yesterday to save me from drowning.

My reality has continued to experience transformation because of Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth's presence in the rivers of my life, and for that, I am eternally grateful. The cathartic gift of light these women have continuously bestowed upon me has created space for renewal, resonance, and resilience. Getting the opportunity to endeavor into a field of scholarly work closely connected to my heart has given me the ability to contribute to generative research creatively, empirically, and aesthetically. I hope that this research study's findings honor the actors' portraits in an authentic way that creates resonant lived experiences with and among its readers, readers that extend beyond the academy. I desire for the broader community to see a reflection of themselves in the waves that rippled throughout the actors' rivers as a mirror image to their own lives as space from which to draw strength, confidence, and healing.

The purpose of this research study is to provide social science theory with both iterative and generative experiences that are revealed in the portraits of three Black female educational leaders and, as a result, inform the implementation of effective institutional practices and policies of a large urban school district. The societal injustice currently plaguing the Black community has catapulted our world into a scrupulously

chronicled racialized and politicized reality. In this context, a global pandemic and the Black Lives Matter Movement magnify pre-existing racial, health, and intellectual disparities. The trauma many students, families, and districts are involuntarily compelled to endure due to the Coronavirus pandemic is a reality all school leaders must face as they move toward creating new ways of knowing, new ways of being, new ways of leading.

To move forward, we must lean into a space where new lived experiences are shaped by new knowledge and reshape the open canvas of authentic and lived experience in just and meaningful ways. The lens through which I see the world is different because of my experience in conducting this research study. The unique skill-set, knowledge, expertise, and experience of Black female educational leaders filled the frame of this research study and will continue to fill the frame of my life. As a result of the research process, I am reassured that we become better when we lean into others' experience of expertise. The portraits in this research study illustrate the centrality of connection as a source of strength, hope, and resilience. As Nia, Ivy, and Elizabeth demonstrate, acceleration towards excellence is born out of challenge when we rely on the gifts and talents of one another. Society will move through this time in history and develop in ways that make the world a better place for everyone. However, to do so, we must join minds with hearts and create a world where the universal voice *of* research becomes the authentic voice *for* the researched.

Thank you for sharing space with me along the river of my life. May our enlightened paths cross again.

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APPENDIX A: LETTER OF CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

What can be learned from Black female educational leaders' scholarship, resilience, and lived experiences in a large urban school district?

Dear Participant:

Summary Information

This study explores the lessons that can be learned from the scholarship, resilience, and lived experiences of Black female educational leaders. This study uses the portraiture methodology, a participatory action research method that is an emergent process, and involves the researcher and participants co-constructing a life narrative that culminates in a final portrait.

This study aims to illuminate the voices of Black female educational leaders in one of the largest urban school districts in the southeastern region of the United States. For large urban school districts to advance the social and academic achievement for all students, particularly those from historically marginalized groups, Black female educational leaders' voices and lived experiences must inform empirical research and instructional policy generated in academic institutions. This study will inform institutional practice and policy by adding to the existing body of empirical research to create new knowledge formation.

Participants in this study will participate in two individual semi-structured interviews that will last approximately 60 - 90 minutes each, two focus group workshops that will involve all three participants in the research study and will last about 2 hours each, and one follow-up unstructured focus group interview that will include all three participants and will be based upon emergent themes previously identified and will likewise last about 2 hours.

Because this research is emergent in design, alternatives to procedures are welcomed. Participants can provide alternatives and present their perspectives throughout workshops. Again, participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time during the study.

Introduction and Background Information

This research study is being done because the literature review revealed that Black female educational leaders have a unique ability to use oppression as a source for institutional transformation and social change within the Black community. However, the existing literature does not readily address the lessons that a study of the scholarship, resilience, and lived experiences of Black female educational leaders can reveal, specifically related to the intellectual advancement of Black and marginalized students. This study aims to remedy this disparity by illuminating how Black female educational leaders use their lived

experiences to elevate the social and intellectual experiences of Black students and members of the Black community.

