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## Black, Woman and Alive: Black Women's Practices of Nontraditional Healing and Freedom

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Black, Woman and Alive: Black Women's Practices of Nontraditional Healing and Freedom

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Hythia Phifer

Expressive Arts Therapy

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### **Abstract**

This thesis explores the implications of nontraditional healing methods on Black women's psychological and holistic health. It includes a critical literature review of existing research by Black Feminist theorists and other Black women scholars on Black women who use nontraditional healing methods, particularly to overcome the violent and pervasive experience of gendered racism and misogynoir. A brief autoethnographic analysis of my own art-based practice is included, with ties to the effectiveness of Literature and Poetry as a nontraditional healing method used by Black women. This thesis is my attempt to create space for myself in academia, in social science, in research. This discourse is inclusive of intersectional identities and cultivates spaces to share our experiences however alike or dissimilar as Black women. Suggestions for application within Psychotherapy and Expressive Arts Therapy is briefly examined.

*Keywords:* Black women, woman, Black feminism, Womanism, intersectionality, survival, nontraditional healing methods, racism, oppression, freedom, liberation, gendered racism, misogynoir, intergenerational trauma, expressive arts therapy

## Black, Woman and Alive: Black Women's Practices of Nontraditional Healing and Freedom

**Preface**

[...] Hatred, that societal death wish directed against us from the moment we were born Black and female in America [...] we have been steeped in hatred—for our color, for our sex, for our effrontery in daring to presume we had any right to live. (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 146)

In this thesis, I examined the lived experience of Black womanhood. During this process of examination, I included my own lived experiences. Presenting this research proved challenging precisely because of the hypervisibility of analyzing a population with whom I shared multiple aspects of my identity. As I completed this research utilizing an ontology of critical autoethnography, I was hyperaware of transgenerational trauma—the historic and contemporary savageries enacted upon my female ancestors, my sisters and myself.

I knew it was, unfortunately, far too easy to author a thesis on Black women's trauma; a paper about how we have been victimized in this world. Abundant research exists supporting various perspectives on the devastating plight of Black womanhood. How we are being imprisoned, killed and raped at high rates (Macias, 2014, p.263).

Very rarely do people who are not Black women recognize the unique struggles of Black womanhood. However, Black women have endured transgenerational violence, targeting us specifically because of our race and gender. The way we currently experience this in the African Diaspora began during the trans-Atlantic Slave trade (Few et al., 2003). Research about Black women frequently implies we, as Black women, are a “lost cause”; it simultaneously holds no other individuals accountable for our lives because no one should care about a Black woman, who has been dehumanized over the centuries due to colonialism and slavery (Brown & Keith,

2003; Few et al., 2003; Macias, 2014). Black women's lives are dictated by an inimitable revulsion aimed towards us entirely, mind, body and soul. Our traumatic existence is preserved by members of the dominant culture and the systems created therein (Lorde, 1984/2007).

There was tremendous fear as I attempted to produce this body of work. I worried that the historical experience of oppression endured by Black women would be re-experienced in the writing of this thesis. Because whenever Black women attempt to affirm the collective reality of our complex subjugation, we are shunned, shamed, scorned, and silenced (Brown & Keith, Lorde, 1984/2007; Macias, 2014).

However, I was determined to create an autoethnographic critical research space where our survival as Black women (while in the midst of our struggle) is celebrated! I was curious about Black women's survival in the face of such significant personal and generational trauma.

I wanted to center the resilience of Black womanhood, which has kept us alive. In the midst of so much violence, oppression, misappropriation and silencing, I wanted to celebrate Black womanhood, as we have managed to hold onto life, joy, hope and love. Although, I knew it would be incredibly difficult for me to conduct this autoethnographic research, I also knew it was extremely vital.

Early in this process, institutional ambivalence and my internal conflict regarding addressing my own traumas and survival as a Black woman manifested a paralyzing and overwhelming predicament in conceptualizing this thesis. I had to embrace that my lived experience, my narrative, is valuable and worthy enough to be assessed as research; that I am the expert of my lived experience and that it is worthy of being read. Since "Black women's mental health issues are intimately tied to experiences defined by social location" (Evans, 2015, p. 166), I decided to explore my lived experiences to provide research for the resiliency of Black women.

## Introduction

Black femininity is a sociopolitical paradox of American society (Lorde, 1984/2007). Black women's social identities are nestled distinctly at the juncture of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991). Black women intellectuals—in diverse fields—have defined for themselves the phenomenological sensation of existing both, as Black and female, in current and historical contexts (Few et al., 2003; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010). Still, there is a lack of valuable discourse about the barriers to internal liberation Black women endure due to relentless discrimination against their intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010).

Research outlining and celebrating the resilience of Black womanhood, amid socio-cultural subjugation is scarce (Few et al., 2003; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010). Specialists in social and medical science assert that Black women suffer detrimentally high rates of psychological distress resulting from direct, socio-cultural and historic violence targeting them specifically (Bryant-Davis, 2007; Carter, 2007; DeGruy, 2005; Evans, 2015; Grills, Aird & Rowe, 2016). Despite disparities in health outcomes, Black women are surviving.

Therefore, the purpose of my thesis is to contribute to a body of research depicting the sociopolitical juxtaposition of Black womanhood and the triumph of Black female survival amidst the oppression we continue to endure (Bryant-Davis, 2007; Carter, 2007; DeGruy, 2005; Evans, 2015; Harvell, 2010; Holiday, 2010; Grills, Aird & Rowe, 2016; Pagnattaro, 2001). This thesis will present traditional and contemporary practices of survival including ancestral, spiritual and creative healing methods (Drake-Burnette, Garrett-Akinsanya, & Bryant-Davis, 2016; Evans, 2015; Harvell, 2010; Holiday, 2010).

Through the epistemology of Black Feminist theory, I summarize the historical prevalence of Black women's endeavors towards internal liberation through the participation in nontraditional healing practices. For the purposes of this paper, nontraditional practices specifically refer to nonwestern practices which may include, arts-based and/or ancestral practices. I will include an examination of arts based research of writing and poetry as a nontraditional mode of healing. I will include research from Black Feminist theorists, authors, activists and my own autoethnographic research as a Black woman, about the relevance and necessity of such practices. I will provide a critical literature review of existing research about Black women using nontraditional healing methods to overcome the violent and pervasive experience of gendered racism and misogynoir, a term coined by Black Feminist writer, Moya Bailey and further defined by Black womanist writer Trudy to specifically articulate anti-Black misogyny experienced by Black women (Bailey, 2013; Trudy, 2014).

### **Black Women and Healing**

Healing practices led by Black women are typically grounded in anti-oppressive and emancipatory frameworks (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016, 2016; Few et al., 2003; Holiday, 2010; Lorde, 1984/2007). Very frequently their stated mission is to increase liberation and healing because of current constructs which are oppressive and harmful to Black women and other marginalized groups. As Holiday (2010) articulates, Black feminists are "committed to the survival and wholeness of the entire people, male and female" (p.103).

Black women utilizing nontraditional healing methods is not a new revelation, as Black women have been practicing ancestral healing since the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Harvell, 2010; Holiday, 2010; Pagnattaro, 2001). However, as public awareness of violence on Black bodies increases, so does the visibility of agents combating such violence (Ablack, 2000; Harvell, 2010;

Holiday, 2010; Pagnattaro, 2001). The utilization of nonwestern healing modalities to facilitate healing and liberation amongst Black women seems to have increased alongside the hypervisibility of Black death (Harvell, 2010; Holiday, 2010; Macias, 2014; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010).

### **Sociopolitical Context of Black Female Survival**

Despite the historical precedent of Black female survival, research ignoring and invalidating Black female resilience abounds (Few et al., 2003; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010). Fear and hatred of blackness alongside degrading views of women combine to create a unique form of violence towards Black women; “[...] violence against African American women is rooted in stereotypical myths about Black women’s nature and the tendency to devalue them as victims” (Brown & Keith, 2003). Additional research tends to decontextualize foundational experiences that impact Black women in America, separating current manifestations of survival from ubiquitous encounters of sexism and racism (Few et al., 2003; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010).

Outside of Black Feminist Theory, limited research exists affirming the survival abilities of Black women in the midst of ongoing sociopolitical violence which influences aspect of daily life (Brown & Keith, 2003; Few et al., 2003; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010). Of the body of research that exists, "othering" perceptions pathologize the characteristics and behaviors of Black women, misrepresenting them as deviants of society (Brown & Keith, 2003; Few et al., 2003; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010). Social sciences and medical research stereotypically portray Black women as: lazy, ugly, irrational, aggressive, angry, criminal, sexually perverse, inferior, unemotional, superhuman, subhuman, dumb, animalistic, etc (Brown & Keith, 2003; Grills, Aird & Rowe, 2016). These narratives are prevalent in every facet of American life (Few et al., 2003;



Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010) and derive from historical and social constructs of blackness that were created during enslavement to dehumanize Black people and justify the brutality of slavery (Brown & Keith, 2003; Grills, Aird & Rowe, 2016).

### **Black Feminist Theory**

Through the use of Black feminism as a tool of analysis the domains of power that constrain Black women, as well as how such domination can be resisted are conceptualized into action. Black feminists strive to make research practical, accessible, and empowering for the informant, research, and the communities of which both are a part. (Few et al., 2003, p. 206)

Black feminist theory is the leading epistemology elevating the body of knowledge about race and gender amongst Black women. Black feminist scholars such as Alice Walker (1979/2006; 1983), Audre Lorde (1983; 1984/2007) and bell hooks (1981; 1984; 1989; 1990; 2003) are dedicated to producing discourse which is inclusive of Black women's perspectives. Black feminist scholars seek to empower Black women by facilitating research from a Black feminist framework. They endeavor to holistically depict Black women's experiences, while simultaneously contextualizing Black women in humanizing, dignifying ways from an ontology of shared intersectional identity (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991; Few et al., 2003).

Black feminists acknowledge women from all walks of life as experts on Black women's experiences (Holiday, 2010). Black women activists, educators, bloggers, journalists, artists, and philosophers, continue to reclaim narratives about themselves by creating auto-ethnographic compositions. As such, my thesis will include research from academic sources and popular culture by predominantly Black women.

### **Womanism**

Womanism is either a specification or an expansion of Black feminism, depending on supporting research (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016; Holiday, 2010). It was coined by Alice Walker

(1979/2006) and describes in her words, “a Black feminist or feminist of color” (Walker, 1979/2006;1983). I will be using both terms, Black feminism and Womanism, in this paper.

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, (1989; 1991) who is a lawyer, scholar and activist. Intersectionality describes the multiple dimensions of identity that one person may embody and specifically addresses the vulnerabilities those multiple identities have within systemic and institutionalized lived experiences; for example, a Black woman is housed within at least two specific dimensions of identity: race and gender. She is particularly vulnerable because both of these identities are vulnerable in a white supremacist culture (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). Intersectionality is the first singular term to expand the academic language used to describe how people are perceived and treated based on the existence of multidimensional identities. Thus, intersectionality also describes how race, class, gender, and other social categories converge to form the identity of one person *and* how those intersections inform the experiences that person has in the world.

Crenshaw (1989; 1991) was particularly interested in articulating the discrimination Black women endure. As such, her primary discourse focused on Women of Color [WoC] and Black women. Most of her discourse was shaped by a lack of knowledge within greater society about Black women’s persistent experiences of violence, oppression and marginalization. Before Crenshaw (1989; 1991), there was no singular word to describe the phenomena of being discriminated against because of intersecting identities.

### **Literature Review**

Black feminist research is rarely referenced when research is conducted by white and non-Black scholars, who are also more likely to have opportunities to publish research (Brown &

Keith, 2003; Few, Stephens & Rouse-Arnett, 2003). Additionally, the research on current movements for Black liberation and the research for conducting psychotherapy from an understanding of intersectional identity is just beginning, largely based on modern civil rights movements such as #BlackLivesMatter (Evans, 2015; Grills, Aird & Rowe, 2016). The research for this critical literature review was conducted through a Black feminist epistemology with connections to Womanist perspectives.

Holiday (2010) affirms that Black women's lived experiences are valid and credible sources of information; "This approach to psychology resists the idea that the emotional needs of women of color can be met without foregrounding our values and investigating our lived experiences for ignored and discounted wisdom" (p.104). This paper is sourced primarily by Black women, including Black feminist scholars and creatives, and Black women who do not identify with the aforementioned categories. By limiting included research in this way, I have ensured research for and about Black women, is informed by Black women. For us, by us.

### **Sister—to—Sister Talk: Transcending Boundaries and Challenges in Qualitative Research with Black Women**

This article examined the challenges Black women researchers experience when facilitating qualitative research with Black women subjects about sensitive topic areas. The authors, Few, Stephens & Rouse-Arnett (2003) self-identified as Black women who had previously used Black feminist theory to design and implement their research. Using the findings from their study on Black women with histories of victimization, the authors presented guidelines for conducting this type of research without degrading Black women in their race and gender identities.

Few et al. (2003) commenced by explaining how research about Black women has consistently offered dehumanizing representations of Black women, typically contextualizing data from a predominantly White/Eurocentric epistemology (Few et al., 2003). They asserted research has routinely failed Black women by misunderstanding and misrepresenting their experiences (Few et al., 2003). Black feminist theory is presented as an appropriate theoretical framework to examine the Black womanhood. Per the authors, research about Black women should be, “for Black women rather than simply about Black women” (p. 206). Rapport building amongst Black women researchers with Black women subjects and guiding tenets for successfully conducting qualitative research were discussed (Few et al., 2003).