Procedures

During the interviews, I will ask you several open-ended questions, and some possible follow up questions. The interviews will be scheduled within three months, beginning in December 2020 and concluding in February 2021. The location of these interviews will occur at a designated date, time, and site of your choice. The topics for the five sessions will be as follow:

1st Semi-structured Interview (Individual) RQ 1 & 2 - Personal Life, Professional Life & Relationships - (approx. 60 - 90 minutes) - Will take place in December (specific date, time, and location will be at your discretion)

2nd Semi-structured Interview (Individual) RQ 3 - Experiences as Community Agents of Change - (approx. 60 - 90 minutes) - Will take place in December/January (specific date, time, and location will be at your discretion)

1st Focus Group Workshop - (All 3 participants) - Will utilize the photo-voice method to create, discuss, and develop PhotoVoice Boards that capture your perspective and feelings about childhood experiences, college experiences, educator experiences, leadership experiences, community experiences, and any other experiences that are meaningful to you, that display the way you used your voice to instigate change - (approx. 2 Hours) - Will take place in January (specific date, time, and location will be at your discretion)

2nd Focus Group Workshop - (All 3 participants) - Will utilize the photo-elicitation method to create and discuss drawings and written reflection using the *Rivers of Life* methodological approach where you will look at various pictures of characteristics of a river and draw images that represent times in your life that are analogous to the images depicted in the river, i.e., calm waters, turbulent waters, murky waters, etc. - (approx. 2 Hours) - Will take place in January (specific date, time, and location will be at your discretion)

Follow-up Unstructured Interview (Focus group Workshop - All 3 participants) - Will utilize an unstructured grid to discuss the way being a Black female educational leadership intersects with other personal and professional roles based upon emergent themes revealed during the semi-structured interviews and focus group workshops - (approx. 2 Hours) - Will take place in February (specific date, time, and location will be at your discretion)

Workshops will involve creating your photo-voice boards, designing your Rivers of Life drawings and reflections, and dialogue about emergent themes. You can decline to participate in any activity that may make you uncomfortable. The reflective writings will be used to encourage discussion about the seasons in your life chapters that are represented in your chosen photographs in addition to life chapters analogous to characteristics of a river. Because of this emergent nature of this research process, participants can choose to collaborate on their River of Life depictions and create individual River of Life portraits or

one integrated River of Life portrait. Depending on your level of comfort regarding the Coronavirus pandemic's impact, we may use other video creating technologies such as zoom to engage in these workshops, or decide upon a location where we engage with one another in person while following the CDC guidelines to wear a mask and remain socially distanced.

The participants will also have the option of having their photo-voice boards and Rivers of Life depictions viewed by my University of Louisville dissertation committee. The purpose of this public viewing is for U of L personnel to observe the way the participatory action research methodology, Rivers of Life, is depicted in the lived experiences of Black female educational leaders.

Timeline of the Study

The study timeline will take place over three months, beginning in December and concluding in February. The specific date, location, and time for each of the two individual semi-structured interviews, the two focus group workshops, and the final unstructured interview will be based upon your needs and, if desired, can occur on a virtual platform such as zoom or a designated site of your choosing. Each interview will last about 60 - 90 minutes. Each focus group workshop will last about 2 hours. Again, interviews and workshops sessions will take place at a place of your choosing or virtually through Zoom.

All sessions will be audio and video recorded; these recordings will only be viewed by the primary and co-investigators. The audio recordings will be transcribed by the company rev.com. Your pseudonym will be used throughout the research process, so your identity will remain protected. It is not anticipated that the research study will be terminated. Still, if unforeseen circumstances arise, you will be made aware in writing of the termination of the study.

Potential Risks

The potential risk for participants is minimal. You are not mandated to participate in this study. You may feel some discomfort answering reflective questions about challenging seasons in your life. However, the process is confidential, and participants are advised that they may stop participation at any time. During the initial session, the co-investigator will also review maintaining the other participants' confidentiality in the study and information on how to maintain confidentiality in selecting your photographs, images, and written reflections during the workshop sessions. There are no foreseeable risks other than possible discomfort in answering questions. While every attempt will be made to minimize risks, unforeseeable risks may arise.

Benefits

The potential benefits outweigh the potential risks in that participants will have an opportunity to contribute to the existing body of empirical research by providing insight into how your lived experiences have positioned you for excellence. Additionally, your ability to influence current practices and policies in schools, particularly related to Black

and marginalized students, serves as a benefit to the community. Thus, school and district personnel may be better equipped to work collaboratively and develop meaningful relationships with students and families. The camaraderie and sisterhood that develops while sharing lived experiences with other women in similar circumstances likewise serve as a benefit from participating in this research study. To that end, the research study's results may guide future programs and practices in large urban school districts, thus changing the intellectual and social landscape for Black students, marginalized students, and members of the Black community.