The authors sought to empower Black women researchers and clients by facilitating research from a Black feminist framework. They endeavored to holistically depict Black women’s experiences, while simultaneously contextualizing Black women in humanizing, dignifying ways from an epistemological standpoint of shared intersectional identity. I am similarly motivated to understand Black women’s experiences, depict Black women in humanizing ways and, empower Black women utilizing a foundational framework of Black feminist theory.

Of the body of knowledge that exists which focuses on Black women as subjects, there is an abundance of gendered racism and misogynoir, through which this research is iterated (Holiday, 2010). White Eurocentric ideologies typically degrade Black women, misrepresenting them as deviant, hypersexual and lazy (Few et al., 2003). This context supports racist narratives with deep roots in White supremacist ontologies. With their article, Few et al. (2003) sought to promote empowering representations of Black women, to increase equity within the power

differential, and to guide other Black women researchers to an epistemology of Black feminist theory in their research of Black women.

### **Womanism, Creativity, And Resistance: Making a Way Out of “No Way”**

The interconnectivity of culture, creativity and activism in the Black community has always existed (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016; Harvell, 2010; Holiday, 2010; Grills, Aird & Rowe, 2016; Pagnattaro, 2001). This simple truth is especially poignant considering the survival of African American women. Drake-Burnette, et al. (2016) examined the relationship of creativity and resistance within the context of Black women’s existence and survival. They entered through an epistemology of Womanism.

The authors (2016) described Womanism as “the essence and expansive nature of Black feminism [...] [which] conveys the full-bodied expression of feminism, enhancing its substance and conceptually merging race and gender” (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016). Womanism is the momentum towards freedom from all forms of oppression suffered by all marginalized groups driven by Black feminists and Feminists of Color [FoC] (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016). Womanist activism is Black women demanding to be free from gendered racism and the ways oppression impact us directly, specifically, and entirely. Womanism highlights the struggle, experienced by Black women and WoC, of multiple manifestations of sociocultural bondage. It is, “the embodiment of activism, spirituality, and relational empowerment of a woman’s commitment to herself, other women and her community” (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016).

#### **Acknowledging creativity in Black communities.**

Using research by and about Black people, the authors grounded creativity as an essential part of African American and African diasporic culture and history, with specific references to Black Feminism and Womanist activism and resistance. This resource was particularly relevant

for this paper because: 1) the authors explicitly named the Expressive Arts as a fundamental part of Black American culture as well as providing sociohistorical context. This naming is important because there are limited resources acknowledging the prevalence of the arts as a mode of healing and resistance in Black culture, historically and contemporaneously (Brown & Keith, 2003; Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016; Few et al., 2003; Grills, Aird & Rowe, 2016; Holiday, 2010; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010). The lack of naming endangers Black culture of having this powerful resilience factor appropriated and erased (Brown & Keith, 2003; Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016; Few et al., 2003; Grills, Aird & Rowe, 2016; Holiday, 2010; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010).

2) The authors highlight the Expressive Arts as an integral component of Black feminism and womanist activism, which in addition to the aforementioned benefits, is important because of the dual benefit of both elevating Black women's narratives and healing Black women simultaneously (Brown & Keith, 2003; Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016; Few et al., 2003; Grills, Aird & Rowe, 2016; Holiday, 2010; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010).

3) The authors gave several examples of how the Expressive Arts are currently used in Black communities to bring about internal liberation, healing and survival. These examples validate the resilience of Black survival, the pre-existence of the arts as part of Black survival and, promoted comprehension by non-Black folks about the ongoing utilization of the arts in healing and activism in Black communities (Brown & Keith, 2003; Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016; Few et al., 2003; Grills, Aird & Rowe, 2016; Holiday, 2010; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010).

4) The examples the authors provided also refutes the White/Eurocentric superiority ontology or "savior mentality" inherent within Psychology which presumes the arts must be brought to Black clients or translated for and by non- Black psychologists/therapists (Brown &

Keith, 2003; Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016; Few et al., 2003; Grills, Aird & Rowe, 2016; Holiday, 2010; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010). 5) The authors, provided a framework for facilitating Expressive Arts Therapy with Black women from a foundation of anti-oppression (Brown & Keith, 2003; Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016; Few et al., 2003; Grills, Aird & Rowe, 2016; Holiday, 2010; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010).

### *Art and activism.*

Creativity has always existed in African American communities, often in the midst of severe hardship, and is widely accepted as an act that is inseparable not only from spirituality but also from all other forms of creative expression. This creativity has historically been manifest in African indigenous healing practices that both incorporate multiple uses of the arts in healing and have a foundation in the historical and current arts by the African American community. (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016, p. 177)

Art and creativity in contemporary Black American culture is descended from roots in Africa (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016). The authors (2016) provided a testament of this, citing indigenous healing practices which joined mental, emotional and physical health with social-connectedness, spirituality and artistic expression to increase a person's well-being (p.177). In this way, environment and community were combined with creative expression to form and inform healing (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016).

The authors provided a summation of the historic centrality of art forms in Black culture, choosing to briefly describe how music, dance and the literary arts have evolved from indigenous African healing traditions to prominent art forms which bring about catharsis and healing in the African American community.

Emerging from these various arts-based healing traditions came African American art forms, including field songs, spirituals, dance and movement practices, and storytelling, which eventually led to the creation of the gospel, blues and jazz music, dance traditions [...] and a rich oral and written literature tradition (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016).

The Mid-Atlantic slave trade united people from diverse African nations in America. Various indigenous practices were integrated to form African American resistance to oppression (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016; Harvell, 2010; Pagnattaro, 2001). These healing and resistance practices included creative expression. Healing and art in Black American communities are inextricably linked (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016, p. 178). The authors (2016) described music, dance, and literary arts within the Black cultural tradition, articulating how the arts are at the center of the enduring movement for Black liberation.

Drake-Burnette, et al. (2016) briefly described contemporary expressions of Black art, such as Hip Hop culture, spoken word and hair styling. Black women are integral to promoting and maintaining freedom within these art forms--as they are in all other movements towards liberation (Drake-Burnette, et. al, 2016). The authors described the complexities of Black women also have to navigating misogynoir while simultaneously rallying the Black community within the realm of the arts (Bailey, 2013; Drake-Burnette, et. al, 2016; Trudy, 2014). The perspective that Black women should continue to support and join with Black men despite ongoing marginalization and violence perpetrated by Black men is described as a prominent component of the ongoing movement towards Black freedom.

### **The Word, the Body, and the Kinfolk: The Intersection of Transpersonal Thought with Womanist Approaches to Psychology**

As the title suggests, this article examined what Holiday (2010) described as a foundational connection between Womanism and transpersonal theory. Holiday (2010) also described the benefit of Womanist Psychology to psychotherapeutic approaches and [minimally] interventions. She used supportive research to demonstrate the enduring link between Black Feminism and Womanism to the transpersonal; she asserted, a holistic understanding of this



relationship allows greater opportunities for comprehending psychological sickness in our communities. Black women's ongoing movement towards liberation is encouraged and (in part) motivated by sociohistorical foundations in spiritual practices (Holiday, 2010). Holiday (2010) provided comprehensive historical references for how Black women who include the "love of Spirit" in their activism, ultimately increase their psychological health.

Holiday (2010) included in her discourse a framework for acknowledging and appreciating intersectional identity and the magnitude of approaching psychology from this epistemology. She acknowledged providing specific therapeutic interventions are beyond the scope of the article, however, she offered a solid epistemological base from which psychotherapeutic interventions with Black women and WoC may be facilitated.

### **Healing Traditions in Black Women's Writing: Resources for Poetry Therapy**

In this article, Evans (2015) offered a curriculum for using poetry therapy with Black women as an alternative to traditional Westernized methods of psychotherapeutic intervention. The works of 54 women across the African Diaspora are included in Evans' curricula. She defined writing and poetry as powerful instruments for voice and healing for Black women (Evans, 2015).

Using supportive research, she identified voice as a particular struggle, as voice is frequently inaccessible to Black women due to social constraints on Black women's articulation of themselves, "[...] Black women must find balance between strength and vulnerability and navigate our way to private peace and public voice" (Evans, 2015, p. 166). Thus, voice is a necessary yet hard-to-reach place of vulnerability which, if accessed, may further healing for Black women (Evans, 2015, p. 166). Poetry allows Black women's voices to be proclaimed, careening us through pinpricks of creativity towards healing and, ultimately, freedom, "[...]

silence can be broken most effectively by activism that engages Black women's creativity” (Evans, 2015, p.167).

Similar to the authors mentioned previously, Evans (2015) referenced Black Women's liberation as fundamentally linked to and aided by creativity and creative expression. She explicitly pointed to the art of other Black women as vital to our holistic freedom (Evans, 2015). She used the term ‘literary mentorship’ which, she described as allowing Black women to access guidance, wisdom and strength through literature from other Black women authors, (Evans, 2015). She indicated, mentorship may occur regardless of the mentor's current state of existence and may even occur posthumously (Evans, 2015).

This article was relevant to this body of research primarily because it acknowledged gendered racism as a biopsychosocial stressor experienced by African American women. It affirmed the need for increased culturally responsive interventions with this population. The historic context of systematic oppression endured by Black women is also described by the author. Promising interventions are mentioned, including, literary mentorship, culturally responsive poetry, and creative activism (Evans, 2015). A culturally responsive curriculum for Black women is presented by the author.

While the curriculum described by the author may be beneficial, the article does not include an art-based research method, which is my main critique of this article. Evans (2015) mentions an art-based project that she created for survivors of sexual violence, however, no qualitative research has been completed on this project to evaluate its efficacy (Evans, 2015, p. 176). However, in addition to a list of Black women authors, poets and musicians, the author has provided an exceptional articulation on the need for culturally responsive interventions for African American women.

**Mind-body Interventions to Reduce Risk for Health Disparities Related to Stress and Strength Among African American Women: the Potential of Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction, Loving-kindness, and the NTU Therapeutic Framework.**

In this article, Woods-Giscombé & Black (2010) presented three alternative healing methods that may reduce health disparities affecting African American women: mindfulness-based stress reduction [MBSR], loving-kindness meditation [LKM], and NTU theoretical framework. They described each of the three methods, and then explored the methods' potential to resolve unique health challenges experienced by this group. They concluded more research is needed to determine their hypothesis that mind-body interventions are uniquely effective in reducing disparate health outcomes affecting African American women (Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010).

Woods-Giscombé & Black (2010) posited that sociocultural stressors pose health risks specific and unique to African American women. They asserted that stressors impacting this group are distinct and pervasive because of systematic marginalization endured by Black women in their intersectional identity. The authors utilized two research-based theoretical frameworks to examine Black women's conceptualizations of stress and strength. These frameworks were the Superwoman Schema [SWS] and the Strong Black Woman Script [SBW-S] (p.119). They identified these frameworks as both benefitting and harming Black women's psychophysiological health (Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010).

This article was relevant to my topic because the authors affirm the need for research about healing interventions for Black women. The limited body of knowledge that currently exists impedes awareness and providence of successful healing strategies that may increase positive health outcomes for Black women. The authors presented research which described the

way sociocultural and historical factors adversely affect Black women's experiences of holistic health.

While the authors made strong arguments for the direction of research on health disparities amongst African American women, the article itself was not art-based research. The purpose of this article was to reinforce the need for increased research in mindfulness based strategies on healing outcomes for African American women. A particular strength of this article was the focus on alternative healing methods to bring about positive health outcomes for Black women. The authors acknowledged a deficit in research about the outcome of alternative healing practices in African American communities. They hypothesized that alternative healing practices may positively impact this group and provided research which supported their position.

The inclusion of the African derived theoretical framework, NTU, was a culturally-relevant intervention that might be utilized to influence positive healing outcomes for African American women. The absence of traditional dominant-culture epistemological interventions strengthens my research by providing a culturally specific framework that empowers my intersectional identity and that of my target population.

Unfortunately, the article did not include an art-based method. The authors reviewed the efficacy of research on mind-body interventions, but were unable to provide an intervention for me to critique. The authors concluded that more research was necessary to prove their hypothesis, however, without this research, I must utilize the limited body of knowledge that exists to speculate about the effectiveness of mind-body techniques on the emancipation of African American women.

### **Method: Autoethnographic Critical Narrative and Analysis**

As a Black American woman in the field of expressive arts therapy writing about the need for a holistic approach to healing Black women, I am sensitive to all forms of oppression confining both me and my community. I am intimately familiar with gendered racism and misogynoir, as well as the plight of being marginalized and surveilled. I have a heightened level of awareness of diverse enactments of violence on Black women by all members of American society and I find myself hyper-resistant to the vulnerability of autoethnographic research (Bailey, 2013; Brown & Keith, 2003; Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016; Harvell, 2010; Holiday, 2010; Grills, Aird & Rowe, 2016; Pagnattaro, 200; Trudy, 2014).

[...] violence against African American women is rooted in stereotypical myths about Black women's nature and the tendency to devalue them as victims. Violence against Black women is tacitly supported by institutional and cultural practices, and it poses its greatest threat to mental health because African American women are encouraged to keep silent (Brown & Keith, 2003).

Brown and Keith (2003) articulate the phenomena of Black female existence; one I am intimately familiar with in my individual and collective experiences. In the context of this paper, I find myself in an interesting juxtaposition—being both researcher and research subject. I am conducting an autoethnographic analysis of the experience of Black womanhood while I am also living this experience. My awareness of my lived experience has provided me with a level of expertise in describing the unique nuanced nature of Black womanhood, the oppression perpetrated against myself and my sisters, and the resulting implications on our holistic health. I decided to create a narrative of my lived experience and my understanding of the lived experiences of other Black women to explore what it means to survive as a Black woman in the current cultural context.