Alternatives

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this research study, your primary responsibilities will include:

- Participating in individual interview sessions.
- Participating in focus group workshops.
- Taking or finding photographs that represent different experiences in your life.
- Reflecting upon images of a river and describing how that image reflects a time in your life.
- Maintaining the confidentiality of the other participants.

This research is emergent in design; alternatives to procedures are welcomed. Participants can provide alternatives and present their perspectives throughout workshops.

Confidentiality

The data from this research study will be kept in a secure area and on a secure password-protected computer on Google Drive for written and digital files, which is also password protected. Individuals from the Department of Educational Leadership and Organizational Development, the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the Human Subjects Protection Program Office (HSPPO), the JCPS Institutional Review Board, and other regulatory agencies may inspect these records. In all other respects, however, the data will be held in confidence to the extent permitted by law. Should the data be published, your identity will not be disclosed. If the results from this study are published, your name will not be made public. Instead, your pseudonym will be used.

Security

With your permission, I will digitally record the interviews. Doing so will help me retain your ideas more accurately for research analysis. Your responses will be kept entirely confidential and will only be available to me via password-protected devices and rev.com, the transcription company I will use to transcribe your data. Your pseudonym will be during the entire research process to protect your identity. You will also have access to your responses once the interviews are transcribed by the transcription company Rev.com. Once completed, the transcripts will be returned to you for review, and make any desired

adjustments to your recorded responses. After all the data has been analyzed and revised, you will receive a summary of the document before the official submission. Your data will not be stored and shared for future research. All data will be destroyed at the three-year mark, according to IRB stipulations. The consent forms and other documents related to the research study will be shredded. Recordings of workshop sessions will be permanently deleted from password-protected devices and a password-protected Google Drive. In the event of any publication resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

Voluntary Participation

Taking part in this study is voluntary. By answering questions, you agree to take part in this research study. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to be in this study, you may stop taking part at any time. If you choose not to be in this study or if you stop taking part at any time, you will not lose any benefits for which you may qualify.

Research Participant's Rights

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may call the Human Subjects Protection Program Office (502) 852-5188. You can discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject, in private, with a member of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is an independent committee made up of people from the university community, the staff of the institutions, and people from the community not connected with these institutions. The IRB has reviewed this research study. You can access more information about your rights as a participant and protect human research participants at the IRB website. If you do not have access to the Internet, copies of these Federal regulations are available by calling JCPS at 502-485-3036.

Compensation for Participation

You will not receive any compensation for being in this research study.

Research Funding

There are no grants associated with this research.

Questions, Concerns, and Complaints

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research study, please contact me at cassandra.g.woods@gmail.com or (502) 216-8311. You may also contact the primary investigator for this research study, Dr. Mary Brydon-Miller @ Mary.Brydon-Miller@louisville.edu. If you have concerns or complaints about the research or research staff and do not wish to give your name, you may call the toll free number 1-877-852-1167. This toll-free number is a 24-hour hotline answered by people who do not work at the University of Louisville.

This research study has been approved by JCPS and the University of Louisville Institutional Review Board. If you have questions, concerns, or general questions about the research, you may also call the JCPS IRB Chairperson at (502) 485-3036 if you cannot reach the research team or wish to talk to someone else. For more information about participation in a research study and the institutional review board (IRB), a group of people who review the research to protect your rights, please visit the JCPS IRB website.

Acknowledgment and Signatures

This document tells you what will happen during the study if you choose to take part in it. Your signature and date indicate that this study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered and that you agree to participate in the study. You are not giving up any legal rights you are entitled to by signing this informed consent document. However, you are providing your authorization as outlined in this informed consent document. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

Participant Name (Please Print)
Date Signed

Signature of Participant

Printed Name of Legally
Date Signed
Authorized Representative (if applicable)

Signature of Legally

Authorized Representative

Printed Name of Investigator (PI, Sub-I, or Co-I)
Date Signed

Signature of Investigator (PI, Sub-I, or Co-I)

The phone number for participants to call for questions:

Primary Investigator: Dr. Mary Brydon-Miller
Department of Educational Leadership, Evaluation, and Organizational Development
Room 314 - College of Education
1905 S 1st St, Louisville, KY 40208
502-852-6887 mary.brydon-miller@louisville.edu

Co-Investigator: Cassandra Woods
Assistant Principal
Johnson Traditional Middle School
502-485-8277 cassandra.woods@jefferson.kyschools.us

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, PHOTO-VOICE & PHOTO-ELICITATION ACTIVITIES

Interview Protocol/Focus Group Protocol

Procedures for the Study:

I am requesting that you participate in the following:

1. Two individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews that will last approximately 60 - 90 minutes each.
2. Two focus group workshops that will involve all three participants in the research study and will last approximately 2 hours each.
3. One follow-up unstructured focus group interview that will involve all three participants and will be based upon emergent themes previously identified and will last approximately 2 hours.

During the interviews, I will ask you a number of open-ended questions as well as some possible follow up questions. The interviews will be scheduled within a three-month time period beginning in December, 2020 and concluding in February 2021. The location of these interviews will occur at a designated site of your choice. The topics for the four sessions will be as follow:

1st Semi-structured Interview (Individual) RQ 1 & 2 - Personal Life, Professional Life & Relationships - (approx. 60 - 90 minutes)

2nd Semi-structured Interview (Individual) RQ 3 - Experiences as Community Agents of Change - (approx. 60 - 90 minutes)

1st Focus Group Workshop - (All 3 participants) - Creation and Discussion of photographs, in the way of Photo -Voice Boards, that capture your perspective and feelings about childhood experiences, college experiences, educator experiences

leadership experiences, community experiences, and any other experiences that are meaningful to you - (approx. 2 Hours)

2nd Focus Group Workshop - (All 3 participants) - Creation and Discussion of drawings and written reflection using Photo-elicitation methods and the *Rivers of Life* methodological approach where you will look at various pictures of characteristics of a river and draw images that represents times in your life that are analogous to the images depicted in the river, i.e. calm waters, turbulent waters, murky waters, etc. - (approx. 2 Hours)

Follow-up Unstructured Interview (Focus group Workshop - All 3 participants) - Discussion about the way being a Black female educational leadership intersects with other personal and professional roles based upon emergent themes - (approx. 2 Hours)

With your permission, the interviews will be digitally recorded. This will help me retain your ideas more accurately for future research analysis. Your responses will be kept completely confidential and will only be available to me via password protected devices. You will also have access to your responses once the interviews have been transcribed. Once completed, the transcripts will be returned to you for review, revisions, and any adjustments you would like to make to your recorded responses. After all the data has been analyzed and revised, you will receive a summary of the document prior to the official submission to the University of Louisville.

Interview Questions

1st Semi-structured Interview (Individual) Research Question 1 & 2 - Personal Life,

Professional Life & Relationships

1. Discuss your educational experiences as a child/young adult.
2. What was your family dynamic growing up?
3. What are your parents' occupations?
 - a. Your mother
 - b. Your father
4. Where did you attend College?
 - a. Graduate school
5. Discuss your most memorable experiences in college.
6. When was the first time you realized that your experience as a Black female was different from the experiences you observed in others?
7. What, if any, were your experiences with discrimination growing up?
8. Why did you choose to go into the field of education?
9. Why did you choose to work in an urban school district?
10. How did mentoring relationships impact your personal and professional experience as it relates to your position as a Black female educational leader?
11. What experiences made you want to move from being a teacher to a higher level position?
12. How did you prepare and position yourself for professional promotions?
13. Describe the racial and demographic characteristics of your organization.

14. How do you believe these demographic characteristics of your organization have impacted your work as a Black female educational leader?
15. What is the most significant accomplishment you have made in your professional career? Explain.