### Arts Based Results

#### To be a Black Woman Writing for Survival

To be Black and woman and alive is to be resilient;  
My very existence is defiance!  
(Button Poetry, 2015).

As a Black woman, I am also intimately aware of the profound impact of nontraditional healing methods on Black women's health and liberation. In this section, I will examine my own creative explorations which have assisted in my personal movement towards liberation. Opening this up for myself in the presence of scrutiny and critique, is an incredibly vulnerable experience.

My mother has my grandmother on her back.  
When I see her, I tell her put them down.  
I tell her put them all down (Phifer, 2016a)

Writing for processing, internal revelation and rejuvenation has always been a part of my healing practice. For many years, I used writing intuitively to facilitate safety, validation of voice and catharsis, unaware of the connection to my own therapeutic processing. However, I now recognize my writing is not just my attempt to make sense of my internal world, it is also my effort to create liberation within the societal confines—confines, which I have also internalized; writing is my attempt to centralize and embrace the entirety of myself; my slow and steady progression towards freedom.

My grandmother been on my mother's back all day.  
On my mother's back forever.  
But she fallin' off now (Phifer, 2016a)

Writing for me reduces the exposure, surveillance and control of hypervisibility; there is less colonial control in the words I write because I write them first for myself.

My words are also dangerous because of their possibilities. I have known so much

dominance it is frightening and impossible to write a language other than that of my master's (Lorde 1984/2007). But when I write, I am free to establish myself in standards I have also created for myself. It is the freedom to articulate my world in alternative English; my very own patois.

My grandmother fell off the backs of two daughters before  
and now the hole so big in her chest she can't breathe.  
Her breath shears her skin.  
Hers and my mother's (Phifer, 2016a).

The previous piece, was written in the midst of a very difficult time. I had experienced multiple tremendous losses and I was facing another impending loss. My grandmother and my mother had a complex relationship, like all mother-daughter relationships. But it was made significantly more complex by their intersectional identities, which included race, gender and socioeconomic status. The challenges of the relationship between my mother and my grandmother influenced the relationship between my mother and me. In an effort to protect me from the psycho-emotional burdens she endured, my mother became the opposite of her mother: overprotective, ever-present and hypervigilant. And yet somehow, in the strange, cyclical way curses always function, I still inherited my mother's pain,

My mother on my back and my grandmother on hers.  
Both with craters in their chests.  
Both with skin sheared clean off.  
Both with bone showing (Phifer, 2016a).

When my grandmother died, the loneliness I felt in my Black, female identity swelled to an unbearable breadth. There was this inexplicable feeling of profound loneliness that grew in me; it was insatiable. I had lost the matriarch of my family and felt simultaneously severed from my ancestral family.

Writing did not extricate the pain from me, entirely. Writing did not heal me; not fully. However, writing did validate my suffering in unique and profound ways. The creative process lateralized my grief as a real, and also traumatic event. I no longer had to prove to myself or anyone else, that I struggle for a reason. It was extremely gratifying to know I was not insane or weak. It was empowering to allow myself the space to be broken and devastated and Black, *and* woman in a society that does not allow this. My writing also revealed to me, my strength; outside of the realm of the “strong, Black woman” trope (Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010). My words revealed my strength and ongoing survival is inextricably linked to my ability to process grief and suffering, adaptively.

### **Sexual Violence**

[...] But the intersection of racism and sexism grounded in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and systematic rape of Black women for hundreds of years deems Black women ‘unrapeable,’ so the psychosocial trauma is increased by historical trauma [...] triggers for survivors of color are everywhere and culturally relevant approaches are imperative. (Evans, 2015, p. 176).

Tragically, I cannot write about Black women’s survival without writing about sexual violence. I also cannot write about my own movement towards liberation without writing about sexual violence. Sexual violence has been a weapon of oppression since humans began warring with one another. As Evans (2015) indicates in the citation above, the same goes for sexual violence towards Black women. Modern-day gynecology derived from sexually violent experimentation on Black women’s bodies (DeGruy, 2005).

Sexual violence was a prevalent weapon of control during enslavement, Jim Crow, and the civil rights era and continues into the present-day (DeGruy, 2005; Evans, 2015). Evans (2015) is not only addressing Black women’s ongoing survival of sexual violence, but also the apathy we encounter when our trauma is observed by people who are not Black women. Evans (2015)



also describes how the compounded violence of racism and sexism—with its historical roots and contemporary enactments—magnifies the trauma experienced by African American women who have also survived sexual assault. She asserts, survivors may be triggered internally by intergenerational trauma and externally by traumatic enactments of violence on Black women, uniting to create a complex and painful mix of psychological suffering. Evans appropriately (2015) recommends culturally relevant approaches to psychotherapy with Black female survivors, stating this manner of approach will include an awareness of the history of sexual violence inflicted on Black women.

Macias (2014) also repeats the usage of the term ‘unrapeable’ in her depiction of the traumatic effects of sexual violence on Black women,

[...] as a result of age-old stereotypes about Black female sexuality, we are seen as promiscuous, always wanting sex and are therefore, ‘unrapeable,’ thereby taking away our agency to publicly name ourselves as victims and survivors of sexual assault, forcing us once again into silence (Macias, 2014, p.263).

In my own practice, voice is imperative. This is due to the ongoing silencing of my voice within the greater context of American society and my more immediate, daily experience.

Through writing and other forms of performative art, I am able to temporarily disengage the oppressive silencing of gendered racism and misogynoir that I regularly suffer as result of white supremacy.

My trauma is mute.

It has a voice, but does not know how to fill the  
empty space of its own form. It does not  
understand sound, it cannot comprehend its own  
shape, is uncomfortable with the way the seams  
of words rub tirelessly against its flesh  
Has become frustrated with the uselessness of  
shifting against the chafing...  
Is mute.  
(Phifer, 2016b)

My utilization of poetry and spoken word for healing is valuable because these forms are mediums through which I manifest moments of freedom amid suffering and oppression; because these forms of artistic expression have become a platform to acknowledge my personal politics as well as my immediate sorrow. And because through these, I can speak and not be destroyed; because my voice is as powerful and true as mountains. And because, when I use my voice, it becomes a lighthouse, a pillar of fortitude, bringing me back to who I am and what I have survived; reminding me of my capacity, my ancestors, and my blood.

### **Conversation with Crystal Valentine**

Crystal Valentine is a Queer Black Femme poet, educator and activist from the Bronx, New York. Her work has been profoundly influential in my own multicultural and professional development. She is also a nationally renowned spoken world artist and recipient of numerous accolades (Personal Communication, October 26, 2017). Ms. Valentine's work is dynamic, spanning the socially conscious gamut, including themes of misogynoir, police brutality and racialized targeting, mass incarceration, and the labyrinth of Black identity (Personal Communication, October 26, 2017). As a Black activist with an intersectional identity, who is also an artist and performer, Ms. Valentine is uniquely positioned to offer her expertise on Black women accessing liberation via creativity (Personal Communication, October 26, 2017).

I conversed with Ms. Valentine on October 26, 2017. In the following section, I will present a transcription of our conversation as well as a brief summation about the relevance to this paper (Personal Communication, October 26, 2017).

I: What was your inspiration for creating the poem, Black Privilege?

[...]as a Black queer woman—I often have to prove my existence, or prove my experience [...] my sadness, my pain, my injustice [to people]. [...] Whenever I have to prove it [...] I have to be sneaky about it. [...] I have to find different tactics to make people *want* to listen to me. [...] [Also], I was actually being critical of my slam

community when I was writing the poem. When we write poems, I think there's a fine line between what narratives we're allowed to occupy in our poem. So, this was like 2014ish and Trayvonn Martin' was heavy on my mind as Trayvonn Martin is still heavy on a lot of people's minds. And in the slam community, everyone was writing a poem about Trayvonn Martin, [...] I kind of struggled with that. [...] [I would say] we are not Trayvonn Martin because, for starters, we're alive [...]. I was thinking, whose narratives can you co-opt and what is the proper way to co-opt a narrative? [...] I always felt weird about that, hence the line 'Black privilege is me using a dead boy's name to win a poetry slam.'

[...] In terms of Black privilege, I can't just go out and say white privilege is a horrible thing. I need to show the reality of what this Black privilege thing that people think exists, is. That was my tactic. [...] if people think that Black privilege is a thing, then let me show them what this thing is, in my most honest of ways. (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)

I: Did you know, when you initially created that work of art, that it would have the impact that it did?

No! [...] I was competing to be the Youth Poet Laureate of NYC. I wrote that poem for that competition. I wrote that poem the day of. [...] I was working on the poem literally until the day of the competition and I was like 'fuck it! Imma' just do it, I don't care, Imma' just do it, because it feels good to me.' The poem was really raw [...] because I read it off paper and it was my first time reciting it in front of people., so [...] that added an element to the poem. I ended up winning the competition and people just started to really rave over the poem. It was the end of 2014 when I first performed the poem. [...] I performed it again at this competition called CUPSI, the College Union Poetry Slam Invitational. [...] they video recorded it. And after they put the video up, it just kinda' went off (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)

I: What do you call your art form?

[...] I am a poet and I'm a writer. I have many titles. I'm a poet, I'm a writer, I'm a pretty, pretty princess, I'm all of these things. But, I like the word poem. [...] I haven't really explored any other words to call what I do besides poetry so I'm going to go with poetry and poems for now (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)

I: Do you have a vision or purpose for your poetry?

[...] I mean, I don't want to be corny and say I want my poetry to break chains, but I do. I want my poetry to put the fear of God in Donald Trump [laughter]. I want my poetry to shake people, you know. That's actually a conversation I've been having with myself as of late. But I guess also, I want my poetry to keep me standing. I think that's something I'm working on right now. [...] [Pause]. I feel like that's a very vague answer [laughter]. (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)

[...] Also, I want to be able to envision freedom in my poetry. A lot of people talk about ‘I want to break the chains, I want to be free, I don’t want to be bound by racism, sexism, homophobia, islamophobia and all these -isms’ but *I* also want to be able to honestly pinpoint what freedom is. (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)

I: What is your vision for your what your poetry does for the community of people you identify with?

[...] I’m going to start with the second question about community. I’ve been thinking a lot about unity; I want my poetry to help people see the differences in each other and be okay with those differences. The narrative [...] particularly within the Black community, is sameness; [...] yes, because we are Black we are the same but we are also different. [...] That’s why we have systems in place that treat Black men differently from Black women, Black women differently from Black trans women. [...] That’s why these systems can successfully exist, because we don’t acknowledge our differences in a way that does not make [them] problematic. (Personal communication, October 26, 2017) When I read my poems, I’m talking about a Black queer woman’s experience. I don’t need other people who do not identify with me to say, ‘oh, I know exactly what you’re talking about.’ I just need people to try to understand the different narratives. (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)

I’m also trying to make sure that I make space for other people. I’m making sure that I’m very aware of the other people who are different from me in my community. So that we can all kind of reach some sort of equity. That’s what I want my work to do. I don’t want equality, I want equity, because equality is not fair. Equity is really what we are trying to attain (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)

I: What does freedom mean to you?

Freedom [pauses] [...] man, freedom [...] that’s a hard question. [...] I talk about freedom in my work all the time. [...] I want to be free, but I can’t name freedom; I’ve been chained or [...] blinded so long that I don’t know what freedom is. [...] I know instances of freedom, being able to talk truthfully and honestly with my parents about my identity; that is a sort of freedom that I want to obtain. (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)

And freedom also is legislative freedom. There are certain laws that are just bullshit that we need to [...] remove; honestly freedom for me is the complete redesigning of the structures that are put in place including the government, including the social structures [...] just a complete redesigning of it. (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)

I: Do you believe your poetry and/or creative process to be healing for yourself?

I would be a fool to say that poetry in general does not save or does not change. It used to be that people would be like, ‘do you write for therapeutic reasons?’ and I would be like, ‘yeah, my poetry is my therapy.’ [But] I’m moving away from that kind of explanation because [...] poetry is dangerous! [...] Poetry is not for the faint of heart. No matter what

teachers or people who don't write poetry would have you believe, it's not easy. Not everyone can do it. Poetry is dangerous. (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)  
 When I think about healing, I think about the long extensive list of people who have committed suicide. The long extensive list of poets who tried to heal themselves through poetry and [...] it was not completely enough. (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)

[...] Does poetry heal me? It can. But that's not why I write it. I think that's important because, there are people who write poetry as a hobby, but that's not me. Poetry is my livelihood, poetry is how I eat, poetry is how I feed myself, poetry is my job. Does poetry heal me? It does, sometimes. It can, sometimes. But that's not the reason why I do it. (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)

I: Do you believe your poetry, creative process to be healing for others?

Does my poetry heal others? I want to say it does. I keep talking about South Africa, I think it's because I was just there. I was just so [...] blown away by how many people loved my poetry in South Africa. I went to this school and the kids were just going crazy for me [...] I never thought that my poetry would have that much impact. I get all these messages that are like, 'thank you for talking about Black women in the way that you do.' I think that I am blessed enough or [...] honored enough to have my poetry heal people. And I am blessed enough to have it heal me occasionally. (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)

I: What does your poetry do?

"It tells the truth in the most honest and heartbreaking and vengeful way possible"  
 (Personal communication, October 26, 2017).

I: What heals you? In life.