2nd Semi-structured Interview (Individual) Research Question 3 - Experiences as Community Agents of Change

1. Do you see yourself as an agent of change in your school? Explain.
1. Do you see yourself as an agent of change in the Black community? Explain.
2. How do you believe the Black community defines a successful Black female educational leader?
3. How do you believe the White community defines a successful Black female educational leader?
4. What do you see as the primary barrier for advancement for Black students in schools? The Black community? Explain
5. What do you see as the primary barrier for advancement for Black female educational leaders? Explain
6. Do you think your race/gender influences the way other people (i.e. students, non-Black staff, Black staff, families) see Black people? In what way?
7. How do you go about changing the negative perceptions that some people have about Black or marginalized communities?
8. To what extent do you believe you have the power to change institutional structures in the school system?
9. What inspires you to continue to be a change agent in the Black community?

10. How do you view your role as a Black female educational leader in the midst of the challenges facing the Black community?

Possible Follow-up Questions about Identity

1. How do you describe your identity in the context of a Black female educational leader?
2. Do you believe there is a correlation between the structure of school and systemic disparities?
3. Have you ever felt that you needed to change a part of your identity to fit into your school community? If so, what part and why?
4. Have you ever felt that you needed to change a part of your identity to fit into your Black community? If so, what part and why?

FOCUS GROUP WORKSHOP # 1 – PHOTO-VOICE ACTIVITY

YOUR VOICE TELLS THE STORY OF YOUR LIFE CHAPTERS

WHAT - PHOTO -VOICE

Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001) define photo-voice as a participatory research method where participants use their cameras and photographs to document the reality of their lived experiences in ways that encourage critical thinking. Wang and Redwood-Jones assert that the use of photo-voice methods in qualitative research creates space for pivotal social change by supporting the creation of powerfully visual images that enables people to assess the strengths and concerns of their community in addition to promoting critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues through large and small group discussions of photographs.

WHY

Photographs capture the unique perspectives we each have about the way we see the world. Creating the space in our world to bring about social change by dismantling oppressive ideology begins with the layers of our stories, our seasons, our lived experiences. Using photographs as tools to voice concerns about the world around us is an effective medium to begin the conversation about change.

HOW

Place your photographs on the board in a way that tells your life story and captures your voice, perspective and feelings about your childhood experiences, college experiences, educator experiences leadership experiences, community experiences, and any other experiences that are meaningful to you - (approx. 2 Hours)

FOCUS GROUP WORKSHOP # 2 – PHOTO-ELICITATION ACTIVITY

THESE ARE THE RIVERS OF MY LIFE

WHAT - PHOTO -ELICITATION

Harper (2002) defines photo-elicitation as a participatory research method that involves the researcher's use of photographs, in addition to words, during an interview to elicit discourse. Harper further states that the difference between interviews using images and text, and interviews using words alone lies in the ways individuals cognitively respond to these two forms of symbolic representation. According to Harper, the parts of the brain responds differently to visual information than verbal information. Thus, images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words alone.

WHY

Visual images that represent perspective and identity have the ability to reveal both what is seen and unseen. Using this participatory action research method will provide context for the participants to celebrate the triumph and challenge they have encountered along the rivers of their lives. Images have the power to conjure emotions that create resonance in the human spirit. According to Ortiz Aragón and Hoetmer (2020), the systemization of human experience allows people to systematically reconstruct a past shared experience in a participatory manner. The *Rivers of Life* methodology will enable my participants to engage in dialogue with each other about common approaches and responses to their lived experiences.

HOW

Listen to Javier Heraud Pérez's poem, *The River* (1960). Use the images conjured through listening to the words of the poem and the images displayed on your photo-voice boards as a tool of inspiration to draw a linear, yet divergent, river comprised of images that represent times in your lives that are analogous to the images of a river, i.e. calm waters, turbulent waters, murky waters, etc. Include written reflections next to each stop along their river, thus re-constructing the authentic depiction of your *Rivers of Life*. (approx. 2 Hours).