Food! [laughter] When I was a kid, I was super awkward and strange and people didn't know what to do with me. So, anime healed me. I am a huge anime fan. Anime, really healed me. What heals me now, I don't know, I think that's why I am so sad [laughter]. I'm trying to figure out the tools I need [...] to heal myself. [...] Good company heals me. Kindness heals me. (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)

[...] Knowing where I'm going, having some sort of end goal plan, *that* is very comforting to me. [...] I have a very [nontraditional] job, I'm a poet. People are like 'What do you want to do? What is your end goal? You're just going to write poems all day?' and I'm like 'hell yeah, that's what I'm going to do!' [...] It is only poetry but it's also more than poetry, because poetry isn't just poetry you know? So, I always have to be sure that I know where I'm going. (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)

Ms. Valentine's final statement after I profusely thanked her for her time and her authenticity, "Sometimes, that's really all I want, especially Black women and Black Femmes

[...] if I can just say something that makes ya'll happy, that's all I want" (Personal communication, October 26, 2017).

### **Summation of Interview**

My interview with Crystal Valentine reinforced the content of my research substantially. The foundation of Valentine's art and activism, is her identity. In speaking with her, it was clear she approaches her identity with pride but also reverence as evidenced by her articulation of it "[...] I have many titles. I'm a poet, I'm a writer, I'm a pretty, pretty princess, I'm all of these things" (Personal communication, October 26, 2017).

She described an acknowledgement of the ways her identity holds privilege. She stated she looks for opportunities to interrogate herself and create openings for folks who are oppressed by unequal power dynamics, "I'm also trying to make sure that I make space for other people. I'm making sure that I'm very aware of the other people who are different from me in my community. So that we can all kind of reach some sort of equity" (Personal communication, October 26, 2017).

She addressed the dynamics of encountering other Black women with intersectional identities. She described herself as using creativity to produce art wherein Black women may celebrate both shared and diverse identities in literature and art. She described using poetry to celebrate areas of similarity and areas of diversity in the experience of Black womanhood,

I've been thinking a lot about unity; I want my poetry to help people see the differences in each other and be okay with those differences. The narrative [...] particularly within the Black community, is sameness; [...] yes, because we are Black we are the same. But we are also different. (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)

Despite her difficulty in communicating this, she linked freedom with a broad embracing of her identity. She also described freedom as transforming and recreating legislation to provide

true equity, “the complete redesigning of the structures that are put in place including the government, including the social structures [...]” (Personal communication, October 26, 2017).

Valentine indicated her intentions for creating activism-inspired art were broader than healing for herself and others. She linked the production of her poems with her survival and spoke about her art with the urgency of hunger, “[...] there are people who write poetry as a hobby, but that’s not me. Poetry is my livelihood, poetry is how I eat, poetry is how I feed myself, poetry is my job” (Personal communication, October 26, 2017). Valentine stated she believed people are healed by her poetry and felt honored by this belief. However, her ultimate vision for her poetry includes, elevating diverse narratives, liberating herself and others and increasing her strength and the strength of her manner of resistance;

I want my poetry to help people see the differences in each other and be okay with those differences. [...] I mean, I don’t want to be corny and say I want my poetry to break chains, but I do. I want my poetry to put the fear of God in Donald Trump [laughter]. I want my poetry to shake people, you know. [...] But I guess also, I want my poetry to keep me standing. (Personal communication, October 26, 2017)

For Valentine, having her contributions acknowledged and compensated appropriately is integral for survival. She also cited being free to produce art for monetary gain and being confident about this profession as validating and healing for her, “People are like ‘What do you want to do? What is your end goal? You’re just going to write poems all day?’ and I’m like ‘hell yeah, that’s what I’m going to do!’” (Personal communication, October 26, 2017).

She recognized, creativity as a vital component of survival, as sustaining, as emancipating, as life, “[...] It is only poetry but it’s also more than poetry, because poetry isn’t just poetry you know? So, I always have to be sure that I know where I’m going” (Personal communication, October 26, 2017).

She also indicated wanting to give joy to other Black women and Black femmes as a personal desire of her own “[...] that’s really all I want, especially Black women and Black Femmes [...] if I can just say something that makes ya’ll happy, that’s all I want” (Personal communication, October 26, 2017). She recognized this is hard for Black women to hold onto; with subtle references to her inability to fully provide this even despite her best efforts. Even with all that I know about Black womanhood, I was struck but this Black woman’s inability to access healing fully. She was fully aware of her own underlying pain and incompleteness, “What heals me now, I don’t know, I think that’s why I am so sad [laughter]. I’m trying to figure out the tools I need [...] to heal myself. [...]” (Personal communication, October 26, 2017). This thought remained with me as we closed the conversation: based on how we are viewed in our intersectional identities, true healing and freedom will be a lifelong pursuit.

### **Discussion**

Based on this research, I have formulated several recommendations for facilitating psychotherapy and Expressive Therapy with Black women; psychotherapists should learn about Black women’s strategies for self-healing from culturally relevant research and Black women themselves.

As therapists, our focus should not be teaching Black women and other marginalized communities to participate in therapeutic interventions facilitated from a primarily Eurocentric epistemology. As therapists, we should be elevating the narratives of Black women, and those of others who have been persistently marginalized. As expressive therapists, we should recognize Black women have been using the arts to exist for centuries. We should be learning from them and supporting their practice. We should be lobbying for changed legislation and providing



psychoeducation with our clients to support the creation of a world where it is not violent to simply exist.

Service providers in the field of psychology should acknowledge the unique ways in which racial targeting and trauma, race related stress, gendered racism and misogynoir impair the holistic well-being of Black female communities and create health disparities between us and members of dominant culture. Therapists must publicly denounce violence against Black people in all systems. We must specifically recognize the unique forms of violence perpetrated against Black women and work with Black feminists and other psychotherapists to understand and support survivors. The field of Psychology and individual psychotherapists should publicly acknowledge white supremacy *and* the intergenerational trauma of Black dehumanization—and Black racial oppression—upheld by all social structures.

Educators in psychology and the subfields of psychology should equip white therapists to work with white communities around racism. They should equip white therapists to be critical of white supremacy and white privilege in self and others; to confront and dismantle racist constructs in self and others; to interrogate white supremacy in all systems; to function as activists dismantling racism and white supremacy and to respect and humanize Black women and Black people, as opposed to pitying and degrading this populace. Institutions must recognize how Psychology pedagogy is exclusionary or abusive towards Black women and strive to create and teach a curriculum that does not perpetuate this.

The field of psychology should hire Black feminist educators to provide an education that is decolonized and anti-oppressive. Hiring executives in this field must recognize how certain aspects of professional achievement are in inherently exclusionary and/or abusive towards Black women and strive to dismantle obstacles that impeded the upward mobility of Black professional

psychologists, psychotherapists, psychiatrists, and counselors. This field should seek consult from Black feminists; should pay Black women the same as a white man in the same position; support Black women with culturally-relevant interventions and strategies in education and professional development.

The Expressive Therapies are facilitated from the ontology that all people are creative but may lack the ability awareness around arts as a utility to produce healing (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016). Within Expressive Therapy, little research exists about the health benefits of this type of therapeutic intervention with Black women. However, creativity is an essential component of Black healing and resistance (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016). The Expressive Therapies [ET] has not recognized how Black women have used creativity not only as a mechanism of resistance but also as a mechanism of survival (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016). Additionally, when the ET field fails to acknowledge the preexistence of arts practice in healing (and spirituality and civil rights and liberation) within Black communities, amongst Black women in particular, it also participates in appropriating and erasing Black women from the history of art as healing practices.

When there is no awareness of the context of the healing strategies of Black women, the Expressive therapists may easily engage in othering and demonizing Black women's practices and exploiting Black women's pain (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016). Just as Expressive therapists seek to empower clients to use creative strategies that already exist in their lives as modes of healing, therapists should seek to gain competence around culturally relevant practices in culturally diverse spaces.

The research for this auto-ethnographic literature review was conducted through a Black feminist epistemology with connections to womanist perspectives. Research about Black women

is frequently iterated through an ontology that inherently privileges eurocentrism and patriarchy (Brown & Keith, 2003; Few et al., 2003; Harvell, 2010; Holiday, 2010; Grills, Aird & Rowe, 2016; Pagnattaro, 200; Woods-Giscombé & Black, 2010). Thus, in utilizing research authored and facilitated by Black feminists about Black women, I have prioritized anti-oppressive discourse (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016; Few et al., 2003; Grills, Aird & Rowe, 2016; Pagnattaro, 2001).

In the body of knowledge that includes non-academic research, several experts have made significant contributions to the field of Black feminism. As previously mentioned, Alice Walker (1979/2006; 1983), Audre Lorde (1983; 1984/2007) and bell hooks (1981; 1984; 1989; 2003) are three such scholars of Black feminism, frequently cited in academic literature (Drake-Burnette, et al., 2016; Few et al., 2003; Holiday, 2010). I have selected authors who have been influenced by aforementioned scholars and have allowed these influences to shape the epistemology through which psychology research is facilitated and presented. I have also included a critical analysis of personal works and a summary of personal communication with a Black Femme poet and spoken word performer. Multiple layers of Black feminist research sourced this text! This knowledge alone is reason for celebration among Black women both within the field of psychology, and without.

Black women are the pioneers of anti-oppressive research about Black women. As members of intersecting social identities, we are best suited to produce research about our demographic. However, this research must be ongoing as Black women seek to increase the body of knowledge on Black women's methods of survival. I am in a unique position to study and contribute to research about Black women. Also, as a survivor of intergenerational trauma (and the traumatic effects of gendered racism), I must define, for myself, opportunities for personal

liberation and communal emancipation. I must role model self-healing strategies as well as enhance the ability to articulate the significance of these strategies to other Black women and Psychology professionals.

To begin to deconstruct social inequity and cease the violence of combined racism and sexism on Black women, there must first be acknowledgement. The goal of my research is to use my platform to elevate the experiences of Black women, to increase anti-oppressive research with this populace in Expressive Therapy, and to drive the narrative of Black femininity, trauma and resilience, to the forefront of scientific research!

Ultimately, I hope to dismantle constructs in systems and in society which disenfranchise and disempower Black women, by creating practices which empower Black women, “And it is empowerment – our strengthening in the service of ourselves and each other, in the service of our work and future – that will be the result of this pursuit” (Lorde, 1984/2007, p. 174).

### Epilogue

In her essay entitled, *Choosing the Margin as a space of Radical Openness*, hooks (1990) examines the utilization of voice as a Black American woman existing in the context of dominant culture (hooks, 1990). She acknowledges the challenges inherent when attempting to speak from a personal and political location without having her voice, silenced, appropriated, assimilated or erased,

Black folks coming from poor, underclass communities, who enter universities or privileged cultural settings unwilling to surrender every vestige of who we were before we were there [...] must create spaces within that culture of domination if we are to survive whole, our souls intact. Our very presence is a disruption [...] Everywhere we go there is pressure to silence our voices, to co-opt and undermine them. (p. 81)

According to hooks (1990), my very existence as a lower middle-income African American woman, depends upon my ability to create a space for myself, a space, often found in the margins of society, “Our living depends on our ability to conceptualize alternatives, often improvised” (p.81). She cites resistance as both a strategy for survival and an intentional act to distinguish oneself amidst dominant cultural efforts to absorb—and ultimately obliterate—an expression of individuality, or in my case, an expression of Black womanliness. This thesis is my attempt to create space for myself in academia, in social science, in research. I am joining Black women in creating discourse which is inclusive of our intersectional identities and in cultivating spaces for us to share our experiences however alike or dissimilar.

My own struggles in living as a Black woman within this society mirror those impeccably articulated by hooks, “For me this space of radical openness is a margin—a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a ‘safe’ place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance” (hooks, 1990, p.82). Trying to find the words to share my truth and my identity with anyone in the context of a white supremacist, imperialist, patriarchal

society is often problematic. Some of the primary reasons include hypervisibility and invisibility, respectively.

To be hypervisible and vulnerable in the context of a culture where all forms of violence towards Black women is subliminally reinforced and legally sanctioned, is terrifying and stupid. I expose myself to all manner of attack disguised as critique. I expose myself to being dehumanized, the validity of my lived experience, depersonalized by other “scholars” who may choose to invalidate my experiences and pathologize me.

Concurrently, there is also invisibility. In this context, I am referencing invisibility as an incredibly violent phenomenon that occurs when Black female pain is ignored and erased by dominant culture; and a shared experience among Black women, where, whenever Black women attempt to have our reality affirmed, we are shunned, shamed, scorned and silenced.

“Often when the radical voice speaks about domination, we are speaking to those who dominate. Their presence changes the nature and direction of our words. Language is also a place of struggle” (hooks, 1990, p.80). When I was organizing the research for this paper, I remember feeling stuck multiple times. I repeatedly asked myself, how I would write about—and essentially prove—an experience I knew to be true! I know every aspect of a Black woman’s existence is shaped by colonization and enslavement; I also know Black women use nonwestern practices to facilitate healing and catharsis. However, greater society would not use these words to describe what happens to Black women in society and how we are able to survive.

Greater society demonizes and pathologizes all black women and calls oppression, another name—one palatable to dominant and non-dominant members of society who are not willing or able to acknowledge their complicity. There was a pressure to force my writing style, my professional identity and my knowledge into a medium more palatable to dominant members

of society. I believed I needed to use the master's language to speak my truth; but it failed every time I tried author this body of work. How could I examine the experiences of Black women in the language of our colonizers? In the context of the White gaze and the male gaze? (hooks, 1990, p.83-85).

Nothing that was true, felt safe to share in the language of my colonizers. Thus, using an epistemology of Black feminism and the validity of my own lived experience, I made a way for myself. Ultimately, there were many things I chose not to say here; however, as I continue to access liberation, I know I will also continue to cultivate the necessary strength and language, with time.

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

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