APPENDIX C: EMERGENT THEMES FROM LITERATURE REVIEW

Lived Experiences of Black Female Educational Leaders				
<i>Black Feminist Thought</i>	<i>Legacy as Trailblazers</i>	<i>Strong Ethics of Care</i>	<i>Change Agents</i>	<i>Identity Formation</i>
<p>*Responsible for the knowledge validation process (Collins, 2009; Daniels et al., 2020; Dean & Porter, 2015; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Mustard & Woodard, 2005)</p> <p>*Communal ethics of care (Baylor, 2014; Collins, 2000; hooks, 1994; Stroud, 2014)</p> <p>*Application in others areas of research (Daniels et al., 2020; Ko et al., 2018; Visintainer, 2020)</p> <p>*Black female educational leaders as social activists (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2008; Collins, 2009; Lomotey, 1989; Mansfield, 2014)</p>	<p>*Perseverance in the pursuit and attainment of educational excellence (Anderson, 1988; Bailey, 2009; Bartanen & Grissom, 2019; Baylor, 2014; Brown, 1863; Buck 2010; Collins, 2000; Franklin, 1947; Green, 2004; Higginbotham, 2013; Holmes & Hudson, 1994; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Loder, 2005; Lomotey, 1996; Lusane, 1992; Lyman, 1998; Madkins, 2011; Myrdal, 1944; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Tillman, 2008; Walker, 2001; Williams, 1883)</p>	<p>*Black female educational leaders as othermothers (Bass, 2012; Baylor, 2014; Collins, 2000; Mack, 2016)</p> <p>*Black female educational leaders and fictive kin (Mack, 2016; Mawhinney, 2012)</p> <p>*Black female educational leaders as community othermothers (Baylor, 2014; Collins, 1989)</p> <p>*Black female educational leaders who change the instructional landscape of the classroom (Loder, 2005; Lomotey, 1993; Newcomb & Niemeyer, 2015; Noddings, 2003; Renix, 2016; Scott, 2011)</p>	<p>*Black female educational leaders as social activists in schools (Brooks, 2009; Collins, 1986; Dillard, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Lomotey, 1989)</p> <p>*Black female educational leaders as social activists in the Black community (Brooks, 2009; Collins, 2000; Dillard, 1995; Fuentes, 2013; Haddix et al., 2016)</p> <p>*Black female educational leaders as advocates for changes in institutional policy and practices (Dingus, 2008; Lomotey, 1989; Shiller, 2008)</p>	<p>*Black female educational leaders as agents of knowledge (Bass, 2012; Collins, 2000; Jean-Marie et al., 2009)</p> <p>*Black females educational leaders and the intersectionality of race, gender, and class (Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Robertson, 2013)</p> <p>*Black female educational leaders with shifting strategies (Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Robertson, 2013;</p> <p>*Black female educational leaders and physical appearance (Oluo, 2018)</p>

APPENDIX D: EMERGENT THEMES FROM ACTORS' PORTRAITS

Emergent Themes: Portraiture Study of 3 Black Female Educational Leaders		
RQ 1: How did the realities and lived experiences of these Black female educational leaders shape the narratives that led to their career path?	RQ 2: How do these Black female educational leaders use their lived experiences to inform their interaction with students and adults with whom they work?	RQ 3: How do these Black female educational leaders understand the relationship between their roles as leaders within the educational system and the broader community?
<i>Who: Black female educational leaders are</i>	<i>What: Black female educational leaders lead</i>	<i>Why: Black female educational leaders lead as a means to</i>
Who we are:	What we do:	Why we do it:
Nia-shaped by our successes and our failures and thrive despite the obstacles that are placed before us.	Nia-with integrity, strength, and determination to change the trajectory of students' lives.	Nia- combat systemic racism and break those glass ceilings.
Ivy -Serious leaders with no excuses, just results	Ivy -lead by example of how they want others to lead with high expectations, strength and having a strong voice	Ivy -Making a difference and saving the lives of other minorities and going against the white privilege attitudes and ongoing racism in our society
Elizabeth- Strong - No nonsense - As Ivy would say "Failure is not an option"	Elizabeth - by modeling the expectation. Walking the talk. With high expectations	Elizabeth- Positively impacting the lives of others. Advocate for the voiceless.

APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP WORKSHOP # 1 – PHOTO-VOICE ACTIVITY

Focus Group Workshop #1
January 30, 2021 - 9:00 - 11:00
Join Zoom Meeting
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/9179128157>

Meeting ID: 917 912 8157
Passcode: 007082

Creation of Photo-Voice Boards - All 3 Participants

We will participate in a photo-voice activity during the first focus group workshop that will involve creating a digital photo-voice board that will visually represent your voice's utilization during various seasons of your life chapters.

According to Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001), photo-voice is a participatory research method where participants use their cameras, images, and photographs to document the reality of their lived experiences in ways that encourage social change and critical thinking. Additionally, Wang and Redwood-Jones assert that this participatory research method provides a contextual framework for participants to engage in dialogue and share knowledge about issues of importance to them and members of the community (2001).

Prior to the Focus Group Workshop #1, do the following:

1. Select a photograph or image that provides a visual representation of the following seasons in your life:
 - a. Childhood Experiences in your community/neighborhood
 - b. Childhood Experiences at school
 - c. College Experiences
 - d. Educator Experiences as a Teacher and/or Administrator
 - e. Community Experiences as a Teacher and/or Administrator
2. Digitally affix the photographs and/or images to the appropriate slides in the slide deck.

Note: If selecting personal photographs, be sure the only visible images are of you or internet released images, as no one outside of this study has permitted me to see their pictures.

During Focus Group Workshop #1, we will do the following:

1. Engage in dialogue about the components of photo-voice. (Approx. 10 – 15 minutes)
2. Engage in dialogue about the experience of gathering or taking photographs/images that captured experiences during various seasons of your life. (Approx. 15 – 30 minutes)
3. Take turns sharing your screen and engaging in dialogue about the selected photographs with the group, including how you used your voice to instigate change during these seasons of your life chapters. (Approx. 45 - 60 minutes)

APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP WORKSHOP # 2 – PHOTO-ELICITATION ACTIVITY

Focus Group Workshop #2

February 20, 2021 - 9:00 - 11:00

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/9179128157>

Meeting ID: 917 912 8157

Passcode: 007082

Photo-Elicitation - Creation of Rivers of Life drawing - All 3 Participants

We will continue building upon our work from the first focus group workshop during the second focus group workshop by going a little deeper into your lived experiences' perspectives. This focus group workshop will focus on photo-elicitation activities and utilize the *Rivers of Life* methodological approach. Harper (2002) defines photo-elicitation as a participatory research method that involves the researcher's use of photographs, in addition to words, during an interview to elicit discourse. Harper further states that the difference between interviews using images and text and interviews using words alone lies in the ways individuals cognitively respond to these two forms of symbolic representation. According to Harper, the parts of the brain react differently to visual information than verbal information. Thus, images evoke more profound elements of human consciousness than do words alone (2002).

Like Harper, Ortiz Aragón, and Hoetmer assert that participatory action research is a vehicle for rich dialogue between researchers and their participants. Ortiz Aragón and Hoetmer (2020) define the participatory action research methodology they call *Rivers of Life* as a process that systematically employs the systemization of human experience to deconstruct and interpret a past shared experience. For this study, the symbolic use of the components of a river, such as calm, turbulent, crystal clear, murky, etc., will provide you with visual parallels between the various conditions and currents of a river and multiple conditions and currents of your life journeys, also known as the *rivers of your lives*. Utilizing this metaphor to frame your experiences will support the convergence and reconstruction of emergent themes that link your life stories' life chapters.

According to Ortiz Aragón and Hoetmer, through reconstruction, diverse individual interpretations emerge that, upon combining with others' interpretations, allow participants to more deeply understand and even theorize from their experiences (2020). During this second focus group workshop, we will incorporate Ortiz Aragón's and

Hoetmer's *Rivers of Life* methodology to illuminate the acquisition of knowledge revealed by the emergent themes of your life stories. This part of the workshop will involve you, both literally and metaphorically, drawing the parallel between the various seasons in their life chapters to that of a river's characteristics.

Prior to the Focus Group Workshop #2 on 2/20/21, do the following:

1. Read [Javier Heraud Perez's poem *The River*](#) (1960)
2. Look at images of various depictions of a river, i.e., calm waters, murky waters, turbulent waters, etc., and list words or phrases in the "speaker's notes" section of the slide that come to mind when you look at the image. (Slides 6 - 14)
3. Reflect on the experiences embedded in the photographs and/or images displayed on your photo-voice boards that you discussed during the first focus group workshop session.
4. Look at the displayed images of the various parts of a river (addressed in number 2), reflect upon the images conjured when reading Perez's *The River* (1960) (addressed in number 1), look at the images on your photo-voice boards (addressed in number 3) and reflect upon any similarities between the sets of images.
5. On a piece of poster-board, draw your river of life that is comprised of images that represent times in your life that are analogous to the images of a river, i.e., calm waters, turbulent waters, murky waters, etc., while using the images displayed on your photo-voice boards and the images shown of the various parts of a river to help guide your thinking.
6. Include written reflections next to each stop along your river, thus re-constructing your authentic depiction of your *River of Life*.
7. Take a picture of your finished drawing and upload it to the appropriate slide in the slide deck.

During Focus Group Workshop #2 on 2/20/21, we will do the following:

1. Engage in dialogue about the components of photo-elicitation and the Rivers of Life Methodology. (Approx. 10 – 15 minutes)
2. Read Javier Heraud's *The River of Life* poem
3. Engage in dialogue about the experience of drawing images that captured experiences during various seasons of your life. (Approx. 15 – 30 minutes)
4. Take turns sharing your screen and engaging in dialogue about your River of Life drawing and how it depicts various seasons of your life chapters. (Approx. 45 - 60 minutes)
5. Discuss the emergent themes from Focus Group Workshops 1 & 2.

APPENDIX G: JAVIER HERAUD PEREZ'S *THE RIVER* (1960)

one

I am a river
I'm going down
the wide stones,
I'm going down
the hard rocks,
down the path
drawn by the
wind.
There are trees to me
around shaded
because of the rain.
I am a river
lower and lower
fiercely,
more violently
low
every time a
bridge reflects me
in their bows.

two

I am a river
a river
a river
crystalline in the
tomorrow.
Sometimes I'm
tender and
kind. I
I slide smoothly
through the fertile valleys,
I give drink thousands of times
to cattle, to docile people.
Children approach me from
day,
Y
at night tremulous lovers
they rest their eyes on mine,
and they sink their arms
in the dark clarity
of my ghostly waters.

3

I am the river.
But sometimes I am
Bravo
Y
strong

but sometimes
I do not respect or
the life nor the
death.
I go down the
run over waterfalls,
I go down with fury and with
resentment,
I hit against the
more and more stones,
I make them one
to a pieces
endless.
Animals
flee,
they flee fleeing
when I overflow
by the fields,
when I sow from
small stones
slopes,
when
I flood
the houses and the pastures,
when
I flood
the doors and their
hearts,
the bodies and
their
hearts.

4

And this is when
the more I rush
When can i arrive
to
The hearts,
When I can
take them by the
blood,
When I can
look at them from
indoors.
And my fury is
makes peaceful,
and I turn
tree,
and I stagnate
like a tree,
and I silence
like a stone,
and shut up like one

rose without thorns.

5

I am a river.
I am the river
eternal of the
bliss. I already feel
the nearby breezes,
I already feel the wind
on my cheeks,
and my journey through
of mountains, rivers,
lakes and grasslands
it becomes endless.

6

I am the river that travels on the banks,
tree or dry stone
I am the river that travels on the banks,
door or open heart
I am the river that travels through the pastures,
flower or cut rose
I am the river that travels through the streets,
wet earth or sky
I am the river that travels through the mountains,
rock or burnt salt
I am the river that travels through the houses,
hanging table or chair
I am the river that travels within men,
fruit tree
stone rose
heart table
heart and door
returnees,

7

I am the river that sings
at noon and at
mens,
who sings before his
graves,
the one who turns his face
before the sacred channels.

8

I am the river at dusk.
I'm going down the slings
streams,
for the unknown towns
forgotten,

through the cities
crowded with public
in the showcases.
I am the river
I'm already going through the meadows,
there are trees around me
covered with pigeons,
the trees sing with
the river,
the trees sing
with my bird's heart,
the rivers sing with my
arms.

9

Arrive on time
in what will I have to
lead to
oceans,
than mix my
clean waters with its
murky waters,
what will I have to
silence my singing
bright,
that I will have to silence
my angry screams at
dawn of every day,
to brighten my eyes
with the sea.
The day will come
and in the immense seas
I will not see my fields anymore
fertile,
i won't see my trees
green,
my close wind,
my clear sky,
my dark lake,
my sun,
my clouds,
nor will I see anything,
nothing,
only the
blue sky,
immense,
Y
everything will dissolve in
a plain of water,
where one more song or poem
they will only be small rivers that go down,
mighty rivers that come down to join
in my new luminous waters,

in my new
waters
turned off.

CURRICULUM VITA

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